USING MICROCOMPUTER HISTORICAL SIMULATIONS: TEACHING SURVIVAL IN EARLY VIRGINIA

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The year 1614 witnessed the beginning of a transformation for the colony on the banks of the River James. That year marked the end of the first settlers' seven-year terms of service to the Company. No longer would directors across the Atlantic or their representatives in America dictate economic policy to them. Private land ownership would forever alter the character of Virginia's society and politics, as well as its economics. John Rolfe's crop that year, small though it was, held the promise of the riches so far denied the dreamers who populated James Towne. Desperately hard times lay ahead--but survival as a colony was virtually assured.

Understanding the struggle undertaken to plant a settlement of Englishmen at James Towne and the conflicting plans for development of the colony provides a basis for measuring the growth of American institutions and for gauging the American spirit. How and why I use a microcomputer historical simulation to teach about Virginia between 1607 and 1614 is the focus of this paper.

The traditional account of James Towne's settlement leaves out much of the human drama. We cannot doubt of Virginia's ultimate success because we know how the story comes out. We know John Smith will succeed as the leader of the tiny colony. We know the "starving time" experience does not threaten an end to the enterprise. What I try to do involves restoring the element of suspense and viewing James Towne from the perspective of its settlers. Microcomputer simulations are a means of providing such perspective.

"History is every becoming, never completed," said Frederick Jackson Turner. He continued, "Each age tries to form its own conception of the past." So it should be with our students. Trying to understand their present, they should look to the past for precusors, patterns, or perspective. Instead, many of them are looking for nothing more than a passing grade. What these students see is an endless morass of names, dates, acts, terms, and events, usually without form or meaning despite the best efforts of textbook writer and lecturer.[1]

Microcomputer simulations provide the teacher with an opportunity to give immediacy and drama, to short-circuit the historical inevitability which makes textbook renderings of the past dull, and to break down student reluctance about examing historical experience. But simulations do not lessen the teacher's responsibility to focus attention on significant developments and to draw out meaning from the activity. They are a means of communication only; they do not eliminate the need for a dedicated, knowledgeable teacher.

History is perhaps best taught as a freeze-frame image, with the action halted temporarily to take stock of what has occurred and what will, or possibly could, take place. History should be presented as the result of ideas and actions preconceived and intended, incompletely formulated and uncertain in consequence, compatible and conflicting, or unknown, ill-conceived, and accidental. Fundamentally, history deals with activity, with a three-dimensional world, and history education should reflect that reality. History education should also emphasize the cognitive skills of analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and interpretation.

Furthermore, I seek to involve my students in history as it happens to ordinary people.

Microcomputer simulations attempt to recreate the past by involving participants in decisions made and actions taken consequent to a specific historical event or relevant to a given time and place. Some simulations have as their chief goal testing the player's knowledge of what really happened, and others seek simply to establish the context, choices, and possible results of available alternatives for the purpose of comparing the game-derived result with the actual occurrence.

Historical simulations should (1) reflect research in primary and secondary sources, because simulations are interpretations of the past and because game development should hinge on probabilities derived from analysis of the historical event, not from a random calculation; (2) value historicity over entertainment because the aim is learning not passing time; (3) represent the past by making conscious and ordered what may have been imperfectly perceived or apparently disordered at the time because the designer's task, like that of the professional historian, is to explain for a later age the actions of an earlier one; (4) exercise visual skills, such as reading and understanding printed rules, evaluating verbal and numerical information on the monitor, analyzing game maps, and interpreting graphic displays; (5) prompt the participant to reflect on what had happened and what would in the future occur from the point of view of the historical actors; (6) include, where appropriate, historically valid alternative courses of action in order to stretch learning beyond memorization to the other cognitive skills; (7) force the participant to experience history as cause and consequence and, as a result, encourage analysis, evaluation, and interpretation; (8) give occasion for players to take risks, to find creative solutions to the problems posed by the simulation, and to appreciate the daring and innovation of their predecessors, as a way of stimulating those attributes in themselves;[2] (9) demonstrate that history involves real people because history students should understand causes, consequences, and individual responsibility;[3] (10) involve individual decision-making as well as group interaction because they should understand history as a product of both and because social skills are important educationally; (11) should, in sum, provide valuable insight or perspective regarding the historical participants, the event, or the times.

