STIMULATING
HISTORY
THE BIG BOOK OF
WORLD HISTORY
SIMULATIONS
by James Denby and Robin Ulster
What Is a Simulation?

The defining characteristic of any academic simulation is that students must step out of their traditional role of simply learning about a topic. Instead, they must build and use knowledge to participate in activities that simulate a process that is deeply connected to history. The roles students play in simulations are intentionally varied (just as the content is) in this book in order to provide them with multiple viewpoints on both historical content and the role of individuals in history.

Some of the simulation roles for students in this book include:

- Museum curators deciding how to represent a historical era
- Citizens trying to find ways to avoid social collapse
- Debaters weighing the consequences of war
- Tradespeople showing off innovations with the potential to transform society
- Treaty negotiators trying to prevent future wars
- Jurors in a trial of historical figures

Every student in your class will have a role and will need to learn important historical content in order to participate. The amount of time needed for each simulation will also vary, but will usually require at least one class period to learn and understand key content and at least one for the simulation itself. It’s worth the time!
Why Should I Use a Simulation?

At their core, simulations try to get at the narrative of history—the stories, people, and choices that shaped world events. We can reduce history to a textbook full of facts and descriptions of conflicts and issues, but this often leaves out the very real struggle to make decisions, find solutions, and resolve conflicts. These struggles are what help us understand the world we live in today. Perhaps most importantly, understanding this struggle is essential if we want our students to see themselves as participants, shaping the world they live in rather than observing it.

Simulations are designed to be immersive experiences that push students to not only learn content but to wrestle with the big questions of history that have very real relevance to our society today. Rather than learning content to complete a task or take a test, simulations require students to learn content in order to take part in and understand the debates and decision-making of history.

For many of our students, understanding this narrative is the key to unlocking an interest in history. Without it, history, for many, will be a list of meaningless details that have little bearing on life today. Simulations offer the potential to inspire not only learning but also civic engagement. From local issues like affordable housing to national and international issues like the distribution of resources, our students will need not just an understanding of the process that shapes decisions but also their potential role in that process.

Though each student can be assessed individually based on their respective contributions, simulations bring students together to examine and analyze important historical questions. They create opportunities to discuss shared experiences while also creating a forum for discussing different points of view about serious questions. This analysis, built into each of the simulations included in this book, pushes students towards a deeper understanding of history content since they rely on this knowledge to support and defend their points of view.
Overview

This peasant and serf simulation is a dramatization of the life of a peasant or serf in the Middle Ages. The simulation focuses specifically on the peasant’s or serf’s particular challenge of providing for their families while working the fields for the upper classes and the church and paying taxes. Intended to kick off a unit on the Middle Ages and/or on Feudalism, this one-day simulation is designed to get students emotionally invested in what they are learning.

This role-play is based on a typical peasant work week where they would spend three days working fields for the nobles, three days working for themselves, and one day working for the church. Students role-play a peasant family in a series of timed challenge rounds.

It is important to read through all procedures, materials, and round setups before leading the simulation, as some of the rounds may have to be adapted for the specific needs of your class.
Timing

The simulation consists of seven three- to five-minute rounds. Students will need time to set up before each round. This role-play simulation can be completed in one 50- to 60-minute class period, though two class periods might be preferred to allow time for a debriefing discussion and/or exploration activity.

Standards

Common Core

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CCSS.ELA-Literacy. RH.11–12.7.</th>
<th>Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.</th>
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<tr>
<td>CCSS.ELA-Literacy. SL.9–10.1</td>
<td>Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.</td>
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College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework

<table>
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<tr>
<th>D2.His.16–8.</th>
<th>Analyze connections among events and developments in broader historical contexts.</th>
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<tr>
<td>D2.His.19–12.</td>
<td>Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.</td>
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<tr>
<td>D2.His.4.6–8.</td>
<td>Analyze multiple factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D2.His.4.9–12.</td>
<td>Analyze complex and interacting factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.</td>
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Materials

- Peasant Life handout
- Origami Cup Instructions handout
- Large mats or poster paper that all students in the group can work with. The material will need to be large enough that after one-third of it is folded, students can still work within the space. As an alternative, you can use masking tape to mark the space off on the floor.
- Pens or pencils
Teacher Instructions

Divide students into groups of three to five. Each group represents a peasant family. Give each group a mat/poster paper that will be their home. This is the space they will work in. Each group will also need several blank sheets of different paper types, pencils or pens, and coloring utensils.

The simulation consists of a series of seven rounds, each representing a period of a week. Each round is three to five minutes long and opens with you reading a challenge and setting the time limit to complete it. After the time is up, write the scores on the board (or chart paper) for families to see how they’re doing comparatively.

At the end of the rounds, leave time for a class debriefing discussion.

