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Historical Thinking with Avatars in an Undergraduate Course on Early Christianity

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ABSTRACT

History simulations have been shown to promote student learning in classrooms throughout higher education. In an undergraduate course on the New Testament and early Christianity, we sought to foster student learning by having students participate in history simulations that involved the use of fictitious personas known as avatars. In this paper we describe the avatar activities in these simulations, and we examine the effects of our simulations on students' abilities in "historical thinking": that is, engaging in the interpretive practices that historians use to reconstruct the past. We argue that our avatar simulations helped our students build upon, refine, and deepen their abilities in historical thinking in small but perceptible ways. We end by noting the extent to which our findings align with research on the use of history simulations and by identifying ways to develop our project moving forward.

KEYWORDS

simulations, historical thinking, early Christianity, learning, higher education

Introduction

An ailing grandmother guided by divine revelations, a pickpocket with a penchant for the circus, an ambitious government official and his pious wife—these were just a few of the ancient Romans interested in joining the Christ movement during the first and second centuries CE.¹ Though these figures are largely unknown to scholars of early Christianity, there is a good reason for their obscurity: they were fictitious personas developed by students in an undergraduate course on the New Testament and early Christian history. This "Introduction to the New Testament" course, which we taught at Northwestern University in Winter 2018, focused on the people, events, and texts of the first and second centuries CE that shaped the Christ

¹ There are a number of people we would like to thank for helping us with this project: participants in the "Academic Teaching and Biblical Studies" panel at the Society of Biblical Literature's annual meeting in 2017, who provided us with the opportunity to discuss our newly created avatar activities; Derek L. Davis, whose great insights and support helped us further develop our simulations; Mira Balberg and our anonymous peer reviewers from *The Wabash Center Journal on Teaching*, whose invaluable feedback greatly improved our earlier drafts of this article; and our students, who trusted us enough to breathe life into their avatars and this project.

movement into the religion now known as Christianity.² During this quarter-long course, students were introduced to the New Testament texts that constitute our main evidence for early Christianity, and to the interpretive practices that historians use to reconstruct Christian beginnings.³ In order to encourage students to think critically about how everyday people in antiquity would have reacted to the messages promulgated by early Christian authors and cultural producers, we asked students to inhabit ancient Mediterranean characters, or “avatars,” during a series of activities centered around two historically based simulations.⁴ Transforming our classroom first into the province of Galatia in the mid-first century CE, and later into the bustling city of Rome in the mid-second century, students pondered and debated their avatars’ reactions to various leaders of the early Christ movement, as well as their interactions with other avatars.

In this article we examine the effects of these avatar simulations on our students’ abilities to think historically about the formation and spread of early Christianity. We begin by discussing the main purpose of our avatar simulations, which was to promote our students’ historical thinking through an intensely granular study of Christian beginnings, with a focus on the actions of everyday people. After defining historical thinking and briefly outlining the ways in which undergraduate students might apply such thinking to the study of early Christianity, we provide a description of the avatar activities (AAs) themselves. Then, for the sake of brevity and clarity, we analyze students’ engagement in three very specific practices of historical thinking during our avatar simulations. These practices are: (1) identifying the range of religious options available and appealing to potential Christ movement recruits in the first and second centuries CE; (2) examining the ways in which social, economic, and political facets of Roman culture conditioned inhabitants’ religious activities and choices; and (3) recognizing the extent to which our modern perspectives influence our reconstructions of early Christian history. We argue that our avatar activities helped students in our classroom build upon, refine, and deepen their abilities in these interpretive practices in small but perceptible ways. Finally, we end by noting the extent to which our classroom observations align with scholarship on promoting historical thinking through simulations, and by identifying ways to develop our investigations moving forward.

Goal of the Avatar Activities

A growing body of literature [suggests](#) that simulations have positively impacted student learning in classrooms throughout higher education (Hertel and Millis 2002; Vlachopoulos and Makri 2017). Within the field of history specifically, simulations have been [shown to promote](#) learning in a variety of ways: simulations energize students, increase student engagement with course material, and build peer community (Arnold 1998; Howard 2017).⁵ This is especially evident in studies of the popular program *Reacting to the Past* (RTTP), with RTTP practitioners [documenting](#) increases in student energy and engagement in classrooms that [utilize](#) these role-immersion games (Carnes 2014; Higbee 2009; Webb and Engar 2016; Weidenfeld and Fernandez 2017).⁶ But these are not the only benefits to student learning that may be accrued through participation in history simulations. Scholars have also argued that history simulations can promote historical thinking among students ([Beidatsch and Broomhall](#) 2010; [McCall](#) 2012; [Olwell and Stevens](#) 2015; [Rantala](#) 2011; [Volk](#) 2013).⁷ The term “historical thinking,” though variously defined, is [regularly used](#) within American scholarship to refer to the goal of history education (Seixas 2017; Van Drie and Van Boxtel 2008; Wineburg 2001). In this paper we define historical thinking as the act of engaging in the interpretive practices used by historians to reconstruct the past. These interpretive practices include, but are not limited to: comparing primary sources’ descriptions of a past event, assessing authors’ interests, historically contextualizing the actions of people from the past, empathizing with historical people, and identifying the limitations of our own perspectives.⁸

2 Our roles in the course were as follows: Laura Dingeldein was the primary instructor, Lily Stewart was the teaching assistant, and Jeffrey Wheatley was the research assistant for our project (though he had served as a teaching assistant for the course during the prior academic year).

3 Students were also introduced to two non-canonical writings during the course: *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* and *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*.

4 We adopted the use of the term “avatar” from [Volk](#) (2013).

5 Cf. Baranowski and Weir (2010), who argued that students’ learning during role-playing simulations may be affected by the types of roles that students play.

