

# Using Historical Role-Playing Games (RPGs) to Teach History Content and Critical Thinking Skills

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Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC) evaluated two historical RPGs funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), aimed at students in the middle grades. Both games and related classroom materials are free and available online.

- ★ *Mission US* [www.mission-us.org](http://www.mission-us.org) produced by WNET/Thirteen
- ★ *Past/Present* [www.pastpresent.org](http://www.pastpresent.org) produced by the Center for New American Media

## I. Learning Goals

|                          | <i>Mission US</i>   | <i>Past/Present</i>   |
|--------------------------|---|---|
| Critical thinking skills | Developing arguments and using evidence<br>Analyzing sources and bias<br>Comparing and contrasting points of view                   |   |
| Historical content       | Tensions in Boston that led to the American Revolution; Resistance to slavery in the years preceding the Civil War                  | Labor conflicts that emerged with industrialization in the early 20th century   |
| Standards                | National Center for History in the Schools;<br>Common Core Standards: English/Language Arts;<br>Partnership for 21st Century Skills | National Center for History in the Schools;<br>National Council for the Social Studies;<br>Council for Economic Education |

## II. Promising Results:

In a series of studies involving approximately 3,300 students and 88 teachers, EDC found:

### Student learning

- ★ Students who played *Mission US* improved their scores on a test of knowledge related to colonial history.
- ★ *Past/Present* students demonstrated knowledge gains from the game through a more nuanced reading of a primary source.

### Student engagement

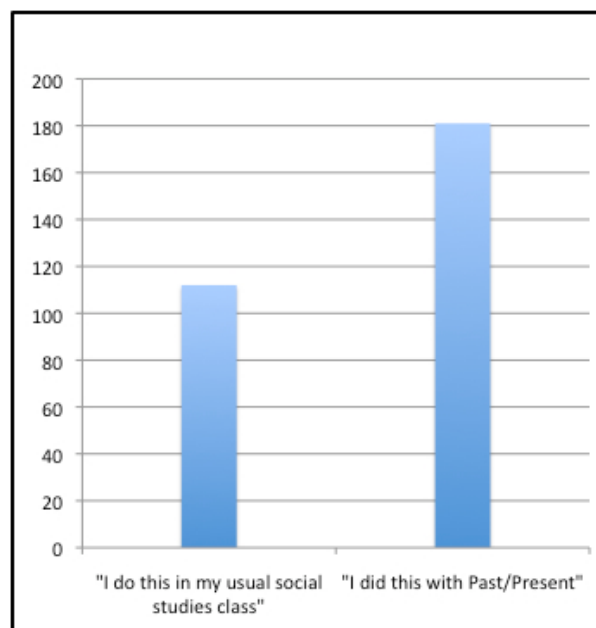
- ★ 16 of 18 teachers who used *Mission US* (89%) said that students were more cognitively and emotionally engaged during the *Mission US* unit than in the typical unit they teach.
- ★ 61.9% of students who used *Past/Present* indicated that while they were playing the game, they were more interested than usual in what they were studying in social studies.

### Connecting with the past

The narrative and role-playing elements of the games helped students connect with the past:

- ★ 86.5% of students reported that they imagined what it was really like to live in the past when playing *Past/Present*, compared to 53.4% of students who reported doing so in their usual social studies class.
- ★ 94.4% (17) of teachers who used *Mission US* strongly agreed that their students were able to see past events in more human, everyday terms that they could understand.

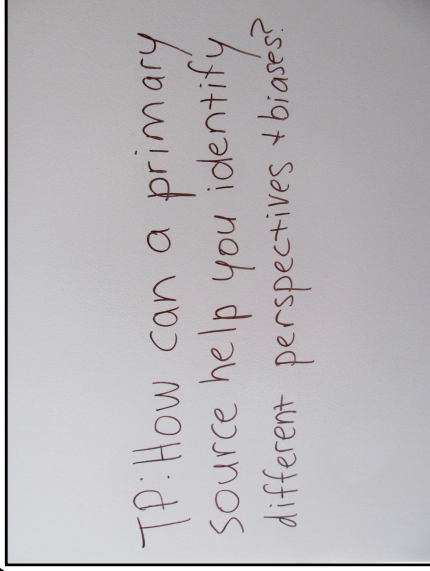
Do you imagine what it's like to live in the past?  
n = 226 students



# Tips for Teachers

Based on EDC's classroom observations, teachers who were most effective in using the games did the following:

## Purpose



Established their own meaningful purpose for using the game (e.g., to teach a specific skill or big idea)

Communicated that purpose clearly to their students

# Preparation

Participated in training sessions

Played the entire game in advance

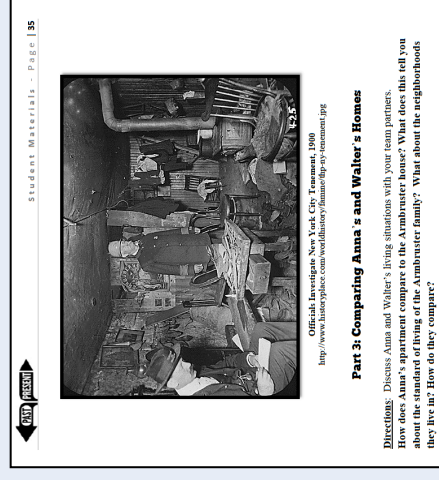
Reviewed and adapted the curricular materials in advance



# Classroom Launch Guide

The Center for New American Media  
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## Integration



Made explicit connections between the game and the rest of the curriculum

Used a culminating classroom activity such as a debate to extend learning

Embedded the game in activities that scaffolded learning before, during, and after gameplay



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