

Rosenstrasse: Holocaust Education Through Role Play

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### Abstract

*Rosenstrasse* is a digitally augmented tabletop role-playing game for four players and a facilitator. Players take the role of Jews and Aryans in mixed marriages living in Berlin between 1933 and 1943; the game culminates in the eponymous protests by Aryan women to free their Jewish husbands. In this paper, we describe key game design challenges encountered in developing a Holocaust-based role-playing game, and how we addressed them. How could players with little historical context participate successfully in the game? What were the risks of players getting the history wrong? Would players accept limits on their agency, and what conclusions would they draw from it? Could we make the connections between characters feel real, meaningful, and motivating in only a few hours? We conclude by sharing preliminary evidence for the game's impact, and by considering some of the challenges of deployment.

*Keywords:* game design, history, Holocaust, activism

### Rosenstrasse: Holocaust Education Through Role Play

A key opportunity in game design is to have players take on alternate identities (Klopfer, Osterweil, & Salen, 2009). These identities can broaden our perspectives, for example by revealing the lost and forgotten histories of women, by centering marginalized historical experiences, and by providing a multiplicity of perspectives rather than a single dominant narrative. Walter Benjamin called this process “brushing history against the grain” (Benjamin, 2005), and it is equally critical today. Brushing history against the grain is a political act meant to allow us to re-imagine our past, understand our present, and create our future. Through historical role-play, players can be invited to participate in this process.

*Rosenstrasse* is a digitally augmented tabletop role-playing game for four players and a facilitator. Players take the role of Jews and Aryans in mixed marriages, living in Berlin between 1933 and 1943. During the first part of the game, players experience the erosion of civil rights and the persecution of Jews through the lens of their marriages. By centering these marriages, which protected the Jewish spouse to a greater or lesser degree, the game challenges the dominant narratives of persecutor and victim. In February 1943, however, that protection ended, and the Jewish men in these marriages were rounded up for execution. Their wives and other family members led a spontaneous non-violent protest outside the Rosenstrasse holding facility. Eventually, most of the men were released, which serves as the climax of the game.

Designing a game addressing the Holocaust is a challenging problem. Some Holocaust educators argue that using games or simulations around this topic “trivializes” the subject, for example by collapsing the experiences of victims and survivors into the experience of play (Davidowicz, 1992; Totten, 2000). On the other hand, Schweber found that emotionally identifying with individual Jewish lives, particularly those that did not line up with simple stories

of victimhood, helped players develop empathy and gave context to factual information about the period (Schweber, 2004). While *Rosenstrasse* is not intended to be used in a classroom setting, we draw on Schweber's approach to ask players to think differently not only about the Holocaust, but about themselves (Facing History and Ourselves, 2017).

In this paper, we describe key game design challenges encountered in the development of *Rosenstrasse*. How could players with little historical context participate successfully in the game? What were the risks of players getting the history wrong? Would players accept limits on their agency in the game, and would they be able to connect it to the historical context? Could we make the connections between characters feel real, meaningful, and motivating in only a few hours? And finally, how would the game transform players? We conclude by sharing preliminary evidence for the game's impact, and considering some of the challenges of deployment.

### **Literature Review**

Historical role-playing games can be effective ways of engaging with history; however, the Holocaust introduces substantial challenges to the design and deployment of such games.

#### **Historical Role-Playing Games**

Tabletop and live-action role-playing games ask players to take on the roles of characters in a shared fictional world. When that world is a historical one, these games can provide opportunities for players to engage with history. For example, games in the *Reacting to the Past* series situate players in a Ming dynasty succession crisis, the trial of Anne Hutchinson, and the Indian independence negotiations (*Reacting to the Past*, 2018). Players take on the role of stakeholders in these historical events and explore them through the lens of their characters.

In formal educational settings, role-playing games can be used as part of the curriculum (e.g. Carnes, 2014; Travis, 2010) or can even replace the curriculum entirely (Hyltoft, 2008). In

informal play settings, role-playing games offer the opportunity for players to adopt the roles and practices of historians (Hammer & Heller, 2012) and to experience aspects of history that might otherwise remain abstract (*Kapo*, 2017). While many role-playing games incorporate fantastic or fictional elements, these elements can actually encourage players to research and reflect on history (Hammer & Heller, 2012). Post-game debriefs can also aid reflection and transfer, whether conducted by an instructor or by other participants (Crookall, 2014; Atwater, 2016).