6 RTTP, developed by Mark Carnes in the 1990s, is a series of immersive, historical role-playing games that take place over multiple class sessions. Students, using a game-book that contains historical texts and contextual information, work to persuade one another of a particular viewpoint. In many RTTP games, students are assigned one of three roles: (1) they represent a historical leader, (2) they represent a member of a partisan faction, or (3) they are “indeterminate,” in that they choose a viewpoint at the end of the simulation.

7 Though most scholars cited here do not use the term “historical thinking” to describe the sort of learning that is promoted among their students through participation in history simulations, they do describe students engaging in and cultivating practices that we consider to be components of historical thinking: namely, empathizing with and historically contextualizing the actions of people from the past.

8 There is no exact consensus on the acts that constitute historical thinking, or the key concepts associated with these acts, though the terms “contextualization,” “corroboration,” “sourcing,” “historical perspective taking,” and “historical empathy” are frequently used to refer to key dimensions of historical thinking (Lee and Ashby 2001; Seixas 2017; Wineburg 1991; Yeager and Foster 2001).

Our major goal in using avatar simulations in our classroom was to develop students' abilities in historical thinking, particularly as this act is applied to the study of everyday people's roles in the formation and spread of Christianity in the first and second centuries CE. Prior to and in between our avatar activities, our students spent much of their time learning to think historically about the New Testament and other ancient Christian texts, which constitute scholars' main evidence for the early Christ movement. Our course lectures, discussions, and readings were aimed at teaching students how to interpret early Christian writings within the context of first and second century Mediterranean culture, assess early Christian authors' interests, and corroborate these authors' claims. When students participated in our avatar activities, however, we wanted them to build upon, refine, and deepen their engagement in such practices by adjusting the object of their analysis, moving from examinations of texts and literate specialists to investigations of the people for whom these writings were produced.

During our simulations, our classroom was populated with the unknown, everyday people who might have joined the Christ movement, rather than the prominent figures who wrote and have been written about in the texts that survive to us. This was a rather significant departure from many of the history simulations described in the aforementioned literature, in which students inhabited known historical people and prominent figures from the past.⁹ We asked students to inhabit everyday people, rather than well-known leaders and textual producers like the apostle Paul or the priest Irenaeus, because we wanted students to focus on how the Christ movement might have developed—or not developed—on the ground. That is, we wanted students to explore the early Christ movement as it might have existed in the mode of everyday, lived religion, which has become a popular topic of investigation in the field of religious studies. This emphasis on a range of individualized ancient personas and hypothetical communities allowed us to explore how religious movements shape and are shaped by the everyday people who live them.

We hoped that students would apply the historical knowledge and interpretive skills that they had acquired during textual analysis to their examinations of the religious actions of these everyday characters. For example, we imagined that students might: assess the effects of their avatars' historical context on their avatars' religious perspectives, recognize the vast differences between their avatars' ancient historical context and their own, and reflect on the ways in which their modern perspectives affect their interpretations of ancient people and events.¹⁰ The goal of our avatar activities, then, was not to arrive at solid conclusions about how and why people joined the early Christ movement. Rather, our goal was to cultivate historically disciplined imaginations among our students by deepening their engagement in the interpretive practices that expert historians use to reconstruct early Christian beginnings.¹¹

At the conclusion of our avatar activities, we expected to see small, incremental improvements in students' historical thinking, rather than grand leaps in abilities. There were several reasons for this. First, many students who enroll in introductory undergraduate courses are neophytes in historical thinking, and most have never applied this sort of thinking to the study of religion.¹² Developing expertise in historical reconstruction takes years, and viewing sacred texts as products of particular times and places often requires students to question deeply ingrained beliefs regarding the timelessness of scripture. Second, most students who take introductory courses in the New Testament are just beginning to learn about ancient Roman culture, and they are not well versed in the past nineteen hundred years of Christian history. This means that such students are unlikely to fully understand the ancient Mediterranean culture in which early Christ followers were embedded, and they are inclined to fill in these gaps in their knowledge with modern ideas and constructs. These are major impediments to historical contextualization. Third, students' religious commitments also frequently obscure historical contextualization: students who

9 Consider, for example, *RTTP*. *RTTP* games do include roles for students that represent historically plausible people who were not elite or well known in the historical record, but these roles are often part of a generalized faction advocating for one viewpoint over another. Rather than asking students to reason and speak from the position of a generalized faction, our simulations asked students to base their reactions on a very particular perspective—that of their avatar.

10 Creators of other role-playing simulations of early Christian history have articulated similar goals, though they do not explicitly frame these goals in terms of historical thinking. Finger (1993) and Finger and McClain (2013), whose handbooks are intended to aid others in simulating early Christ assemblies in Rome and Corinth, describe the goal of their simulations as a better understanding of what the apostle Paul meant in his own historical period (Finger 1993, 17). Howard (2017), who created and uses *The Jesus Game* in her classrooms, [observes](#) that her simulation promotes deep learning among her students, increases students' motivation, and encourages students to sympathize with different points of view.

11 Here we were influenced by the words of Smith (2013, 134): "Collegiate education depends on, and trains for, the capacity to assume, simultaneously, differing points of view in order to engage in the interpretative enterprise and to reach some consequential decision. It is here, in such an in-between, that guessing and valuing finally come together. At times, this process may produce the 'right answers'; at times, our discussions and arguments will be frustrating and inconclusive; at times, we will appear to have wasted our time. None of these is an inappropriate outcome, each is the precondition of the other. . . . What we celebrate in college is not rectitude. What we honor, above all else, are playful acts of imagination in the sense stipulated by Wallace Stevens when he wrote, 'Imagination is the power of the mind over the possibility of things.'"