There are negatives involved with the use of microcomputer simulations. They use a lot of time and focus narrowly on a specific event or circumstance so that scheduling may become a problem. Microcomputer simulations are often fun and some students mistrust this element; these student may think of you as "strange" or may conclude the game serves no serious educational purpose. Microcomputer simulations are not lectures, and those comfortable with traditional methods may not appreciate having to make decisions and evaluate the progress of a game. Microcomputer simulations frequently cause a lot of moving around, chair rearranging, and interaction, and some students may react poorly to being disturbed. Such simulations do not produce filled notebooks, nor are they keyed to existing texts and readers; those who want everything written down and neatly packaged may be apprehensive. Finally, microcomputer simulations at times produce a result different from reality, and students may dismiss such developments as

impossible or simply erroneous.

Patience and reassurance may help. You can discuss the serious purpose of the simulation with the students and point out how their involvement relates to understanding the past. You can identify for them outcomes which were historically possible, and discuss with them the role of chance, timely intervention, and turning points in history. You can add questions to your examinations which call for information or insight drawn from the game. You can show them how the handouts they have completed and the documents they have read in connection with the simulation aid the study of history.

Microcomputer simulations force students to confront the choices, because they must respond to a computer simulation's request for a next action. The player may appreciate that he or she does not have all the facts necessary to make a wise choice or know all the possible consequences of a wrong selection, but by having to go ahead anyway, the student should come to reflect on the somewhat parallel process followed by the individual who had to make the decision originally. Most students retain an appreciation for the context of the simulated event and for the difficulties confronting the actual participants long after other details have been forgotten. For many, the simulation helps them see history as it occurs, as they experience it today, and not as lifeless trivia. Historical simulations can restore the element of play, while at the same time they can give a reason for knowing what really happened, if only as a measure of the student's own accomplishment.

We must select, of course, what we present among the many topics we might choose to discuss. In teaching the survey of American history, I have come gradually to adopt the "postholing" technique, concentrating on specific periods or issues, and relying on the textbook for the overarching narrative connection.

Developing the story of James Towne takes me at least six class periods. Briefly, this is what I do.

Class I: I provide the class with a timeline covering significant events related to James Towne and the Virginia colony and lecture on England's developing interest in colonization and the propagandists' reasons favoring such a step. I illustrate the lecture with slides depicting first Medieval views of the world and then the evolution of the New World in the Old World's imagination, using John White's views of Roanoke, the Indians, and the natural environment of America. In order to stimulate the class to "see" as well as "look" at the images on the screen, I ask them first to identify a map of North America shown from the Arctic perspective, not the customary equatorial view, and next to examine John White's 1585 drawing of Secota and Theodor de Bry's 1590 engraving of Secoton to find the differences between the two renderings.

Class II: I begin by having the class fill out a "space colony" exercise which asks them to choose among seven different hypothetical colonies, updated versions of actual English settlements, and explain their selection, for the purpose of drawing them into the situation facing English men and women during the colonial period. Overwhelmingly my students pick Lee Iacocca's for-profit, Virginia-style colony over Plymouth Plantations headed by Reverend Oral Roberts, Reverend Jerry Falwell's Massachusetts Bay, Vice-President

George Bush's New York, Dr. Henry Kissinger's Pennsylvania, Reverend Jesse Jackson's Maryland, and the Carolina colony founded by Barry Goldwater, Richard Nixon, and Gerald Ford. Most of them say they are ready to make the journey. Next I provide them with Richard Hakluyt's "Discource concerning Western Planting" and, dividing them into groups to read and analyze different parts of the document, ask them first to separate Hakluyt's arguments into political, social, economic, military, and religious reasons, and then to determine which set of motives seemed most important to the author. Finally, in order to impress upon them the need to understand geographical relationships, I pass out an outline map of the United States and ask them to draw in the boundaries of the original thirteen colonies and to locate James Towne, Boston, New York City, Philadelphia, and Charleston.

