“I had to live, breathe, and write my character”:
Character Selection and Student Engagement in an Online Role-Play Simulation

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Abstract
This study explores the relationship between character selection and student engagement in the Jewish Court of All Time (JCAT), an online and classroom-based role-playing simulation of a current events court case with Jewish historical roots. Analyzing students’ responses to three questions posed in an out-of-character JCAT discussion forum, we tracked indications of their different types and styles of engagement and how they were associating this engagement with their character roles. The findings seek to augment the implementation of future JCAT simulations, as well as to inform research and practice of role-play simulations that involve assuming character personas.

Introduction
Educational games and simulations are becoming increasingly relevant options in the current era of rapid technological advances. These advances drive the need for both constantly evolving skills and new ways of capturing the interest and attention of the modern student, which means that educational endeavors must view skills and interest as part of the process as well as the product. One option that has been used in recent years is educational role-playing, in which students take on a character’s persona in order to interact within a structured learning environment with other participants doing the same (Feinstein, Mann & Corsun, 2002). Role-
playing can occur in-person, or in blended or online teaching and learning contexts, and in the online environment has the possibility to be synchronous or asynchronous (Wills et al., 2007).

This study explores student engagement in the Jewish Court of All Time (JCAT), a contemporary and historical online role-playing simulation, in relation to the selection and in-game role-playing of participants’ chosen persona. As participant-observers in JCAT, we detected a dynamic connection between students’ level of engagement and the specific characters they played and sought to better understand this phenomenon. The findings seek to inform research and practice of role-play simulations that involve assuming character personas, as well as augment the implementation of future JCAT simulations.

JCAT is an online simulation of a current events court case with Jewish historical roots. The case in which students in our study participated (2015) focused on the French law of Laïcité regarding religious adornment in public spheres. Two fictional public school students, one Jewish and one Muslim, had brought their case to “The Court” to challenge the law so they could be allowed to wear their traditional religious headwear in school.

Through an online platform across two dozen Jewish day schools (approximately 600 students and 25 teachers) and four graduate schools of education (approximately 40 students), students assumed historical and current-day personas—from Moses to Gluckel of Hamlin, to Emma Goldman, to Barack Obama. Located on a virtual Masada, they became speech-makers, respondents, witnesses, justices, and game makers in deciding the previously described case. The graduate student “mentor” characters probed the thinking of middle school students with regard to their role-playing and critical thinking. Classroom teachers introduced students to content and facilitated character research, while encouraging and monitoring their students’ online participation in a variety of ways.
As project directors, our participant observations of role-play in JCAT have broader implications for teachers and researchers interested in experiential learning, the teaching of history, social-emotional learning and the use of serious games. Over the years in JCAT, there has been somewhat of a creative tension, or “felt difficulty” in Dewey’s terms (1910/1933), around character selection and assignment. What characters should be available to choose? How should the characters be selected? How much freedom should students be given in choosing their preferred characters? Should all characters be Jewish? Do popular culture characters have a place in JCAT? Do we allow controversial characters such as Hitler? Project directors, teachers, mentors, and the students themselves have all at some point felt this tension. The logical conclusion for our research team was that it might be useful to try to answer some of these questions. We decided to look at character selection from the students’ perspective, since it is really their experience that is most impacted by the process.

At the outset of the project, our research question was: How does character choice shape student engagement? We decided to turn to the students to ask them about their understandings of the character choice process. We formed our three open-ended questions accordingly, focusing on how students felt and thought about the process of choosing their top three character preferences (which was the first step in the character selection process), the character they were assigned, and then the impact of that character on their game play. Interestingly, the findings leaned much more specifically toward how the character they played shaped their engagement, rather than the impacts of the actual choice process on that engagement. So, this paper focuses much more on how the actual character shaped engagement than on the choice and assignment process.
Literature Review

In this work, we explore the influences of character choice on student engagement in JCAT and how these factors relate to notions of the thinking, feeling, and acting self. For our purposes, we define engagement as what results when students move from a state of motivation into forms of active learning (Toshalis & Nukkula, 2012). It is the range of academic, behavioral, cognitive, and psychological activities employed by students to generate the interest, focus, and attention they need to build new knowledge or skills (Toshalis & Nukkula, 2012). Active learning is also dependent on a thinking, feeling self (Damasio, 1999). “If we consider relationship with self as a process of making connections, both cognitive and affective, then it is important to identify the forces that facilitate, impede, and shape these connections” (Raider-Roth, 2005, p. 23-24).

This study is part of a larger action research project to understand the nature of teaching and learning that occurs in the JCAT simulation, and adds to that and other existing JCAT literature. The preceding work has focused on varied topics from the perspectives of teachers (deNoyelles & Raider-Roth, 2015), college-level mentors (Killham, Tyler, Venable, & Raider-Roth, 2014), project directors, and students (Rector-Aranda & Raider-Roth, 2015). This trajectory of scholarship builds on research of the “secular” version of JCAT called Place Out of Time (Kupperman et al., 2011; Kupperman, Stanzler, Fahy, & Hapgood, 2007).