12 In fact, students in our classroom sometimes assumed that religion is wholly exempt from critical, historical analysis. This is in large part due to the pervasive assumptions within American culture that (1) religion is fundamentally about personal beliefs, and beliefs are unassailable; and (2) religion is unchanging, divinely mandated dogma. Within our classroom, however, religion was studied as a mode of human activity, and categorizing it as such rendered it subject to humanist inquiry.

self-identify as Christian sometimes presume similarities between themselves and ancient Christians, and they also often believe that Christianity succeeded because of its promotion of an ultimate truth. Given all of this, then, we did not expect our students to achieve great expertise in historical thinking through our avatar activities. We did, however, hope that our avatar activities would enable students to refine, expand, and deepen their abilities in historical thinking in small but noticeable ways.

Description of the Avatar Activities

The course in which our avatar activities took place was nine weeks long, and there were forty-eight students enrolled. All enrolled students engaged in the avatar activities described below, and twenty-nine of these students agreed to participate in our study. In this article we analyze only these twenty-nine participants' work.¹³

We began our avatar activities by generating basic biographies for forty-eight different avatars. These basic biographies included the following information for each avatar: name, age, sex (in this case, male or female), social status (freeborn, freed, slave), literacy level (literate or illiterate), and varying degrees of elaboration on the avatar's profession, interests, social relationships, and physical health. We did our best to recreate among our community of avatars the demographics of early imperial Rome, particularly with regard to literacy levels and social statuses. Below are three examples of the basic avatar biographies that we provided to students:

Malchio

- eighteen year old male, slave, illiterate
- manages a local tavern at the behest of his owners
- often regaled with stories from customers about their trips to consult with the local sibyl

Aurelia

- twenty-six year old female, freeborn, literate
- married to Publius, a *quaestor*
- has two young children
- regularly commemorates her dead parents by pouring out libations at their graves
- friends with a woman named Eirene, who has children around the same age

Pratonikos

- thirty-three year old male, freed, literate
- decently educated (possesses basic reading and writing skills)
- a scribe
- copies texts in the library of his former owner
- in a romantic relationship with a slave, Ariston, who is owned by Pratonikos's former master

We did not assign religious identifications (such as Jew, Christian, or Mithras devotee) to any of the avatars that we created. Rather, we framed religion-related biographical tidbits in terms of practices and interests: for example, an avatar might be initiated into a mystery cult or interested in prophecy. We did this because we suspected that our students would interpret religious identifications as fixed, static, and immutable, and as indicative of adherence to normative systems of beliefs and practices. Such an understanding of religious identification would have been problematic in two major ways. First, both in antiquity and today, religious identifications are not fixed, and they do not typically result in perfect adherence to prescribed norms. Second, students would be given the possibility of joining new religious movements in our simulations, and thus we did not want students to presume that their avatars had fixed religious identifications.

¹³ We received consent from participants to analyze and cite their work in this study. Participants have been assigned numerical identifications in order to protect their privacy. Avatars have also been given pseudonyms in order to protect the privacy of participants. This study was determined to be exempt by Northwestern University's IRB (STU00206565).

In the first week of our course, we randomly assigned avatars to students by having each student blindly choose a slip of paper that contained the biographical information of an avatar. Then, in the third week of our course, students were asked to elaborate on their avatars' lives and religious practices in a one-page paper that we called the "Avatar Description." In these descriptions, students supplemented their avatars' basic biographies with information about daily life and religion during the early Roman imperial period that they learned from readings and lectures during the first three weeks of our course. Some students chose to write as omniscient, third person narrators about their avatars' lives, while others chose to actively inhabit their avatars in their descriptions.¹⁴

After working on and producing Avatar Descriptions in the second and third weeks of our course, students engaged in Simulations A and B during the fifth and ninth weeks of the course, respectively.¹⁵ Each of these simulations took place over the span of one or two class sessions.¹⁶ Prior to each simulation, we presented students with a historically based scenario regarding participation in the early Christ movement. For Simulation A, which took place during our unit on the apostle Paul's authentic letters, students were asked to respond to the following prompt:

Your avatar has been attending an assembly of Christ followers that meets in a Galatian town in the year 60 CE. During your visits to this assembly, you have heard two of Paul's letters read aloud (known in modernity as Galatians and 1 Corinthians). Your assembly has also been visited by one of Paul's opponents, a leader of the circumcision faction named Alexander. After learning about these two different gospels—one promoted by Paul, one promoted by Alexander— your assembly is now gathering to discuss what to do moving forward.¹⁷

For Simulation B, which took place after students had studied the canonical gospels, Acts of the Apostles, Revelation, and the pseudonymous Pauline epistles, students' avatars were located nearly a full century beyond the time period that they inhabited in our first simulation. Students were asked to respond to the following prompt for Simulation B:

The avatars in your discussion section constitute one of several early Christian assemblies meeting in Rome in the year 150 CE. Recently, three Christian experts—a shipbuilder from Pontus, a priest from Smyrna, and a philosopher from Alexandria—have arrived in the city, and they are attempting to gain followers from the local assemblies. These Christian experts have visited your assembly, and they have each argued vociferously in favor of their version of Christianity and their canons. [Students were given a handout that contained the proclamations of the Christian shipbuilder, priest, and philosopher.]¹⁸ Your assembly has decided to discuss what to do moving forward (in discussion section). Then, your assembly will venture into the marketplace and attempt to convince other assemblies of the rightness of your decision (in our last class).

In the days leading up to each simulation, we asked students to think through their avatars' responses to the aforementioned scenarios and write down their thoughts in a "Pre- Avatar Activity (AA) Reflection." In these pre-simulation reflections we asked students to respond to the following questions: "What will your avatar do in response to the scenario that has been provided, and why will your avatar respond in this way?" Students then came to class and engaged in the simulations, inhabiting their avatars and navigating the scenario with their peers. One of the instructors—either the main instructor or the teaching assistant—played the role of narrator during the simulations. The instructor-narrator largely removed herself from the simulation, contributing only occasionally by elaborating on or changing aspects of the simulation in order to move the discussion forward. Immediately following each simulation, we held in-class debriefings with the students, in which we discussed what happened and what students learned during the simulation.