Round 1  

Time: three minutes

Read script to students:

In most parts of Western Europe in the Middle Ages, peasants worked on divided parcels of land owned by nobles. Depending on the country and the lord who owned the county, peasants ranged from free (not very many) to serfs (property of the noble or lord). Most peasants had to get a lord’s permission to leave their village or their land. They didn’t own their own clothing, tools, land, house, or food.

The challenges of famine, frost, drought, and flood were particularly devastating for peasants. When crops were limited, nobles and lords took care of their own survival first. There was not always food left for peasant families to survive on.

Today you will be working for the noble who owns your land. Using blank paper, pencils or pens, and rulers, your challenge is to draw as many neatly adjoined one-centimeter-wide squares as you can in three minutes. You cannot stop until the time is up.

The squares that you draw represent the task of getting each plot of land ready for planting.

When the round ends, have students count up their one-centimeter squares (do some spot checks to make sure they are neat), add the total for their group, and divide by the number of people in the group to find the group average.
Write the average for each family on the board (or on a piece of chart paper). The family should average 160 squares per family member. If their average is below 160, they are going to have to take half of the next round’s points and give it to their nobles as a penalty.

**NOTE:** Walk around the room during the three minutes that they’re drawing, alternately choosing one person per family to fill a glass or bottle with water. This makes it more challenging for the families to finish their work, but it represents a routine and necessary task that peasants undertook for their own families and for the nobles. These tasks could often be dangerous since wells, rivers, and streams could be slippery and muddy, and peasants (particularly peasant children) could fall and injure themselves.

Before the next round begins, tell students winter is coming, so they have to bring their animals inside the house. Animals take up one-third of the space, so each group needs to fold the mat/poster paper and work within two-thirds of their original space.

**Round 2**

**Time: five minutes**

Read script to students:

*Today you will be working to grow food for your family. Take a sheet of lined paper, and write the alphabet in a single column down the left side of your paper (in the margins). When I start the timer, you are going to have to write as many words as you can that begin with different letters of the alphabet in the category of ____________. Circle every word that you write.*

**NOTE:** If this simulation is kicking off a unit on the Middle Ages, then you should choose an unrelated category for students to write on their papers (words from a past unit of study or a random category such as animals, places, adjectives, etc.).

*Every letter must have at least one word before listing multiples by any letter (Q, X, and Z can be exempt from this rule, but if you get them, they count for two points). Each point represents a unit of food that you are going to grow for yourself and your family.*

When the round ends, ask students to count their words. Make sure you have been walking around and spot checking while they were working so that you know that most of their words are valid.

Tell them they will need at least 50 points per person to feed their families (depending on the category you give them, you may change this). If they do not earn 50 points each, one of the family members will fall ill. This means that for the next round, the ill family member will only be able to use their non-dominant hand to perform their share of the work. After the next round, the family member will have recovered.

Tell students that you have to take a third of their points from them this round for taxes and rent, and one-tenth of the remaining total for the church. Also remember to take half of the remaining points from any family that did not make their quota in Round 1. Record the final points for each family on the board.
Round 3

Read script to students:

Today you will be working for the noble who owns your land. Take the graph paper you created in Round 1 and fill each square with a circle. Make sure that the circles are clearly colored in. You will have three minutes to fill in as many squares as you can. If you fill in all your squares, you can use the remaining time to make more squares. This symbolizes the planting of the crops.

During this three minutes, walk around to monitor student progress and give each group a blank piece of copy paper. Tell each group to place the sheet in the middle of the space they are working on. No one is allowed to touch the piece of paper. This paper represents the space needed for cooking inside the peasant homes. These fires fill the rooms with smoke.

Take a minute and ask students to think about the space they are working in, the animals they are sharing the space with, and the smoke from the fires.

At the end of the round, ask students to count up their circles and divide the group’s total by the number of people in the group. Record the averages on the board (just like in Round 1). To meet their quotas for the nobles, peasants will need to score an average of at least 55 points per person. If they do not earn 55 points each, half of their food in the next round will go to feed the nobles.

Round 4

Read script to students:

Today you will be working for yourself. You have five minutes to continue with the alphabet challenge. Every new word counts, and each word represents a healthy plant that has made it past the sprouting stage.

NOTE: Change the category to hold students’ interest. Categories could include those listed above or new ones such as jobs/professions, sports and leisure, book titles, famous people, things of a specific color, etc.

After 2.5 minutes have elapsed, announce that the land has been flooded and tell students to keep working.

Make sure you have been walking around while they were working so that you know that most of their words are valid. When the round ends, ask students to count their new words. Tell them they will need at least 35 points per person to feed their families (depending on the category you give them, you may change this). If they do not earn 35 points each, one of the family members will fall ill (you can set the points at 50 if the category is easy). For the next round, the ill family member will only be able to use their non-dominant hand to perform their share of the work.