The impact of games and related digital environments in general have often been studied for their potential benefits within institutions of learning (Squire & Jenkins, 2003). Simulations in particular have found their way into the classroom for the past few decades within a vast array of topics and courses (Smale, Overmans, Jeuring & Grint, 2015), supporting the need for more research into the feasibility and effectiveness of this implementation.
According to Smale, Overmans, Jeuring & Grint (2015), the relationship between engaged students and desired learning outcomes or objectives is important when analyzing the worth of educational simulation games. Outcomes have long been a core principle in the validation of methods and strategies within a classroom, however, such traditional assessments pose a challenge when attempting to affirm the worth of simulations (Smale, Overmans, Jeuring & Grint, 2015). Important qualities of student experience and interaction between learners are often neglected in favor of measuring students’ individual ability to recall information. In contrast, an analysis of simulations grounded within theories of deep and active learning tends to highlight these neglected knowledge constructs, facilitating a more thorough scrutiny of critical thinking, problem solving, connection of themes, and relation to the self through the medium (Smale, Overmans, Jeuring & Grint, 2015).

The very nature of role-playing in academic simulations is to motivate and increase student engagement through an authentic desire to contribute and instigate responses within the learning environment and associated course content (Rodgers, 1996). Role-playing environments allow students to create alternate personas, in turn encouraging the exploration and acknowledgment of multiple perspectives that may not readily be found in a traditional lecture-based setting. Students immersed in the gameplay with one another, all under assumed personalities, allows for historical and contemporary subjectivity that breeds the creation of new knowledge. Finally, the elements of challenge, fantasy, curiosity and control are characteristics of gameplay known to motivate and engage learners (Akili, 2007; Carnes, 2014).

Reacting to the Past is one such role-playing environment that began in 1995. Much like in JCAT, students take on the roles of characters and debate critical issues of historical significance (Carnes, 2014). Reacting to the Past is now used in over 350 schools and various
studies surrounding the simulation have found that this immersive approach to education
significantly increases the motivation and engagement of participating students. Students have
also been found to gain a greater understanding and empathy for historical events, actions,
peoples, and perspectives (Carnes, 2014).

The reviewed sources above indicate that role-playing games can offer an immersive and
engaging environment for students to critically develop new perspectives and a greater
appreciation of the curriculum. Character choice is important to examine as it is the main
component in the role-playing experience that drives student engagement.

**Theoretical Framework**

Our theoretical framework represents a culmination of observations from previous phases
of JCAT inquiry into the nature of teaching and learning, and specifically our contemplation of
2014 student feedback around character selection. Through inductive examination of this data,
what we found was that students most prominently discussed how they were connecting with
their character and the experience through knowledge, emotion, and action/risk-taking. We went
back to the literature to seek a framework that would help us describe these phenomena and
found theories of *experiential education* and engagement as a “meta” construct made up of
cognition, emotion, and behavior to be very useful. It was important that we be able to recognize
just how student engagement was influenced and constructed through JCAT’s role-playing
experience, and as an action research study, ways we could use this information to better support
future students.

*Experiential education* is a term that has been so widely applied that we must make clear
the ways we are defining its use. We have rooted our understanding of experiential education in
John Dewey’s conception of experience. For Dewey, an educative experience is grounded in two
core criteria—interaction and continuity (Cuffaro, 1995; Dewey, 1963). Interaction refers to the transaction between the individual (all that which occurs internally), and the environment (all that which occurs externally). Dewey underscores that attention to both the individual and the environment are equally important in an experience, as it is the interaction between the two that allows the individual to construct new knowledge. Continuity “means that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after” (Dewey, 1963, p. 35). Thus, an educative experience must offer students the opportunity to make connections with prior experiences and knowledge, and consider how they might build on the experience in the future (Cuffaro, 1995).

Jewish education, too, has examined experiential education at length, and Bryfman (2011) offers a useful definition, based in the work of the Association of Experiential Education: “A philosophy and methodology in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase their Jewish knowledge, develop skills and clarify values” (quoted in Gilbertson, 2006, p. 9). JCAT is a particular form of experiential education in that the educational environments are both in-person (classroom discussions, research, etc.) and online (JCAT website).

Experiential education in these ways has great potential to support students’ development of engagement through the interplay of their cognition, emotion, and behavior—or what we simplify here as thinking, feeling, and action—during the experience (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, and Paris, 2004). In 2014 JCAT, these three dimensions all seemed to appear equally relevant in the ways students described their experiences and learning, which guided us in this theoretical orientation toward engagement as a multidimensional concept and studying how it is built through students’ character role-playing. Attempting to draw out the potential of engagement as
a concept, Fredericks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) contend that the three “factors are dynamically interrelated within the individual; they are not isolated processes” (p. 61). The fusion of these three constructs is therefore important, and studying them concurrently can help us better understand engagement than studying any of the constructs alone. In our study we propose that when students are able to accomplish all three—to think about the information or experience, to attach specific emotions to it, and to act on that thinking and feeling—they are more deeply engaged and their learning is strengthened.