14 While we did provide students some time during discussion sections to share their Avatar Descriptions with their peers, we have made this sharing of Avatar Descriptions a greater focus in subsequent iterations of this course so as to make students more aware of the social relationships among their avatars.

15 We also asked students to think with their avatars in contexts beyond the simulations. For instance, during class discussions on *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* and the pastoral epistles, we asked students to consider how their avatars would have reacted to these texts' key themes and messages about gender and sex. These sorts of avatar activities, though, will not be discussed in this paper.

16 This is one major difference between our avatar activities and *RTP* games, the latter of which occur over a period of several weeks. In subsequent iterations of our course, we have chosen to conduct both Simulation A and B during a single discussion section. Our goal in conducting the simulations in smaller class settings was to provide students with more opportunities to contribute during the simulation.

17 Rather than directly asking students to choose among Paul, Alexander, and the Roman religious practices in which they engaged, we tried to frame the scenario in a way that allowed students as much flexibility as possible in their reactions.

18 In this handout the shipbuilder proclaimed that the God of Jewish scriptures was a cruel and jealous God, and he denounced the use of Jewish scriptures in the worship of Jesus. He considered Paul's letters and the Gospel of Luke to be authoritative, and he gave money to a local assembly of Christ followers. The priest, on the other hand, promoted a canon that included the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, as well as Paul's letters, Acts of the Apostles, and Revelation. Finally, the philosopher encouraged avatars to accept his message because he studied with a man named Theudas, who claimed to be a student of Paul. This philosopher endorsed a five-gospel canon—Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and the Gospel of Truth—and he also considered other apostolic letters to be authoritative. The shipbuilder, priest, and philosopher were modeled after Marcion, Irenaeus, and Valentinus, respectively. Students, however, were informed of these connections to historical figures only after the simulation had concluded.

We also took this time to address any historical inaccuracies that we and the students observed during the simulations.¹⁹ After the debriefings, each student wrote a “Post-AA Reflection.” In these Post-AA Reflections students recorded how their thoughts had changed as a result of the simulation. Specifically, we asked them to record their responses to the following questions: “Did your participation in this simulation change how you envision your avatar responding to the scenario that you were given? If so, how? What sorts of changes would you make to your Pre-AA Reflection now that you have participated in this simulation?”²⁰

The Avatar Descriptions, Pre-AA Reflections, and Post-AA Reflections of participants in our study, as well as our typed transcripts of our participants’ contributions during simulations themselves, constitute the data examined in our analysis below. I recorded a lecture on each theological topic and made viewing it, along with readings, part of the assigned work prior to class time.

Analysis of the Avatar Activities

In what follows, we assess our twenty-nine participants’ engagement in three specific practices that we consider part and parcel of historical thinking as it is applied to the study of early Christianity:

1. Identifying the range of religious options available and appealing to potential Christ movement recruits in the first and second centuries CE.
2. Examining the ways in which social, economic, and political facets of Roman imperial culture conditioned inhabitants’ religious activities and choices.
3. Recognizing the extent to which our modern perspectives influence our reconstructions of early Christian history.

These are not the only historical thinking practices in which we observed students engaging during our simulations, but they were among the most basic and vital aspects of historical thinking that we could reasonably expect our students to practice and develop during our simulations. The quality of our participants’ engagement in these three activities, as well as the duration of their engagement, served as evidence of the extent to which students were building upon, refining, and deepening their abilities in historical thinking. We will analyze each of these practices in turn.

Examination of Practice #1

The first practice noted above—identifying the range of religious options available and appealing to potential Christ movement recruits in the first and second centuries CE—is an act of historical contextualization. In the periods and places of Roman antiquity in which we situated our students’ avatars, there were numerous religious options for Mediterranean inhabitants, including traditional forms of Roman religion and opposing factions within early Christianity. The authority and legitimacy of various forms of Roman religion fluctuated according to time and location, but the worship of Jesus Christ was certainly not the norm within the Roman Empire until later periods of history. We repeatedly emphasized to students in lectures, readings, and discussions that early Christianity was an emerging religious movement in the first and second centuries CE. Early Christianity did not wield the clout that Christianity does in the modern United States. Moreover, we often stressed that no faction within the early Christ movement carried a stable identification as orthodox in the first and second centuries CE. In order to historically contextualize their avatars’ actions, students needed to situate their avatars in this ancient religious landscape, rather than operate with the misconception that Christianity was the predominant religious movement of the period.

Our role-playing simulations—more so than course readings, lectures, and discussions—seemed to help many participants identify a wider range of religious options for their avatars, and become more open to the appeal of non-Christian religious options for their avatars.²¹ This is best demonstrated through an examination of the changes in avatars’ religious choices that occurred after each simulation. The vast majority of participants embraced Christian options for their avatars when they first encountered our simulation

¹⁹ These debriefings were modeled after the “postmortem” sessions of other history simulations, like those in *RTTP* games.

²⁰ We purposefully posed open-ended questions in our Pre- and Post-AA Reflections: we did not want to overly determine the sorts of responses that students might have to our simulations, and we did not want students to adapt their responses based on what they perceived our expectations to be.

²¹ It is worth emphasizing that participants themselves did not become more open to the appeal of non-Christian religious options; rather, participants’ avatars were becoming more open to these options.

prompts, and a good portion of these participants gravitated toward the Christian position that was deemed orthodox in later periods.²² After our simulations, however, avatars' overall interest in the Christ movement decreased markedly. For example, before Simulation A, twenty-three out of twenty-eight participants reported in their Pre-AA Reflections that their avatars would choose to follow a leader within the Christ movement: twenty stated that they would certainly or likely follow the apostle Paul (whose teachings were deemed orthodox by later Christians), and three stated that they would certainly or likely follow Alexander (the fictitious leader of the Christian faction that opposed Paul and was deemed heretical by later Christians). After engaging in Simulation A, however, twelve of the twenty-three participants who had originally chosen to follow a Christian faction decided to weaken or abandon their commitment to the Christ movement. Instead of joining the Christ movement, these participants stated that their avatars would either: (1) follow the religion of their husbands or masters; (2) worship traditional Roman deities; or (3) embrace indecision, open-mindedness, and/or multiple options (see Table 1).

