Examining the Impact of Historical Role-Playing and Narrative on Motivation in the Online Classroom: Lessons Learned

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Abstract

This pilot study assessed the use of case studies in an online history course to examine students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to engage with the course material. The case studies were developed using principles of Self-Determination Theory [SDT] (Ryan & Deci, 2017), which include an individual's core needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. With SDT as a framework, the online upper division class "Crime in History" included case studies drawn from the history of Mexico using immersive role-playing and storytelling to teach the course material. Students roleplayed historical characters involved in violent crimes that took place in Mexico in the 18th and 20th centuries. In both case studies, students had access to crime scene photos and videos, as well as podcasts, primary sources, popular True Crime books, and academic scholarship to shape their role-played narratives. This pilot study focused on examining students' motivation in the course and their feelings of engagement and competency with the case studies. At the beginning of the academic term, surveys of 12 enrolled students indicated high intrinsic motivation and lower extrinsic motivation for learning. At the end of the course, 10 enrolled students indicated they enjoyed the case studies. To a lesser degree, students also indicated that they felt an overall sense of competence in engaging with the case studies. These preliminary findings suggest that training traditional humanities disciplines such as history in innovative online pedagogy can spark undergraduate interest in our online humanities courses.

Introduction

Although the academic discipline of history is based almost entirely on analyzing written sources, undergraduate history courses offer an opportunity for imaginative instructors to engage with students in creative and interactive ways, moving beyond traditional assignments such as reading and summarizing sources or giving quizzes to check content memorization. College history courses can engage students through role-playing in formal (such as the Reacting to the Past pedagogy, https://reacting.barnard.edu/) or informal ways. Because the academic discipline of history has a "grab bag" approach to bringing the past to life, incorporating literature, art, architecture, music, and a wide range of creative and social science disciplines, history professors have a wide array of resources available for energizing the student learning process.

Student engagement is vital in this era of devaluing the humanities and redirecting funding away from majors like history. The skills provided by academic history training remain critical to analyzing the ever-multiplying sources of information available to our current and future students. History also teaches ethical behavior in its requirement to listen with respect and to learn from diverse voices. When presented in an engaging way that highlights their shared humanity, historical sources can train students to feel empathy for people who seem, at first glance, very different from themselves.

I (the first author) envisioned my online class Crime in History (HST 451/551) as an opportunity to tap into a wide range of materials coming out of my three decades of research in Latin American history in order to create an immersive, role-playing experience for students. This white paper provides insights into the strengths and challenges of attempting online role-playing for teaching history at the college level. These insights can help educators in the humanities who are striving to keep students engaged and producing original work.

The paper begins with a proposed theoretical framework for a study with undergraduate students taking an online history course. Next, we summarize the course materials and assignments, and discuss the study methods. Following a brief description of the overall findings, we conclude by suggesting some lessons learned.

Theoretical Framework and Research Questions

The study of History can help students practice six skills:

1. Empathy for past historical actors
2. A flexible mindset which comfortably embraces ambiguities and contradictions
3. An enthusiasm for the endless search for contextualizing details
4. The discernment to see the biases inherent to all kinds of sources
5. Meticulous care in citing sources
6. A solid grasp of narrative and storytelling

In my experience as an educator at Oregon State University (OSU), students struggle to develop these higher-level skills, which also require a great deal of emotional intelligence. This project was designed to guide and encourage students to engage with the past through a narrative and character-based game(s) built into the design of a new online course – Crime in History (HST 451/551). Instructional design specialists worked to create part of this course with a game structure that used the principles of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2024) to spark students' motivation and train them in the above six skills.

SDT, in combination with video game principles, was a natural fit for a narrative approach to the teaching of history online. This theory was developed in 1977 by Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci and is described by Gillette (2021) as experiencing "positive growth and satisfaction as a person as long as you meet three core needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness." In their review of STD theory, co-authors Lindberg and Naxer (2021), define these three core psychological needs:

> "The first need, autonomy, describes the need for individuals to consider their own values, and self-regulate their behaviors and experiences accordingly. The second need, competence, describes the need for individuals to feel effective at what they do.