Methods

The Center for Studies in Jewish Education and Culture at the University of Cincinnati has been involved with and researching teaching and learning in JCAT since 2010, as previously discussed. This educational action research study examines another specific dimension of the JCAT curriculum and seeks to improve the quality of student learning (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007). As current or former participants in JCAT (as in-character mentors, project director, or professional development support), our stance has been that of participant-observers who are committed to listening closely to the voices of the middle school student “players.”

Context of Research Question

We have chosen to study students’ anonymous comments in the Green Room forum, the one space in the simulation where participants can step out of character and write from their own perspectives. Here, students are routinely asked to answer a set of questions reflecting on their JCAT experience at the conclusion of each simulation in the fall. Studying student responses to these questions in the 2014 simulation,¹ we were seeing some kind of relationship between the students’ personal connections with their characters and their apparent level of engagement in the game. We decided this was an important phenomena to explore further, with many potential
opportunities for positive action to improve the students’ experience and learning. The character selection process varies throughout JCAT, as students in some schools are limited in their choices to an approved list of characters, while other students have the opportunity to choose very broadly. In all settings, students request three top choices and are then assigned one of these characters. We wanted to find a way to study how this process and the resulting character assignment shaped students’ engagement in the simulation.

IRB and SER

Due to the anonymous and situation-specific nature of the data, this particular study was deemed exempt from our institution’s IRB oversight. Committed to a reflective and rigorous ethical stance, however, we chose to utilize a Structured Ethical Reflection (SER) process for each step of this research (Brydon-Miller, Rector Aranda, & Stevens, 2015; Stevens, Brydon-Miller & Raider-Roth, 2016). In the SER, we consciously problematized our ethical assumptions by choosing a set of values together that we wanted to uphold, then questioning how we would do so, from planning and constructing the project, through data collection and analysis, to disseminating our findings. In addition to helping us conduct a more ethically rigorous and meaningful inquiry, this process allowed us to pay closer attention to the nuanced possibilities and limitations of the project that might otherwise have gone unnoticed or unaccounted for. In this way, our research group provided ongoing and iterative ethical reflection.

Data Collection and Analysis

In line with other qualitative methodologists who believe data collection and analysis should be recursive (Hubbard & Power, 2003), ours was an evolving and intuitive process of moving between our questions, students’ responses, our SER values, and back again. With input
from teachers and project directors, we asked students in the 2015 simulation to respond anonymously to the following three questions in the Green Room:

1. During character selection, what was it about your top 3 characters that made you select them?
2. What do you feel/think about the character you were assigned?
3. How do you think your character selection affected the way you participated in JCAT?

We posted the first two questions near the beginning of the experience, just after character selection, and posted the last question after the simulation had ended. These questions yielded over 300 student posts across three simultaneous games.

It is important to note the limitations of this set of data. First, going with anonymous quotes meant we lost the capacity to follow a specific student/character through the three questions, or to even know whether the students who participated in fact answered all three questions. Anonymity allowed us a wider reach, however, we also missed out on the deeper analysis possible with more focused methods such as conducting interviews or connecting a student’s responses with verifiable character activity within the simulation. Finally, we do not know exactly how many students or different schools who participated are represented in this set of responses.

Using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), we analyzed 2014 simulation as pilot data and sought emerging themes and overarching categories that contributed a useful lens for considering our new data from 2015. This prior knowledge was an important contributor to the theoretical framework we constructed for this more formal phase of the study,
helping us focus in on the connections students were making between themselves, other players, and the subject matter of the simulation through thinking, feeling, and action.

Through this framework, we again interrogated students’ responses using a grounded, constant-comparison approach in the 2015 simulation. We were able to see how previous codes and themes were relevant and repeated, as well as identify new codes and themes. Focusing on one question at a time, we looked at student responses using a chart in which we kept track of the occurring codes and specific examples of each from the data text. From here, we also clustered the codes into larger themes as they emerged, eventually constructing a thematic conceptual matrix that unified the themes across the three questions and better defined and explained the reasoning behind the codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

As we honed the most relevant, prominent, and actionable overall themes, patterns began to emerge that we needed to interrogate further in order to make sense of them through our theoretical framework. A breakthrough occurred during an analysis session in which we attempted to represent the emerging findings through a more visual display (Miles & Huberman, 1994). During this session, the following figures evolved as we tried to understand how the findings fit the framework, and how all these components interacted. Beginning more linearly, we soon realized how processes could not be separated out from one another, and drew the conclusion that we must represent them in some interconnected fashion. We were surprised at the effectiveness of creating the visual representation for facilitating our deeper understanding of the data and of our budding conclusions.

Throughout our data collection and analysis, we employed five useful “intellectual habits of mind” that we propose are also analytic habits of mind. These were: questioning evidence, or how we know what we know; questioning the multiplicity of viewpoint, or who is speaking;
searching for connections and patterns, or causal relationships; supposing how things might have been different; and, questioning why any of it matters (Meier, 2002, p. 50; Hubbard & Power, 2003, p. 110).