Table 1: Religious Choices Before and After Simulation A²³

Religious Option Chosen	Before Sim A	After Sim A
Paul's gospel [later Christian orthodoxy] ²⁴	20 (Participants #1, #2, #3, #4, #6, #7, #8, #9, #11, #12, #13, #14, #15, #17, #19, #21, #24, #26, #27, #29)	9 (#1, #4, #9, #11, #12, #14, #20, #24, #26)
Alexander's gospel [later Christian heresy] ²⁵	3 (#20, #25, #28)	2 (#8, #27)
Master's/husband's decision	3 (#10, #16, #18) ²⁶	6 (#2, #10, #13, #18, #25, #29)
Traditional Roman religion	2 (#5, #22)	7 (#5, #6, #16, #19, #17, #22, #28)
Indecision, open-mindedness, and/or multiple options chosen	0	4 (#3, #7, #15, #21)

We found a similar pattern of changes after Simulation B. Before Simulation B, twenty-four out of twenty-eight participants stated that their avatar would follow a Christian faction: twelve chose to follow the Christian priest (whose views were deemed orthodox in later periods of Christian history), nine chose the Christian philosopher (later deemed heretical), and three chose the Christian ship-builder (later deemed heretical). After Simulation B, however, avatars' commitments to Christian options declined: now only fifteen out of twenty-eight participants stated that their avatar would join a Christian faction. Seven participants whose avatars had originally chosen to follow a Christian faction now either did not make direct statements on the matter of joining a religious movement, or they expressed that their avatar was undecided, more open-minded, and/or committed to multiple religious options. Three participants whose avatars had originally chosen to follow a Christian faction now expressed their avatars' commitment to the religion of their masters or husbands, or to traditional Roman religion. Only one person whose avatar had chosen a non-Christian option prior to our simulation chose to join a Christian faction after engaging in the simulation (see Table 2).

²² Most participants' Avatar Descriptions had highlighted their avatars' commitment to non-Christian religious options, so it was interesting to see that many avatars expressed great interest in the Christ movement in their first Pre-AA Reflections.

²³ Twenty-eight out of twenty-nine participants engaged in this simulation.

²⁴ Participants placed in this row expressed their avatars' decision to follow Paul as either a certain choice or a favored and likely option.

²⁵ Participants placed in this row expressed their avatars' decision to follow Alexander as either a certain choice or a favored and likely option.

²⁶ Though Participants #10, #16, and #18 stated that they would most likely follow their masters' or husbands' decisions, they all also elaborated on reasons why they would choose to follow Paul if granted autonomy.

Table 2: Religious Choices Before and After Simulation B²⁷

Religious Option Chosen	Before Sim B	After Sim B
The priest [later Christian orthodoxy] ²⁸	12 (#2, #11, #14, #15, #16, #19, #20, #23, #24, #25, #26, #27)	7 (#5, #9, #12, #15, #20, #21, #26)
The philosopher [later Christian heresy] ²⁹	9 (#1, #3, #7, #8, #9, #10, #13, #17, #21)	6 (#3, #4, #7, #11, #16, #17)
The shipbuilder [later Christian heresy] ³⁰	3 (#5, #6, #12)	2 (#6, #19)
Master's/husband's decision	0	2 (#1, #13)
Indecision, open-mindedness, multiple options chosen, or unstated	3 (#4, #18, #29)	9 (#2, #8, #10, #14, #18, #23, #24, #27, #29)

Overall, these changes in religious choices suggest that many participants identified a wider range of legitimate and appealing religious options for their avatars after engaging in the simulations. The Post-AA Reflections of eight participants directly address this. After Simulation A, Participants #3, #6, #18, and #28 explicitly claimed that the first simulation enabled them to see that their religious options were not limited to Paul's gospel and the circumcision faction, but also included the worship of Roman deities. For example, Participant #6, playing a freedman who oversaw operations on his former master's farm, wrote the following after engaging in Simulation A:

In this pre-simulation reflection, I felt like I needed to pick a side and so I went with Paul because he would give me the most flexibility. In the simulation, I witnessed a lot more general distrust and incredulousness about siding either way. It made me reevaluate whether my avatar would be so quick to worship a new god in the first place, especially since worshipping one or two gods his whole life has seemed to go so well for him.

Prior to engaging in our first simulation, Participant #6 felt as though his avatar needed to choose between Paul's gospel and Alexander's gospel. But after hearing the variety of opinions and voices expressed during our first simulation, Participant #6 deviated from his original assumptions about the limits of his avatar's religious options. Our simulations complicated the dichotomy that Participant #6 initially envisioned, helping him to see that there were more than two religious choices available to him. Thus, this student was able to better contextualize his avatar within the ancient Roman world, and to consider a broader range of perspectives within and beyond the burgeoning Christ movement.

Participants #16, #17, #23, and #24 made similar statements after Simulation B. These students wrote in their Post-AA Reflections that their avatars had become more open to the attractiveness of the Christian philosopher's teachings, which today are considered heretical by most Christians. For example, Participant #16, who inhabited an enslaved textile shop manager, opted to switch her avatar's allegiance from the Christian priest to the Christian philosopher after engaging in Simulation B. She wrote:

²⁷ Twenty-eight out of twenty-nine participants engaged in this simulation.

²⁸ Participants placed in this row expressed their avatars' decision to follow the priest as either a certain choice or a favored and likely option.

²⁹ Participants placed in this row expressed their avatars' decision to follow the philosopher as either a certain choice or a favored and likely option.

³⁰ Participants placed in this row expressed their avatars' decision to follow the shipbuilder as either a certain choice or a favored and likely option.