To be most effective, educational games should be well-designed (Clark, Tanner-Smith, & Killingsworth, 2016) and should align game content with the game's activities (Aleven, Myers, Easterday, & Ogan, 2010). Whether a particular historical role-playing game is explicitly educational or merely incidentally so, these games can take advantage of what role-playing games do best. Hammer et. al. (2018) identify key opportunities of the genre that include portraying a character, manipulating a fictional world, generating an altered sense of reality, and sharing an imaginative space. In a historical role-playing context, these elements can be used either to communicate dominant narratives of history, or to brush history against the grain.

### **Holocaust Education**

While role-playing can be an effective way of engaging players with history, Holocaust history introduces unique challenges. Substantial debates exist within the field of Holocaust education, including what is meant by Holocaust education in the first place (Davis & Rubenstein-Avila, 2013; Francapane & Haß, 2014). Should the emphasis be on the entire Nazi period, including the early persecutions of Jews, or primarily on the mass killing? To what extent should it focus on the Holocaust as a Jewish experience of genocide, to what extent should it incorporate the Roma genocide, and how should it address the persecution of other groups? How much should the material be universalized, for example by drawing moral lessons, and how

much should it be particularized to that historical period and/or to the history of antisemitism? These debates become even more complex when placed in a global context. For example, relatively few Jews remain in most Central and Eastern European countries, but persecution against the Roma is ongoing; in some of these countries, focusing on the Jewish victims of the Nazis may be a safe way to avoid political action (Bărbulescu, Degeratu, & Guşu, 2013).

One major question in the field concerns the appropriateness of simulations and games as a pedagogical approach. Critics cite two areas of concern. First, does the nature of simulation trivialize the Holocaust? By making the experience tame, or by risking making it fun for players, a game might diminish the historical events themselves (Laqueur, 1994; Totten, 2000). Second, would players learn the wrong things from their experience? For example, they might believe that they truly understood what the victims of the Holocaust had suffered (Totten, 2000).

While these are serious concerns, empirical research on Holocaust education suggests that these are problems games and simulations must *address*, not ones that are inherent to games and simulations as an approach. For example, Schweber (2004) observed a successful classroom simulation that fused moral and historical experiences into a larger whole (Facing History and Ourselves, 2017). While many students described the simulation as fun, Schweber points out that they likely did not have better language to express the deep, respectful engagement she observed in the classroom. Additionally, in the simulation Schweber observed, students began by taking on the roles of Jews living everyday lives under the Nazis, in sharp contrast to most images of Jews in Holocaust education (which typically emphasize propaganda images and images from death camps). This role-taking led them to see Jews as ordinary people rather than through the eyes of the perpetrators of the Holocaust, brushing history against the grain.

Schweber attributes the success of the simulation she observed to the gifted instructor, and calls it “barely replicable.” Additionally, she identifies limitations with the design of the simulation, such as the failure to connect Jewish stories to the role of bystanders and non-Jewish collaborators. These are design challenges that future work – such as *Rosenstrasse* – can address.

### **Historical Context**

*Rosenstrasse* is set in Berlin between 1933 and 1943. When the game begins, Hitler has just been appointed as chancellor; the country is economically unstable, politically polarized, and ideologically divided. Under his rule, the civil rights of Jews were first restricted, then revoked. For example, the Nuremberg Laws of 1935 forbade marriages between “Aryans” and Jews, while by 1936, Jews had been banned from all professional jobs. By September of 1939, over 60% of German Jews had fled the country, but over 200,000 remained. Then the deportations and executions began (Kaplan, 1996).

Despite the Nuremberg laws forbidding new intermarriages, approximately 30,000 previously-intermarried couples remained in Germany in 1939. Intermarriages where the Jewish partner was female were in many ways treated as German families, while intermarriages involving Jewish male partners were far more affected by legal restrictions (Stoltzfus, 1996; Koonz, 2013). Similarly, some intermarriages were considered “privileged,” such as families who had chosen to baptize their children prior to 1935. Privileged marriages afforded a degree of protection to the Jewish partner, such as not having to wear the star (Stoltzfus, 1996; Koonz, 2013). Until 1943, intermarried German Jews did not have to fear deportation, even as the remainder of the Jews of Germany were being systematically executed.

On February 27, 1943, the Gestapo began a final roundup to capture and deport the last Jews of Berlin. The targets included approximately 1,500 Jewish men in privileged marriages.