**Findings**

In our analysis of students’ 2015 Green Room posts, we tracked indications of their different types and styles of engagement, and how they were associating this engagement with their character roles. We found that students expressed a multi-layered framework of elements, as shown in the final version of our visual display below (see Fig. 1). It is the interaction of all these elements that makes up these students’ engagement as a whole. Here, we will visit each of these as linearly as we are able in order to draw out their importance in more detail. We will then describe what manifested when students were able to successfully integrate all these elements—**embodiment**—and why this is important to student engagement in educational role-playing simulations.

![Figure 1. Full Visual Representation of Findings.](image-url)
Relatability, Immersion, and Voice and Agency

The three dimensions of engagement we identified throughout students’ comments were: relatability, immersion, and a combination of voice and agency. (Note that these were evident in all three of the larger themes that follow and are represented as the triangle in the visual, regardless of word placement. See Fig. 2.) Relatability is defined as either having things in common or differences with their characters, “getting to know” their characters, expressing an admiration, interest, enjoyment, or enthusiasm for their characters. Immersion means connecting deeply with the simulation experience, feeling fully part of the action, or feeling confident that they know what their characters would do and say. Voice refers to students’ ability to speak and be heard through their characters, and agency is their capacity and freedom to act through their characters (Rector-Aranda & Raider-Roth, 2015).

Figure 2. Relatability, Immersion, Agency & Voice, and Character Attributes.
Character attributes. Students usually described their characters’ attributes as central to relatability, immersion, and voice and agency. By character attributes, we mean how students perceive, identify, and classify their characters’ personalities, characteristics, biographical information, and so forth. In addition, we paid attention to the ways in which these attributes shaped students’ thoughts and feelings about the characters, as well as their actions within the game.

When talking about character attributes that might influence their engagement, students most frequently referenced the following: controversial or extreme figures, politicians, activists, creative figures/artists, feminists/well-known women, well-known people in general, characters’ specific achievements, characters with strong or weak voices/opinions, who are wise or profound, or who have ties to the case on trial, and so on. Students maintained that these types of characteristics guided their selection of certain characters and affected their role-playing decisions and their interactions with other players.

Attributes also contribute to the relatability of characters for students, particularly when there is shared sense of common ground or a contradiction of mindsets with their assigned personas. Recognizing that the traits of a character might mean a student would need to be “humorous,” “arrogant and offensive,” or “highly intelligent, moral, brave and peaceful,” for example, certainly made a difference in the level and style of engagement of the student portraying that character depending on how well the student could personally relate to these traits.

Attributes can also help or hinder students’ immersion in the JCAT environment, particularly when attributes pose opportunities or barriers for connecting with specific topics and activities in the simulation. Students weighed these traits heavily, shown in statements like this
one from a student in a school where they partnered with another student to share the portrayal of one character: “We had to embody the characters personality and use of feminism, because it was such a new concept at the time. This affected how we answered emails, posted in the comments, and what characters we choose to interact with.”

Finally, attributes also influence students’ agency and voice, sometimes pre-determining what students may do and say. As one student noted, “This character really gives me a chance to be creative with my responses, and express my views in all different ways, whether it’s a poem, story, or just a normal comment.” Some students wanted to feel empowered in specific ways by the traits of their characters, as with one who specifically chose characters “with strong opinions, who spoke their minds, because I wanted to be able to write with confidence.” Others appeared to enjoy the challenges posed by certain characteristics. For example, some students who portrayed controversial or “extreme” characters made statements like, “My character was infamous, so we got a lot of strong opinions from other people.” Students spoke frequently about the amount of attention and interaction they did or did not receive based on their character’s attributes.

Understanding the role of character attributes can serve as a jumping-off point for understanding student engagement, showing that specific attributes affect engagement in specific ways. Relating attributes back to our theoretical framework, we further see why they are so important. First, it is these attributes that largely determine the types of knowledge students access, specific reasons they feel as they do about their characters as people, and the actions and interactions that result. As part of experiential learning, attributes also mediate how students as individuals interact with the JCAT environment, and can make or break students’ learning continuity, how they are connecting what they know about their own and others’ characters with...
new knowledge they are building. This finding is immensely helpful for understanding why students were drawn to or disliked the various characters they portrayed, what kinds of characters could be said to have the most impact on student action, interaction, and engagement, and therefore, how teachers and project directors might be able to steer students toward or away from characters with/without specific attributes.

Knowledge Building

There were three larger themes in what students discussed and described that incorporate the dimensions of relatability, immersion, and agency and voice (see Fig. 3). The first is *knowledge building*. Specifically, this theme encompassed the consequences of students’ access to information about their characters, learning *from* their characters and getting to know their characters as real people, and perspective taking.

First, students identified different ways learning about their characters was an important part of their *immersion*, and that either accessing abundant information or having a hard time
finding information about their characters greatly impacted their ability to participate and feel engaged. One student said, “She has a lot of information written about her and even things that she wrote herself, so reading all of this information really helped me get into character.” On the contrary, when students couldn’t access enough biographical and similar information, it could be, as one put it, “very hard to find out what he thinks about this whole thing,” which often prevented those students from enjoying and becoming fully immersed and engaged in the simulation.