> The third need, relatedness, describes the need for individuals to feel connected to and valued by other individuals, and to feel belongingness in their communities. If these three psychological needs are not met, individuals will have trouble achieving optimal motivation, in educational contexts, as well as in other areas" (p. 323).

Multiple studies have already shown the link between meeting these three core needs and a change in the "self-determination continuum" toward more intrinsic motivation (Gagné & Deci, 2005). However, more research in the online environment in higher education is needed to examine these three core needs proposed by SDT and their effect on motivation and engagement (as defined above). This is especially true in an asynchronous online environment where the face-to-face interaction between students and instructors is not possible. An excellent model of how SDT can be applied online courses is through game design, which often fulfills the three core needs in order to motivate players in a virtual world not entirely unlike an online learning environment, especially in single-player, narrative-driven games. This shared design philosophy is one similarity between approaches in game design and instructional design. Both approaches to design leverage the core needs suggested by SDT to encourage a change in participant motivation in order to achieve these goals.

The research question was: *Can incorporating role-play games into course design for online history classes help motivate and engage undergraduate and graduate students?*

This study measured extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation before and after a narrative intervention in the Crime in History course, designed with the six core skills (learning outcomes) described earlier. According to Ryan and Deci (2000), extrinsic motivation is defined as "doing something because it leads to a separable outcome" (e.g., a grade in a course) and intrinsic motivation is defined as "doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable" (e.g.,

learning because it is fun). The plan was that the experimental, game-focused course would be offered 1-2 times in 2022 and 2023. The intention was to establish a baseline of student intrinsic and extrinsic motivations coming into the course by taking a preliminary survey of students enrolled who elected to participate. This first survey contributed descriptive context by providing an understanding of what type of motivation students had for engaging in this course at the beginning of the course. The second survey near the conclusion of the course assessed student interest and engagement in the game-based course design.

Class Materials and Course Implementation

Academic history relies on written texts along with supplementary material often drawn from popular culture or fine arts. Historians who find value in the "Archival Turn" of the last several decades view texts as artifacts which reveal more about the writer and their historical context, not unequivocal truth. A witness testimony from a court case adjudicating who should be punished for the death of another person does not necessarily reveal "the truth" of how someone died, but instead how a given society is able to verbalize the causes of that death. As such, fictional sources have value because they create familiar cultural narratives which are later adapted in confessions in front of both religious and secular officials. The sources I provided for my course designers reflect this overall approach to historical texts. I drew from my own transcribed, translated, and edited versions of court documents dating back to the early seventeenth century, as well as published scholarship, memoirs, and fictional sources. I also provided podcasts and journalistic sources when available for more recent cases.

For the proposed study, we had envisioned carrying out research based on course activities utilizing role-playing video game design in Fall 2022, but unforeseen circumstances made this plan impossible to implement. However, this gave me (the first author) the opportunity to revise the course for Spring 2023 delivery, where I was able to conduct a modified version of the original research project. In this revised version, I designed the course around three case studies with the following schedule and themes:

- Weeks 1-4: 1789 mass murder in Mexico City with a focus on comparative law enforcement history.

- Weeks 5-6: 1986 murder in Salem, Oregon concentrating on analyzing the race-based injustices built into the US court system.

- Weeks 7-9: 1988 mass murder in Matamoros, Mexico which prompted the students to question the true crime genre as well as their vision of violence at the US/Mexico border.

In the first and last cases, students created characters to role-play in all of their written assignments. In doing so, the students helped create a new history-based narrative by imagining themselves as a character involved in these events.