Announce that you are taking half the points from this round from each family to represent the crops damaged by the flood. Remember to also take half the remaining points from any group that did not meet the quota in Round 3. Record the final points for each family on the board.
Round 5

Read script to students:

*Today you will be working for the noble who owns your land. When the time starts, you will fully color in the squares with alternating colors so that no two adjacent squares are the same. Color in as many squares as you can in three minutes. This symbolizes the harvesting of the crops.*

When the round ends, ask students to count their colored squares and divide the group total by the number of people in the group. Record the group averages on the board. To meet their quotas for the nobles, peasants will need to score at least an average of 40 points per person. If they do not earn an average of 40 points each, half of their food in the next round will go to feed the nobles.

Round 6

Read script to students:

*Today you will be working for yourself. You have to make as many origami cups as you can in five minutes* (hand out the Origami Cup Instructions). *These represent the tools and clothing that your family needs in order to sustain yourselves.*

After 2.5 minutes, pause the timer and announce that one family member per group must come to the front of the room (or near you) and follow you around. This represents family members who were taken away to fight in wars. Once those family members have joined you, restart the timer.

When the round ends, add up the number of tools each family created and add the totals to the board. Each origami figure represents one tool or one outfit of clothing. Students should think about how long clothes in particular needed to last.

Round 7

Read script to students:

*Today you will be working for the church. Without talking at all, you will have three minutes to clean up and quietly put away everything that you have made and used so far. When you finish, everyone in your group should sit in silence until the three minutes is up. Make sure everything is put back in the right spot, including your mats/poster papers. There are no points added here because when peasants gave a day of labor to the church, they did not necessarily plant anything and they did not earn any money or food for themselves. However, if you do not do this work, points will be taken away. Each family will lose half of their points for not completing the work for the church.*

**NOTE:** Have clear instructions for where you want things to go.
Peasant Life

Taxes

- Peasants had to pay 10% of the crops grown as taxes. In times of war, they might have to pay up to 30%.
- Peasants had to pay rent for living in a house on the noble’s property. The rent was 10% of the crops grown.
- Peasants had to give the church 10% of everything they grew or raised (eggs, chickens, crops, etc.) as a tithe.
- About half of their labor was spent working in the fields, cutting timber, hauling water, spinning and weaving, and making repairs to the nobles’ homes and generally serving their household. The rest of their labor was spent working to meet their own needs.

Daily Life

- Drinking and cooking water came from rivers, springs, streams, or wells. Sometimes the rivers were contaminated with animal, human, or food waste. Wells in the Middle Ages were not always solid stone structures—many of them were holes in the ground that could be difficult to navigate with a bucket and rope.
- Peasants didn’t really have any furniture, so life indoors was spent primarily on the floor.
- In summer, field work started at 3 a.m. This field work included cutting the crops, plowing the fields, sowing the seeds, weeding the fields, making hay, bringing in the harvest, and threshing and storing the grains for winter.
Origami Cup Instructions

The origami drinking cup is a traditional and popular design, representing something that peasants really would have needed to create. To make an origami cup, follow these simple instructions:

1. Take a square sheet of paper, and fold in half at the dotted line as shown.

2. Fold the right corner to the left edge. Crease well.

3. Fold the left corner to the right edge. Crease well.

4. Fold the front top flap downwards.

5. Now fold the back top flap backwards in the same manner.

6. Open out and enjoy your finished drinking cup!
Debriefing Questions

1. Did your family complete all of the challenges for each round successfully?
2. Which one was the most difficult to complete?
3. What was it like to be doing all of that work for others?
4. How did the dynamic change when there was a flood or a war, or when someone fell ill?
5. How did taxes and paying rent affect your family?
6. What about the animals, the smoke, and the loss of space inside the house?
7. Did you feel angry or frustrated at all during the simulation? If yes, what were your options for dealing with these feelings? How can this help you relate to some of the feelings the peasants might have had?
8. Why might it have been advantageous for landlords and nobles to have had such a large peasant population?
9. Can you make any connections between this activity and the present day?
10. Can you apply what you have learned about the past to decisions you might make about the future?

Exploration Activity (Optional)

This explorative writing task gives students an opportunity to think about the connections between the Black Plague and the ways in which life choices improved for many peasants. It also allows students to put themselves in the shoes of the peasants. Students will read the writing prompt, brainstorm possible effects, and then create a short (one- to two-page) written response without researching that completely addresses the two questions.

Writing Prompt:
From 1347 to 1350 the Black Plague struck Europe and millions of people, including peasants, devastating entire populations. This created a labor shortage. What might some effects of the shortage be on the surviving peasants? What would you do if you survived and different nobles wanted you to work for them?

Works Cited