Similarly, a student’s level of character knowledge appeared to affect that student’s voice and agency within the simulation, such as with another student who decided that knowing the character had done so much meant he would “never run out of things to say.” Without this level of available character information, however, students’ words and actions were more limited.

Students also relayed that learning from their characters and learning more about characters as real people—their backgrounds, how they think, and what inspires them—made them excited and encouraged them to learn more. Here we see how a character’s relatability can be a large factor in how students build knowledge, and just as importantly, how knowing more about a character can make that character more relatable. Finally, students strongly tied knowledge to perspective taking, describing how they thought more deeply, changed their own understandings/opinions, and physically connected with their characters’ perspectives: “becoming” their characters, feeling what they felt, standing in their shoes, using their words. “I think that this character is very different than I am, and it is very interesting for me to feel what he probably felt, and it is almost like I am walking in his shoes,” said one student. They not only desired to understand their characters’ perspectives so that they could enact their roles more fully, but also appeared to want to emotionally connect with and personally relate to those
perspectives. In all this, we see students’ ability to think, feel, and act strengthened through access to and use of knowledge, which translates into more meaningful engagement. The ability to fully learn or know about a character, to take on a character’s perspectives, enables students to better relate to the character personally, and make choices and speak as their character would, which in turn enables them to produce new knowledge through deeper immersion in the simulation gameplay. We see an actionable item in that we need to be sure to provide character options that students will be able to find information about in enough abundance to feel they are really knowing and taking on the true personas of their characters. When they do not know enough about their characters, there is a disconnect, a diminished ability to represent the character and interact within the game, which leads to less learning and less personal engagement overall.

**Connection to Self**

A second theme that emerged from the students’ posts that described the dimensions of relatability, immersion, and agency and voice is connection to self (see Fig. 4). We found that students’ ability to feel connected personally to their characters in some way was also a point of engagement or disengagement. For many students, being similar to their character facilitated an ease of engagement. For other students, being different from their character was meaningful and encouraged a deeper kind of thinking. Learning more about and from the character as they “got to know” them made engagement easier. The importance of students’ interest in, enjoyment of, and enthusiasm for their role as a form of connection was also very apparent. Overall, student
language in this category exhibited a compelling link between students’ engagement and their personal connections to their characters.

![Connection to Self](image)

**Fig. 4. Connection to Self.**

First, when students could *relate* to their characters, typically through shared traits, hobbies, or viewpoints, or because they admired and really wanted to “be” those characters, they conveyed that it motivated them to be more engaged. “I believe that if I had gotten a different character, the simulation would be much harder. I got a character who’s opinion is similar to my own in some ways, and I found it easy to take on their personality and opinion.” However, some students still felt a connection with characters dissimilar from themselves because it made them want to understand their characters more and to work harder. One student noted,

I find it interesting to look at things from their point of view and think about what they might say or do unlike someone who's views are similar to mine and what they would say or do is similar to what I would say or do.
Familiarity with a character played a similar role for students, as many chose characters about whom they already possessed a good deal of knowledge, and others wanted a character they knew little about in order to learn something new. Some students even personally knew, had met, were relatives of, or otherwise had tangible connections to their characters.

Alternately, some students conveyed strong emotions or disinterest when they were unable to connect with their character, which certainly impeded their engagement. These students did not like feeling different from, disagreeing with, or not knowing enough about their characters, and even conveyed distress. “When commenting and portraying my character, I am sometimes embarrassed and upset that I have to say such rude remarks,” said one student. These students often felt a disconnect with their own ideas and feelings, unhappy that they could not be true to themselves when in character. “My character made it frustrating for me because I couldn’t answer my question the way I wanted to, I had to do it in the attitude of my character.” This limitation of students’ own voice and agency was a stumbling point for some students.

Still others found that their relationship with their character evolved over the course of the game, contributing to their ability to become fully immersed. They began the experience thinking they would not like a character, because they found the character uninteresting, didn’t know much about the character, or it wasn’t one of their top choices. They described how this changed and they came to enjoy playing their characters for varied reasons. Some came to appreciate their character’s different or disputed views, or learned they agreed with their character’s views or had something else in common. One student said, “I really did not want him, but I have learned to like him. I do not agree with his views, but to play with someone as controversial as him is fun. I like getting to know him.” Others were able to “identify with” their
character while realizing differences, or changed their own thoughts and opinions because of their character.

At one point, I completely favored the muslims and jews in oppose to the French. But once I found out my character's opinion, it changed mine. My character changed my opinion on the JCAT case, and everything related to it. It made an opinion that favored the Muslims and Jews more, but not completely, but at a good balance.

Most of these connections evolved as students came to know more about their characters or the case, supporting the importance of knowledge for engagement, as previously discussed.

All types of connection to self appeared to factor highly into how students engaged in JCAT. Different levels of interest, familiarity, and relatability could determine students’ thinking and knowledge-building, how they emotionally experienced voicing their roles, and the types of actions and risks they felt comfortable taking. Students who felt positive connections with their characters, who could relate to and feel immersed in their characters, also used more language of empowerment and enjoyment around their experience. Those who felt a disconnect with their characters were more likely to convey distress and unhappiness about their experience. Both affective reactions lean heavily toward the emotion component of our theoretical framework, showing the importance of feeling for productive thinking and action.