To detail one of these modules – for the 1789 case, students were asked to imagine themselves as rookie "bobbies" or "coppers" starting work for the London Metropolitan police in 1830. Students were given two sources to create this character: a fictionalized memoir, published in 1827, of a law enforcement official; and a popular academic True Crime book about the 1811 Ratcliffe Highway murders. They also watched a video "call to action" in which an OSU professor role-playing as a superintendent of the Metropolitan Police. In this video, the students were given the task of investigating how law enforcement happened in Mexico City under Spanish rule. After reading the sources and listening to the video, the students introduced their self-designed characters to the class in a discussion post.

Next, I provided information to contextualize their journey to Mexico City. This included a guide published in the 1820s for an exhibit of Mexican artifacts in Piccadilly Circus, London; a short section of an 1830s memoir by a Scottish woman who lived in Mexico City in the 1830s; two

podcast interviews in which I discussed my book on Mexico City law enforcement in this era, entitled, *The Enlightened Patrolman: Early Law Enforcement in Mexico City* (von Germeten, 2022); and a link to the complete book at the OSU library. Upon their character's arrival in Mexico City, next the students watched a video which brings to life the biography of a night watchman named José Bernal. This video was framed as a conversation that the British bobby [student roleplaying] had with Bernal during a chance meeting in a traditional Mexican tavern called a *pulquería*. Watchman Bernal told them about his life walking the beat. This video humanized the early history of professional law enforcement in the Western Hemisphere. To show their comprehension of this material, the students then roleplayed their initial impressions of Mexico in a journal entry for their "boss" back in London, drawing from all of the above primary and secondary sources.

The second part of the module pertains to the crime which is the focus of my book *Death in Old Mexico: The 1789 Dongo Murders and How They Shaped the History of a Nation* (von Germeten, 2023). Once again, I provided access to the entire book via the OSU library and also another podcast interview of my summary of the book. I also recorded a number of street scenes in Mexico City relating to this crime, and presented my own photos to bring life the setting and individuals involved. After reading, listening to, and viewing this material, the final journal entry asks the students, in their roleplaying mode, if they would choose to stay in Mexico City or return to their work as coppers in London. The idea for them is to build an argument for their decision, and cite the sources in the module that relate to the history of violence and law enforcement.

Although it takes place almost exactly 200 years later, the final 4-week module follows a similar immersive approach, with students receiving a number of videos and podcasts from experts who I interviewed on the border; presentations including recent photos that I took of scenes relating to this series of murders in Matamoros; and written sources including both academic analysis of the crime and related topics, as well as sections from popular True Crime books. This time I provided a list of a few dozen roles for them to choose. Some of these are fictional characters, but most were historical individuals involved in the case as victims, perpetrators, law enforcement, or family members. One overall learning outcome of this final module was to critically evaluate the True Crime genre because of the way it creates a stereotypical vision of the border and its tendency to focus only on certain kinds of victims.

For the purposes of this research, these case studies were chosen to support students' interest and engagement in online learning, using the SDT principles of autonomy, competence, and relatedness as a guide. True Crime is a popular genre in book, video, and podcast form. Many students enroll in this class because they are True Crime fans or work in some way connected to law enforcement. Therefore, many possess background or expert knowledge that can enhance their intrinsic motivation, as well as their autonomy and their competence in navigating the roleplaying course design elements. A focus on content that attracts True Crime fans can also enhance students' feelings relatedness in online courses, as the establishment of "common ground" is known to support the building of relationships and communities, both on- and off-line (Arkoudis et al. 2013; Vandergriff, 2006). These two cases also contain many elements which make for popular True Crime media: 1) they are violent and they take place in intriguing settings which spark the imagination; 2) there is suspense in the quest to solve them; and 3) the characters involved can be stereotyped as "good" or "evil". Within the context of a history course, the True Crime genre can also be used as a vehicle for supporting the development of the six essential skills described above (e.g., empathy, a flexible mindset, discernment of biases). In this course, I challenged the True Crime genre with activities designed to spark empathy, develop knowledge of detailed historical contextualization, promote the toleration of ambiguity, create a narrative, and challenge students to pay attention to biases in

sources. Next, we describe the research methodology used to evaluate the efficacy of these case studies in supporting students' interest, engagement and competence in this online history course.