After this simulation, I think my avatar would actually be much more open to the philosopher's teachings. This simulation helped me realize that in antiquity, nothing was super familiar. The four Gospels in today's New Testament were still new and unique during antiquity. Since there are other gospels floating around as well, my avatar wouldn't have immediately discredited anything outside the four we know today.

Participant #16 had initially assumed that the religious option that was most familiar to her in the twenty-first century would have also been familiar to her second century avatar. But after engaging in Simulation B and participating in its accompanying debriefing—in which we stressed the lack of a fixed New Testament canon in the second century—Participant #16 realized that she had anachronistically applied her modern perspective regarding the authority of the four-gospel canon to her avatar. It seems that the simulation itself was instructive in this regard, highlighting the ambiguities and complexities in the decision processes that eventually led to a canon of Christian texts. It is also possible that our comments during the debriefing contributed to this student's recognition of her anachronistic views. Regardless of the exact reason for her epiphany, after Simulation B, Participant #16 was able to see that the religious options that were familiar to and authoritative for her did not necessarily hold weight for ancient people, whose religious choices were influenced by a different set of circumstances.

Overall, the evidence provided above suggests that our simulations—more so than our class lectures, readings, or discussions—helped students better identify the range of religious options that would have been available and appealing to their avatars. Although we spent time prior to the avatar activities teaching students about the range of religious options in the Roman Empire and the lack of authority wielded by the Christ movement in the early imperial period, many students were able to more fully realize the implications of these facts for early Christians' religious decision-making through participation in our simulations.

Examination of Practice #2

Practice #2—examining the ways in which social, economic, and political facets of Roman imperial culture conditioned inhabitants' religious activities and choices—is an act of historical perspective taking, which is also often called historical empathy. Religion, understood as a mode of human activity, is always linked to and affected by various social, economic, and political facets of the cultures in which humans are embedded. This is true of religion today, and it was true of religion in antiquity. Thus, in order to productively engage in historical thinking as it applies to the study of early Christianity, students and scholars of the early Christ movement must take into account the ways in which Roman culture affected Romans' religious perspectives and actions.

We observed participants engaging more deeply in Practice #2 as a result of their participation in the simulations, particularly with respect to their examination of the link between social subordination and religious autonomy. At the outset of our avatar activities, the Avatar Description assignment prompted students to consider the effects of their avatars' social station and life experiences on their religious activities. It was not surprising, then, to see participants demonstrating a basic awareness of how the social, economic, and political facets of their avatars' lives conditioned their avatars' religious practices in their Avatar Descriptions. Notably, though, once participants encountered prompts that introduced the option of following Christian leaders, participants had a more difficult time appreciating the ways in which the social, economic, and political facets of their avatars' lives might interact to limit and shape their participation in the Christ movement. Many participants initially declared their avatars' adherence to the Christ movement without much consideration of the effects that their avatars' social relationships, business pursuits, and political interests would have on their commitment to this new religious group. After engaging in the simulations, however, some participants acquired a more thorough understanding of the ways in which their avatars' reactions to the Christ movement would have been affected by such interests and positionalities.

Participants #24 and #5 stand out in this regard. Participant #24 inhabited an avatar named Rufus, who owned a local tavern frequented by other avatars. Rufus enjoyed a good relationship with his wife, who was an initiate of the Eleusinian mysteries, but Rufus was not as fortunate when it came to his physical health. Suffering from frequent back pain, Rufus relied on a gymnastic trainer and the god Asklepios for relief from his injury. Prior to engaging in Simulation A, Participant #24 weighed Rufus's religious options in reference to his wife's interests and his back pain. Eventually, Rufus chose to follow the apostle Paul because this decision would allow him to avoid experiencing the additional pain of circumcision. After engaging in Simulation A, however, Participant #24 noted that there were other aspects of Rufus's life that she needed to take into account when determining Rufus's religious practices: "I could have thought of his social status also, like would his decision on which gospel to follow affect his business at his tavern? Would he have talked about this with Kronion or Felix? (the frequents at his tavern)." Participant #24 carried this realization about Rufus's social situation into her preparation for Simulation B, writing in her Pre-AA Reflection: "Rufus feels like he can influence some people's thought since he is the owner of the tavern and local people tend to respect him greatly." Through her participation in Simulation A, Participant #24 came to

recognize a wider range of social and economic factors that would have influenced her avatar's religious choices.

Participant #5 also arrived at a more thorough and complex understanding of the relationship between his avatar's religious actions and business pursuits over the course of our simulations. Participant #5 inhabited an avatar named Cammilius, who was a middle-aged silversmith and president of a local association of craftsmen. Cammilius made a living selling small figurines of the goddess Artemis. From the start of our activities, Cammilius recognized the effect that his business would have on his religious actions, writing prior to the start of Simulation A:

Recently I have been hearing about this Christ movement that is gaining followers. I am not happy about this at all. I have already talked with my fellow craftsmen during our local association gatherings. We as craftsman [sic] make a living off of creating shrines of our god Artemis for everyone to buy and enjoy. Since this Christ movement has spread, I have noticed that our business has been shrinking. Not only are we, the craftsman [sic], in danger of losing our business, but our god Artemis is in danger of losing her divine greatness.

Cammilius held this stance throughout Simulation A. At the start of Simulation B, Cammilius remained reluctant to join the Christ movement, knowing full well that it would put an end to his selling of Artemis figurines. But this time, Cammilius also considered adapting his business strategies to fit a new market:

Recently, I have not been selling many shrines anyways since many people are joining the Christ movement and abandoning their previous gods, so it may be time to join the movement and reconstruct my business. As far as the three men who came to share their ideas, I most closely related to the ship builder from Pontus. Not only is he a fellow craftsmen [sic], like myself, but I liked what he said.