**In-Game Action**

The third theme that encompasses the character attributes of relatability, immersion, agency and voice is that of “in-game action” (see Fig. 5). This broad theme includes how character role influenced the frequency and freedom of students’ actions, how they represented themselves in-character through their postings and other interactions, and the varied in-game activities they specifically referenced. In a way, comments under this theme were about how
their characters’ attributes and their knowledge of and connections with their characters manifested in what they actually did in the simulation. We prominently hear students talking about how they were able or unable to use their voice and agency. Character representation was important to students as a way of embodying and “being true” to what they know about their characters; echoing the “knowledge” theme in that their familiarity with their characters informed the types of in-game actions for which they felt specifically engaged. In this way, the thinking/learning is connected to action and risk-taking through agency and voice.

Fig. 5. In-Game Action.

Students spoke of the different ways playing their characters in JCAT impacted their specific actions, from debating, emailing, and commenting, to being or not being a justice (as discussed below, a group of justices are selected near the end of each simulation to represent the larger population of characters in deciding the final verdict). The nature of their character also affected whether they believed they had something important to say, or could interact with other certain characters, as well as how those interactions unfolded. For example, one student said, “I
think that because I was an outspoken lady I participated more in speeches and was up for debate but at the same time was patient and open-minded.” Tracking the specific actions students referenced when talking about their characters will be useful as we make recommendations for potential enhancements and changes.

Students often relayed how playing their character influenced the amount and frequency of their activity in the game, which reflects their level of immersion. Getting attention from other players because of one’s particular character seemed to inspire students to do and say more. Conversely, some students believed having a less outgoing or well-known character made it harder to get this attention and diminished their opportunities for interaction. “I think that if I had chosen a more rude, outspoken person, I would have participated more than I did with my quiet, friendly, nice person,” said one. However, this wasn’t always a hindrance, as for the student who said, “My character helped [me] participate in JCAT way more. I did not want to be a boring, unknown character. I wanted to reach out to people. So, I emailed a lot more, and commented a lot more on JCAT.” Another saw this as an opportunity to “teach” fellow players about their character. Other reasons students gave for more or less participation included feeling challenged by their characters’ opposite viewpoints, being interested in the character in general, as well as being able to participate more or in special ways due to their characters’ attributes. As one student said, “he has strong opinions about things that he cares about which means I can participate a little more.”

Students were also highly conscious of how they represented their characters, whether it was through extra effort to remain authentic, or because they admitted to taking liberty or having fun with that representation. This also ties strongly into how students were able to become more
immersed in the gameplay. One student discussed the connection between knowledge of the character and in-game actions, saying,

   It affected the way I played by making me use the words that my character would use, and it made me think much more because I had to think: what would my character do in this situation. I also had to use more sophisticated words on my comments, speeches, and exhibit halls.

Some enjoyed being able to do and say things as their character that they would not normally do or say. Another student remarked, “I decided to make fun of his idiotic views by saying them just like he does.” While a handful of students admitted they had “made some things up,” generally, it was important to most students that they “live up to” what others expected of their character, and that they think deeply in order to say what their character would say. Therefore, having adequate knowledge of their characters’ attributes and ways of being influenced students’ character representation.

Finally, Students’ expressions of voice and agency through their characters were especially important findings under this theme. Relating to findings in an earlier study specifically about student agency and voice in JCAT (Rector-Aranda & Raider-Roth, 2015), we saw evidence that students acted and reacted affectively and intellectually to opportunities or barriers in these areas. Adequately knowing about their characters made students feel they had the power to know what their character would say and do. Students further enjoyed the ability to express themselves without judgment through the guise of their character.

Being able to relate to and connect with their characters also made a big difference. When they shared opinions with their characters, for example, they felt a freedom and capacity to speak up and be heard themselves. As one said, “I feel my character is a perfect way for me to
express how I really feel by actually making an impact. Now, my words will be heard through JCAT through someone I truly admire.” Another made a similarly striking statement that showed how the student was really connecting with the character:

Most people just think about how to make life easy for themselves in the short term, but my JCAT character taught me that if you take a step back and think about your decisions, you can always choose to do the right thing for yourself, your loved ones, AND the world.

These are rich examples of the interplay between all the different parts of our engagement model; students here are thinking, feeling, acting, relating, connecting, and feeling immersed through their agency and voice. And in these instances, students not only feel engaged, but empowered that they can make a difference through their voices and actions.

Having points of view that differed from those of their character, however, made students’ expressions of voice and agency challenging in both positive and frustrating ways. Some students who did not share their character’s opinions said things like, “I liked having the character’s opinion because the person has a different way of thinking about things than other people.” On the frustrating end of this, we saw that some students felt restricted having to act in character instead of communicating and acting upon what they really feel and think themselves. As one put it, “I felt that I had my own opinions that I could not express because I had to play my part.”