Method

Participants and procedures

In the Spring 2023 course, participants were recruited by several announcements posted on Canvas at the beginning of the course for the first survey and the end of the course for the second survey. The questions for both surveys are described below and can be found in Appendix A. Participants received a five-dollar e-gift certificate as an incentive for taking the surveys at the end of the academic term. A third party who was not associated with the course administered the online surveys and the supplemental survey that was used to send participants their incentive; therefore, the instructor had no knowledge of the participants' identities. To preserve participant anonymity, no identifying information was collected. Twelve students responded to the survey at the start of the term, and ten students responded at the end of the term. Different groups of students may have participated in the first and second surveys. Given that the class was offered at the 400 and 500 level, participants were likely a mixture of undergraduate and graduate students.

Measures

The motivation survey was administered at the beginning of the term, and a survey about their interest, enjoyment, and competence with the case studies was administered at the end of the term (see Appendix A).

Motivation

In order to establish a baseline for student motivations coming into the course, participants completed a modified version of the Learning Self-Regulation Questionnaire (SRQ-L) adapted from a scale used by Black & Deci (2000) for college students learning organic chemistry. Students responded to questions about their extrinsic and intrinsic motivations for taking the course using a 7-point Likert scale where "1" was "not at all true" and "7" was "very true".

Interest, Enjoyment, and Competence

To assess students' interest and enjoyment in engaging with the case studies, as well as their competence in completing work for the case studies, an adapted version of the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (IMI) (Ryan, 1982) was administered at the end of the term. Questions were adapted from two subscales: 1) Interest/Enjoyment subscale; and 2) Perceived Competence subscale. Students responded to questions using a 7-point Likert scale where "1" was "not at all true" and "7" was "very true".

Results

Descriptive statistics from the two surveys are reported in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the SRQ-L and IMI by subscale

Time	Survey	Mean	SD	Range
Beginning of Course (n = 12)	SRQ-L	4.97	2.20	1.00 – 7.00
	Extrinsic motivation	6.29	1.17	4.50 – 7.00
	Intrinsic motivation	3.65	2.20	1.67 – 5.67
End of Course (n = 10)	IMI	5.87	0.96	1.00 – 7.00
	Interest/Enjoyment	6.21	0.52	5.86 – 6.71
	Perceived competence	5.47	0.78	4.33 – 6.50

As is shown in Table 1, students entered the course with higher intrinsic motivation – they felt motivated to learn about crime in a historical context compared to lower motivation by extrinsic factors, such as grades or the opinions of others. At the end of the course, students indicated that they enjoyed the case studies and, to a lesser degree, felt that they were competent at the case studies.

General Insights

These preliminary data provide some insights that can inform the use of roleplay and case studies in future online courses.

Students come into this class motivated to learn the material.
A class called Crime in History based on case studies seemed to have an intrinsic appeal to online undergraduates studying history. They were less motivated by grades and competing with their peers.

Students do enjoy case studies, role playing, and diverse kinds of sources. This kind of pedagogy encourages feelings of competence, mixed with some feels of not fully mastering the material.
I (the first author) speculate that these positive impressions have to do with the creativity students exercise when role-playing, as well as the freshness of not working with a textbook or more conventional sources. Although they are role-playing, students used a wider range of primary sources than would be used in a conventional course. In combining these primary sources with fictional accounts from the relevant eras, students are grappling with historical documents and narratives in a way that more closely resembles what professional academic historians do when writing books. On the other hand, as noted above, students were assigned a number of primary sources from the early nineteenth century, which they might have found difficult. This may explain why the survey results from the end of the course show a slightly lower feeling of competence than enjoyment.

Extra planning and scheduling are needed for innovative course designs
Courses with unconventional design could be flagged as more time-consuming for instructional designers, and a reduction in their overall workload might be beneficial to accommodate more ambitious pedagogies.