After Simulation B, Cammilius decided to follow the Christian priest because the majority of avatars had decided to do so. His business, though, remained his top priority. As Cammilius explained, he chose to follow the Christian priest because "it is in my business' best interest to agree with the majority." Through our simulations, Participant #5 was confronted with circumstances that prompted him to rethink the ways in which he might navigate his avatar's competing religious and economic interests. This led to a more robust examination of the way in which his avatar's business pursuits might condition and be conditioned by his religious choices.

Though both Participant #24 and Participant #5 chose to examine the links between their avatars' business endeavors and religious practices, one of the links that participants most commonly examined was that between social subordination and religious autonomy. Out of the eighteen participants whose avatars were socially subordinate to a master, patron, or male head-of-household, thirteen participants explicitly examined the ramifications of that relationship for their religious practices at some point during our avatar activities. Moreover, eight of those participants demonstrated an increasing appreciation of such ramifications as our activities progressed. This increasing appreciation can be seen most clearly in the written comments of Participant #13, who inhabited the avatar Aurelia, a young mother married to a wealthy Roman official. When Aurelia entered our first simulation, she recognized that her husband would make important decisions for her, but she also emphasized her desire to have religious autonomy and follow Paul. After engaging in Simulation A, Aurelia wrote that she now would be more likely to obey her husband's ideas than have her own ideas. Several weeks later, prior to Simulation B, Aurelia wrote that she would choose to follow the Christian philosopher, this time omitting reference to her husband. After Simulation B, Aurelia returned to emphasizing the attention that she would pay to her husband's actions: "Seeing that my 'husband' saw things differently, it made me realize that in a historical context, my opinions should probably validate my husband's and not contradict them. I would try to see the situation differently and try to imagine how he would respond to them."

There are two things that we found interesting about Participant #13's examination of the sway that her avatar's husband would hold on her avatar. First, despite the fact that Participant #13 had emphasized Aurelia's lack of religious autonomy after participating in Simulation A, she did not carry this realization forward into Simulation B. Instead, she approached Simulation B with an assumption of religious autonomy, and again realized the potential anachronism as a result of her participation in the second simulation. Many participants experienced similar regresses throughout our avatar activities. Second, Participant #13 seemed to struggle with her realization that Aurelia lacked the religious autonomy that the participant herself would be afforded in a modern context. In describing her recognition of her avatar's religious dependency, Participant #13 used phrases like "my opinions should probably validate" and "I would try to see the situation differently" (*italics added for emphasis*). We also saw other socially subordinate participants attempt to assert religious autonomy at various points in the activities. The most common strategy was to claim that their avatars followed their social superiors in religious practice, but not in religious opinions or beliefs (#1, #4, #6, #16).

In sum, although a thorough examination of the complex links between Romans' religious activities and their social, political, and economic interests proved a difficult task for students, the simulations did help many participants pinpoint and analyze the major cultural forces that affected participation in the Christ movement. By inhabiting the lives of people from a range of classes, genders, and occupations, students were able to explore how various factors of Roman culture and daily life informed ancient people's decisions about religious practice.

Examination of Practice #3

Another vital dimension of historical thinking is the ability to identify the limitations of our own perspectives. No matter how hard historians try, we cannot fully rid ourselves of our modern mindsets. But we do strive to identify the limitations of our perspectives, as well as correct the anachronisms that result from bringing our modern mindsets to bear on our examinations of the past. Thus Practice #3—recognizing the extent to which our modern perspectives influence our reconstructions of early Christian history—is another element of historical thinking in which we hoped to see our students engaging. We expected, of course, that students would promote anachronistic views and engage in anachronistic behaviors in our simulations. Indeed, we hoped for this: we knew that our students, as novice historians, still operated with gaps in their historical knowledge and inconsistencies in their historical thinking, and we wanted our simulations to bring these problematic concepts and frameworks out into the open so that we could work to correct them.³¹ By identifying the anachronisms that occurred during the simulations, we hoped that students would be better able to grasp the influence of their modern perspectives on their recreations of ordinary people's actions within the developing Christ movement.

Overall, students continued to use many anachronistic frameworks, concepts, and behaviors during and after the simulations. Among the most glaring anachronisms that remained with students throughout our avatar activities were the misconceptions that (1) belief was the most important element of ancient religious life, and (2) early Christ followers were drawn to the movement because of its emphasis on salvation through belief alone. For instance, many students argued that their avatars preferred the apostle Paul's teachings because of his emphasis on faith, which made his gospel easier to follow than that of Alexander. Not only did these lines of reasoning ignore the rigorous religious guidelines advocated in Paul's letters, but they suggested that participants had not fully digested previous classroom discussions about the importance of practice in Roman religion. Though we worked before and after the simulations to remind students that Roman religion was practice-based, many participants imported into their avatars' lives anachronistic views about the primacy of belief and faith. Students also often failed to take Roman social hierarchies into account when speaking during the simulations. In fact, during Simulation A, participants' own personalities were more likely to determine their avatars' level of engagement than were their avatars' social statuses and genders. Wealthy male politicians remained silent while tavern owners and women of low status took control of the conversation. Though we pointed out such anachronisms to students and saw some correction during later exercises, participants still found it difficult to work within unfamiliar social structures.³²

While anachronistic tendencies such as these remained with many of our students during and after the simulations, we found that students were generally more open to recognizing and confronting anachronistic perspectives in post-activity debriefings and reflections. After exiting the simulations, students and instructors discussed their observations in a debriefing session, collectively identifying and analyzing anachronistic tendencies within the simulations. Students then individually wrote Post-AA Reflections, some of which explicitly discussed the influence of their modern perspectives on their engagement in the simulations. Such statements were most plentiful after Simulation B.³³ For example, Participant #18 wrote: "If I were to change my Pre-AA Reflection, I would take more into account the fact that I'm writing from a twenty-first century perspective, and it's hard to remove what we're used to from our opinions as the avatar in this activity." Participant #23 was even more specific:

After the simulation on Thursday [the first day of Simulation B], I became more openminded [sic] to the philosopher because the idea of a fifth gospel would not have been terribly new and foreign in the time period. It made me realize that my opinions regarding the three experts were heavily influenced by what I know now in the twenty-first century with the four gospels in the New Testament canon.