An unexpected finding was that students largely believed they were either chosen or not chosen to be one of the justices in the later part of the trial based on who their character was, when in reality, those overseeing the game chose justices based on participation and engagement with the game rather than character role. Students who believed this way felt they had no agency
in whether they would be selected, which was unfortunate. These students made comments such as “I think my [character] selection affected how I participated in the case, because my character was not a political figure in any way so I was not even an option for a justice.” Another student similarly said, “My character didn't let me be a justice because of her profession so that had a huge effect.” Ironically for some, believing they had no power over this decision (because of their character) apparently hindered their participation, which, in reality, would weaken their chances of being chosen.

**Embodiment**

Our framework acknowledges the interplay and interdependence of several factors that contribute to students’ overall engagement by way of their characters. When creating our visual representation, we became especially intrigued with finding out what was occurring at the intersection of all these ideas (see. Fig. 6). Throughout the data we saw a recurring theme among comments from highly engaged students, and that was their use of “embodied” language. Statements such as “I had to be in the mind of my character,” or “I had to embody another person's perspective” are quite distinct from those that typify what we are calling immersion in the overall action of the simulation. A student who said, “my character was the one who I was trying to think like. I had to live, breathe, and write my character” was not only engaged in that role, but was *embodying* it. It is precisely the feature of role-playing a real person with thoughts, feelings, and traits of their own that lends this embodied quality to the JCAT experience.
The act of “becoming” a character can invite a certain kind of embodied knowledge for students—“living, breathing and becoming” their character (Gee, 2008). Gee explains that the game player must “attribute certain mental states (beliefs, values, goals, feelings, attitudes and so forth) to the virtual character. You must take these to be the character’s mental states; you must take them as a basis for explaining the character’s actions in the world” (p. 258). Here, in Gee’s statements, we can hear the echo of Dewey’s idea of interaction in the virtual world—how the character will engage with the virtual environment.

By assuming a character in the form of role-play, the students in JCAT engage in their learning by attending both to themselves and their own needs as well as what they perceive their character to need and feel. In a sense, the idea of engagement in JCAT includes assuming the character’s mind, heart, and body, as well as “imposing” the student’s own mind, heart, and body on the character (Gee 2008, p. 260). Engagement is embodied through the role that the student plays. Thus, the ways in which students connect and/or disconnect with their characters’
thoughts, feelings, and emotions shape their capacity to engage in the experience of JCAT. And this engagement in the experience is the basis upon which they can construct new thoughts, ideas, and insights.

**Discussion and Implications for Action**

Through examining students’ own explanations of the ways their characters influence their level of engagement, we have been able to uncover many useful ideas that will help us take action, a key ingredient in any action research project. These actions revolve around questioning such things as *goodness of fit* between students and their characters, accessibility of information about characters, the character selection process, clarifying processes within the simulation, and considering the win/lose aspect of the simulation. Here we will explain these implications and make some suggestions for improvements that can support more and deeper student engagement.

**Goodness of Fit**

*Goodness of fit* between learner and character is evidently very important in supporting student engagement in role-playing experiences such as JCAT. Goodness of fit is a complex idea, as it is different for each student. For some students, it might mean having a character with attributes similar to their own, with whom they feel a personal connection and relatability. For others, goodness of fit, at least for the purposes of engagement, is achieved when their character is quite different from themselves. While there is evidence in our data that being different from a character can be a source of disconnection for some, for others, if they are able to find the “hook,” to make some type of connection, then the learning can actually be deeper. Whether it is through accessing more information, “getting to know” the character over time, finding out the character’s attributes facilitate more attention and action within the game, or something else, these students report a more profound engagement that is typically more embodied and nuanced.
than that of students who portray characters who are similar to themselves. However, this doesn’t mean we should limit those students who feel better connected to similar characters. This still needs to be honored (and of course, there aren’t enough characters for them all to be “different”), but it does give us fuel for thinking about possible interventions. In any instance, students need to know the character well enough to be able to experience a fit.

**Information Accessibility**

Portraying characters with a sufficient information base so that students could build new knowledge easily and have a strong foothold for perspective taking was also a significant contributor to their level of engagement. Those who were able to find abundant information about their characters were far more likely to indicate constructive engagement than those students for whom information about their character was sparse. In fact, there were typically serious consequences for those students tasked with portraying a character about whom they knew very little, as these students not only weren’t fully engaged, but tended to convey distress and disinterest due to this factor, almost like they had “given up.”

Luckily, this is at least an easily measurable component of the game. When we are aware of characters that are consistently hard to research, how can we remedy this? We might choose to take those characters out of the master list of options. Or, maybe as teachers or project directors we seek out this information for these students, using the more complex skills we as experienced adults have developed to find information, and then provide that to the students who choose to take on these characters. Alternatively, and likely most effective, we let students decide for themselves whether they are up to the challenge of a hard-to-research character. Which leads us to the character selection process itself.
Character Selection

As previously mentioned, character attributes were linked to practically every dimension of engagement we identified, and are therefore a large contributor to goodness of fit. In thinking about how to use this information combined with our finding about information availability, we logically considered the character selection process. How do we make this more conducive to students ending up with characters who have the kinds of traits they are finding exciting, fun, engaging, relatable, and so on? Do we limit the list of options to characters with traits students have been shown to find more engaging, and for whom there is enough accessible information when students do their research? How would we manage the matching task? Do we put time into developing a “master” sheet of characters and their prominent traits that teachers might use to match their own students?