Class III: I begin class by putting on the blackboard two lists of reasons why individuals left England for America, one of forces "pushing" them out of their homeland and the other of America's attractions, and ask the students about situations in their own lives which might encourage them to cut their ties or leave their hometowns or home state, and I have them compare the reasons they gave on the "space colony" exercise with those given on the blackboard. Then I display an indenture certificate for the purpose of stimulating a brief discussion of the role of indentured servants in early America and conclude this with asking them whether or not they would undertake such a bargain--most would not, and rightly so, because America remains a land of freedom and opportunity. Next I give them a brief visual introduction to England on the eve of colonization, combined with contemporary English music; following that I hand out John Smith's list of goods necessary for a year's stay in Virginia, call for a comparision with what we might need for that trip today, and finish by discussing the cost of those items today. By my reckoning the Captain's 12 pounds, 10 shillings, and 10 pence works out to an expenditure of about $4,377. I then give them a short introduction to the James Towne simulation, pass out the rules, and provide them with a list of actual settlers' names to personalize the experience. Finally, to aid in creating a biography for the individual they will become during the simulation, I distribute a "Bound for Virginia" questionnaire due in at the beginning of the next class period.

Class IV: I collect the "Bound for Virginia" handout and give students the "James Towne in Virginia" questionnaire which calls for evaluation of the experience (due in a week's time). Next I have them divide into three or more groups, depending upon the number of computers available, with a randomly selected first leader who can be removed by the majority vote of the group--with a full vote to each one designating him or herself as upper class, a half vote to those from the middle class, and no vote at all someone of the lower class--and require them to vote approval or removal at the conclusion of each season. Typically, the first time through, students will fail to survive: given sufficient time, replays are permitted, but a complete game may take a full class period.

Class V: The simulation concludes and I encourage a brief discussion of the most and least successful efforts.

Class VI: I pass out three selected readings (Governor Thomas Dale's Laws, Richard Frethorne's letter to his parents, and William Strachey's letter) and ask the class to describe

James Towne by giving written answers to questions about the documents and oral responses in a brief discussion. Students then reflect on the simulation and consider such questions as--Was your James Towne bound to survive? What would you add or delete to make James Towne Better? I conclude with a discussion of chapter one of James West Davidson and Mark Hamilton Lytle's After The Fact as a look to the future of James Towne, and point out important developments mentioned there in Virginia's history between 1614 and 1624.

In evaluating what the class has learned from the microcomputer simulation, I give up to ten points toward the equivalent of a course examination for each of the handouts. On my mid-semester examinations, I may ask students to draw upon what they have learned from the simulation in an essay tracing the history of early Virginia, in an analysis of the problems facing the colony, or in a series of questions calling for a Virginian's view of specific individuals, developments, or actions. At least one question on the final examination requires the student to reflect on some aspect of American History based on perspective drawn from one or more of the computer simulations.

In conclusion, I would rather my students learn enough about a single event or connected series of occurrences to appreciate the richness of history than so little about so many past happenings they lose touch with reality.

I can accomplish this task best by using microcomputer simulations along with other sources of information and insight. I do not consider microcomputer simulations the miracle cure for what, if anything, is ailing history education, but, used with care, I do think they can help students understand the past.

NOTES

[1]Frederick Jackson Turner, "An American Definition of History," in Fritz Stern, ed. The Varieties of History From Voltaire to the Present (New York, Heritage Books, 1973, orig. 1956), p. 200.

[2]For instance, see the preliminary findings of the Carnegie Study, "Higher Education and the American Resurgence," USA Today, 20 March, 1985.

[3]See Frances, FitzGerald, America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979).