³¹ Other scholars have recognized the inevitability and importance of anachronisms during history simulations. Carnes (2014, 255-259) effectively responds to criticisms of the anachronisms that occur during *RTP* games. McCall, writing about students discerning historical inaccuracies in video game simulations, notes that "the inaccuracies in historical simulation games are actually a critical part of their effectiveness as learning tools" (2012, 21).

³² Students with avatars of lower social status also often asked us whether or not they should be voicing their opinions in assembly meetings, citing concern over their participation grade in the course. We assured them that active listening counted as a form of participation, but we ultimately let students determine the ways in which their avatars' social statuses would affect their participation in our simulations. Several students noted that this resulted in a built-in anachronism to our simulations: students were asked to participate in the simulations in ways that their avatars likely would not have participated in antiquity.

³³ Perhaps this was because these anachronisms were directly addressed in the debriefing, or perhaps this was because students could see anachronisms more clearly at the end of our course.

Participant #8 provided the fullest and most articulate reflections on the extent to which modern perspectives colored our simulations. During our in-class debriefing after Simulation B, Participant #8 noted that the majority of students had chosen Paul in Simulation A and the Christian priest in Simulation B, and she suggested that students had chosen these two options because they represented positions that are viewed as orthodox within modern Christianity. As she stated in our debriefing session, “In this and the last avatar activity, a lot of people pushed for Paul and his authority, maybe because we’re used to him being an authority figure, and we have a built in trust for him. The priest is closest to what we know as twenty-first century people.” In the Post-AA Reflection that she wrote immediately following this debriefing, Participant #8 continued to emphasize the influence of students’ modern perspectives on our avatar activities. Reflecting on the actions of her avatar, Antonia, who was a self-employed prostitute, Participant #8 wrote:

Some people made comments during both the simulation and the debrief that were definitely aimed at me, saying that if we were truly in Rome I wouldn’t have talked so much, or at least no one would have listened. It’s not untrue—but I also can’t imagine that a woman who lives and works alone and is financially independent wouldn’t have some confidence in her own ideas and a fire in her gut that makes her speak up. I think the simulations are heavily influenced by our twenty-first century understanding of Christianity, but it was still really enlightening to see how others formed their arguments and imagine how that would have played out in antiquity.

What is perhaps most intriguing about Participant #8’s reflection is that she recognizes the influence that students’ modern perspectives wielded over our simulations, while also fervently defending her avatar’s actions by asserting modern ideals regarding women’s social and financial independence.

There were also some participants who purposefully embraced anachronisms in our simulations and wrote about their decisions to do so in Post-AA Reflections. This was most obvious in the contributions of Participant #3, who inhabited Diokles, a young male enslaved to a wealthy oil merchant. Diokles voiced his opinion several times throughout Simulation B, though he was careful to preface his comments with admissions of his social station and his lack of authority. After Simulation B, Participant #3 reflected on Diokles’s actions, writing: “I think it would have made sense for me to back up a person with higher authority than [sic] asserting my own opinion, but I found other people’s statements frustrating so I just made my own despite my avatar’s identity as a slave.” This participant recognized the anachronism of Diokles’s actions, but refused to be encumbered by the social rules of Roman antiquity.

Though students’ post-simulation reflections continued to reflect unidentified anachronisms, there was at least a growing awareness of the anachronisms present in these simulations among many students. Helping students to identify, unpack, and correct these anachronisms was in fact one of the most fruitful products of the simulations, which seemed more effective than other forms of assessment in exposing misconceptions and ahistorical modes of thinking. Participants, by recognizing that their twenty-first century perspectives inevitably played a role in how they viewed and engaged with history, were able to interrogate more deeply their positionalities as readers of historical texts, and further dismantle some of the preconceived notions that initially shaped their understanding of the early Christ movement.

Conclusion

In this article we have examined how the use of avatar simulations in our “Introduction to the New Testament” course affected student engagement in three practices that enable historians to reconstruct Christian beginnings: (1) identifying the range of religious options available and appealing to potential Christ movement recruits; (2) examining the ways in which social, economic, and political facets of Roman culture conditioned recruits’ religious activities and choices; and (3) recognizing the extent to which our modern perspectives influence our reconstructions of early Christian history. Our assessment suggests that our simulations helped students advance their abilities in historical thinking subtly but perceptibly: on the whole, participants made incremental progress in their abilities to historically contextualize and empathize with ancient Mediterranean people’s behaviors and decisions regarding their participation in the early Christ movement. Certainly, the qualitative nature of our analysis above, as well as the small number of participants in our study, precludes us from generalizing our findings. Yet our analysis of student learning via our avatar simulations does largely align with the existing scholarship referenced in Section 2, which argued that history simulations help cultivate students’ abilities in empathizing with and historically contextualizing the actions of past humans. Though our history simulations differed from other scholars’ simulations in various way—for example, in our focus on everyday people or our emphasis on imagined historical situations—we still observed our students engaging in acts of historical empathy and contextualization. Yet several questions remain. For instance, what other aspects of historical thinking can we reasonably expect our students to engage in during these simulations? And might it be possible to conduct a more quantitative study of the promotion of historical thinking via our simulations? In future instantiations of these simulations, then, we would like to identify a fuller range of the interpretive practices that we can reasonably expect our students to

engage in during our simulations, with an eye to further assessing the impact of our avatar simulations on students' historical thinking. We have also considered administering an ungraded assessment, such as a quiz, after each simulation to measure the extent to which anachronisms and misconceptions persisted among our students. Such adaptations to our avatar activities might provide us a more complete picture of the effects that our history simulations have on our students' historical thinking abilities, thus helping us to further ensure that our students leave our classroom as better historians than they were when they entered.

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