Currently, students choose three characters, usually from an approved list, and someone else decides which character they receive. Teachers may attempt to guide their students quite proactively toward character selections they feel will be best suited to those particular students. However, this process assumes the students or their teachers have an idea of what a good fit actually entails, which are all those dimensions we have uncovered in this study. Many of the specific qualities that truly influence goodness of fit cannot really be known without explicitly learning many underlying dispositions of a student. This might be whether a student is the type that connects with similarity or difference in attributes, responds better with easily accessible knowledge or enjoys the challenge of discovery, wants notoriety or to work quietly behind-the-scenes, and so on.

We propose taking this process a step further and removing some of the guesswork by incorporating a brief questionnaire to replace the process of students choosing their top three
characters. Instead, this would deliberately assess students’ inclinations according to the different dimensions of engagement revealed in this study. For the 2016 simulation, such a questionnaire is being tested (see Appendix A). Combining the results of this questionnaire with the previous idea of a master list of more “proven” characters and their special attributes would make the character selection process even more precise, and is being considered for future simulations. These processes should allow teachers or project directors to assign characters with a better goodness of fit.

**Clarifying Processes**

As mentioned earlier, many students felt that their characters could not and would not be chosen as justices because of their professions or other attributes, and that diminished their participation since apparently students place a large value on being chosen as a justice. What is actually explained to students? In the past, the process for choosing justices has been largely unknown to the students themselves, leaving them to devise their own explanations that have unfortunately been off the mark. It may be more important than we realized to be candid with students about how their participation influences whether they are selected as justices as well as how many “votes of confidence” they are allotted when it comes time to support those justices. Alternately, it may be time to consider alternative ways justices might be chosen that are more participatory, involving all students in something more like an election.

Also important here is that students perceive that if they have not been chosen as justices, their part in the simulation is basically over or their contributions no longer matter, at which point they disengage. This is troublesome in itself, as only around 25 justices are chosen from upwards of 200 participants in a simulation. Currently, students give votes of confidence to an appointed justice based on that justice’s “legal philosophy,” after which the justice is still in
control of how he or she finally “rules” in the case. Returning to the idea of a more participatory process, justices could instead be tasked with learning the views of their constituents and voting accordingly. This might mean that other characters must offer their own brief testimonies directly to their chosen justices, and the justices are required to decide their positions based on the will of their constituents. This should make the decision process more democratic and require sustained participation from all players as they work to convince justices that their perspectives are right. This idea is just one suggestion, but there are likely several potential solutions to the problem of students placing too much weight on whether and how they are chosen as justices.

**Winning and Losing**

Thinking about all these facets of student engagement, one member of our research team had the insight that perhaps there are also elements here of students’ interest in winning and losing, and how their characters contributed to either outcome. Are students subconsciously turning the role-play simulation into a win-lose gameplay? The goal to win would make sense in more game-like settings, but we hadn’t previously realized it would still be relevant in a role-play simulation like JCAT. For example, being well-known, getting attention/interaction, being selected as a justice, and having one’s side win the case can all be associated with winning/achieving or losing/failing for students, and all are certainly affected by the character one plays based on our findings. Here we see an interesting lead for possible future research, which might consider the consequences of the win/lose setup, such as how relatability, immersion, and agency/voice fall away when students feel that they have “lost.”

**Conclusion**

Many promises of educational role-play games and simulations like JCAT hinge on student engagement, and as we have shown, that engagement is highly influenced by the
characters they play. As the channel of their experiential learning, students’ characters largely dictate their level of interaction with the environment and continuity as they connect prior knowledge and experience with current and future learning. Likewise, an important synthesis of thinking, feeling, and acting through their characters is simultaneously shaping students’ engagement in the experience. Understanding the multi-layered framework identified in this study which explicates how this engagement manifests through the chosen character can therefore help educators implement these kinds of activities more successfully.

Taking on another’s persona in a role-play such as JCAT specifically can help students better understand Jewish history, while also developing broader capacities for perspective taking, historical empathy, and ethical decision-making. Our findings illuminate that the character a student plays is a substantive factor supporting student engagement in this learning environment. These findings, rooted in a Jewish day school learning experience, also inform the larger field of educational role play in both theory and practice. The triarchic understanding of engagement as comprised of feeling, thinking, and action instructs us to truly consider the “whole child” in these role-play settings. Similarly, by understanding the complex intellectual, emotional, and behavioral challenges and opportunities that students confront—such as in knowledge building, finding connections to self, navigating the in-game action, and the potential for embodiment—we can understand the depth of experience that role-play simulations offer.

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1 Previous phases of the JCAT action research studies had been under separate IRB oversight (protocol #2013-6585).
2 Any spelling, punctuation, or grammatical errors have been retained from students’ original posts in order to maintain authenticity.
References