Conclusions and Lessons Learned

The case studies chosen and implemented in this class provided an experience that highlighted the SDT needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness. Students had freedom to choose their characters and their interpretation of the material. They had many opportunities to read challenging primary sources to boost a sense of competence. They interacted with their peers in character, and with the historical characters depicted in the cases. The preliminary data derived from this study further suggests that this approach was both enjoyable and engaging.

While the students reacted positively to the version of the class available to them, due to the failure of the original plans, I (the first author) also learned that I need to be a more informed expert about new technologies which I may want to use in my online teaching. This is a daunting realization, as my traditional academic training focused on content knowledge - not on pedagogies for online learning. Future educators in history need to keep this in mind as we struggle to capture the attention and interest of our students. Junior scholars must know that the extremely arduous and time-consuming onsite archival research needed for groundbreaking historical scholarship now has to be balanced by staying up-to-date on present-focused forms of delivery, particularly within online education. Fortunately, many history graduate students and recent PhDs are now more well-versed in digital humanities. In the future, continued training in digital humanities pedagogy and technological skills will be essential in preparing the next generation of educators in historical scholarship. Such training can support innovations in course design that can attract and engage future scholars in this work. The use of

roleplay to bring case studies to life is one example of innovative pedagogy that promotes students' interest, engagement, and competence in historical scholarship.

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Appendix 1:

Survey 1: Adapted SRQ-L (Black & Deci, 2000)

Subscale	Item
Intrinsic Motivation	
	I will participate actively in Crime in History because I feel like it is a good way to improve my understanding of the material.
	I will participate actively in Crime in History because I would feel proud of myself if I did well in the course.
	I will participate actively in Crime in History because a solid understanding of history is important to my intellectual growth.
	I am likely to follow my instructor's suggestions for studying history because they seem to have insight about how best to learn the material.
	The reason that I will work to expand my knowledge of history is because it is interesting to learn more about history.
	The reason that I will work to expand my knowledge of history is because it is a challenge to really understand how to solve historical questions.
Extrinsic Motivation	
	I will participate actively in Crime in History because others might think negatively of me if I don't.
	I am likely to follow my instructor's suggestions for studying history because I would get a bad grade if I didn't do what they suggest.
	I am likely to follow my instructor's suggestions for studying history because I am worried that I am not going to perform well in the course.
	I am likely to follow my instructor's suggestions for studying history because it is easier to follow their suggestions than come up with my own study strategies.
	The reason that I will work to expand my knowledge of history is because a good grade in this history course will look positive on my transcript.
	The reason that I will work to expand my knowledge of history is because I want others to see that I am intelligent.

Students responded on a 1-7 Likert scale where "1" was "not at all true" and "7" was "very true".

Survey 2: Adapted IMI (Ryan, 1982)

Subscale	Item
Interest/Enjoyment	
	I enjoyed doing the case studies very much.
	The case studies were fun to do.
	I thought the case studies were a boring activity.*
	The case studies did not hold my attention at all.*
	I would describe the case studies as very interesting.
	I thought the case studies were quite enjoyable.
	While I was doing the case studies, I was thinking about how much I enjoyed it.
Competence	
	I think I am pretty good at these case studies.
	I think I did pretty well at the case studies, compared to other students.
	After working at the case studies for a while, I felt pretty competent.
	I am satisfied with my performance on the case studies.
	I was pretty skilled at the case studies.
	The case studies were an activity that I couldn't do very well.*

* *Items were reverse coded*
Students responded on a 1-7 Likert scale where "1" was "not at all true" and "7" was "very true".

About the Research Unit at Oregon State Ecampus

Vision

The Ecampus Research Unit strives to be leaders in the field of online higher education research through contributing new knowledge to the field, advancing research literacy, building researcher communities and guiding national conversations around actionable research in online teaching and learning.

Mission

The Ecampus Research Unit responds to and forecasts the needs and challenges of the online education field through conducting original research; fostering strategic collaborations; and creating evidence-based resources and tools that contribute to effective online teaching, learning and program administration.

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