While Jews were held at several locations around the city, most of these men were taken to Rosenstrasse 2-4. By that night, hundreds of women had gathered in front of the building. Between February 27 and March 6, they protested day and night, demanding their husbands' release (Stoltzfus, 1996). Behind the scenes, German authorities debated whether or not to shoot the protesting women; the SS sent trucks with machine guns to threaten them, but the women stayed put. On March 6, 1943, Goebbels ordered that the Jewish men held at the Rosenstrasse facility be released back to their families.

Jewish men who had the bad luck to be sent to another facility due to overcrowding did not fare as well. These men were sent to Auschwitz, along with the other Jews caught by the final roundup, and some of them were murdered there. Others were returned from Auschwitz to a prison camp outside Berlin as a result of the protests (Stoltzfus, 1996).

On May 19, 1943, Germany was declared *judenrein*, or free of Jews. By 1945, approximately 8,000 Jews remained in Berlin, either in hiding or married to non-Jews (Gross, 2015). The men released from the Rosenstrasse facility were among the survivors.

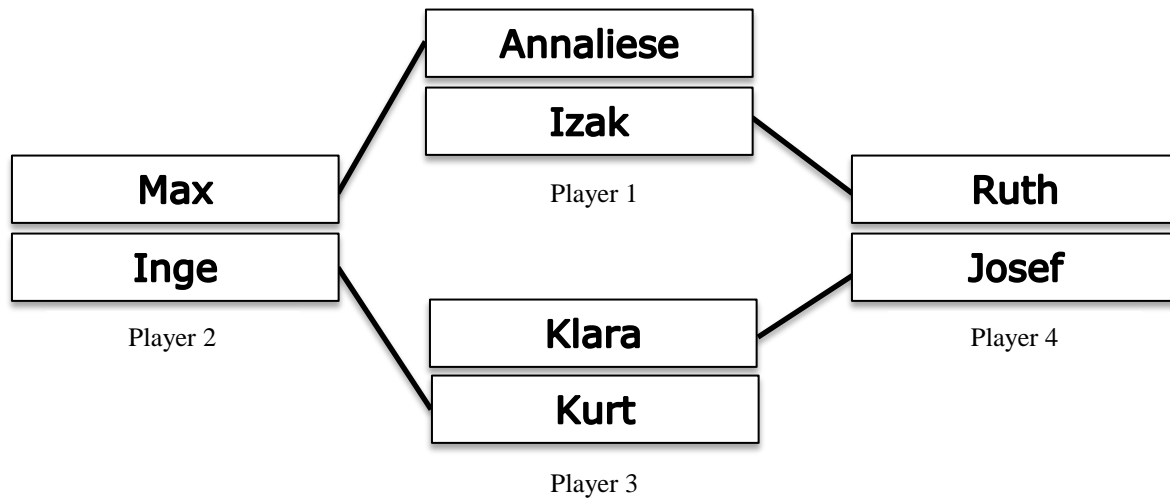
The Rosenstrasse protest was the only protest ever raised against the "Final Solution" under the Third Reich (Michalczyk, 2004).

### **Game Description**

*Rosenstrasse* is a tabletop role-playing game for four players and one facilitator, designed to be played in a single four- to five-hour session. During play, players describe the thoughts, feelings, and actions of their characters. The facilitator presents game challenges, tracks secret information, helps players follow the rules, and manages the time allocated to each scene.

Each player is assigned two characters: one male, one female. They alternate between portraying their two different characters in different scenes of the game. These characters span a





*Figure 2:* Relationships between players and characters at the game table.

range of social positions that affect their vulnerability to the Nazi regime (Figure 1). For example, Ruth is a Jewish woman married to an Aryan man, so her family is considered an Aryan family and is largely unaffected by the race laws. On the other hand, Max is a Jewish man, so his family is considered Jewish even though he is married to an Aryan woman, and their lack of children reduces the protections of their marriage further.

Characters are paired with one another, either as spouses or siblings (Figure 1).

Characters are assigned so that each person's spouse or sibling is played by another player (Figure 2). Each player directly interacts with two other players during most of the game: one as the partner for their male character, and one as the partner for their female character. In some scenes late in the game, characters can interact with characters other than their partner. More typically, however, one or two players are interacting with one another and with the facilitator, while the rest of the players watch.

The game is made up of 90 individual scenes, separated into a Prologue (1921-1933), Act I (1933-1937), Act II (1938-1942), Act III (February-March 1943), and the Epilogue (1943).

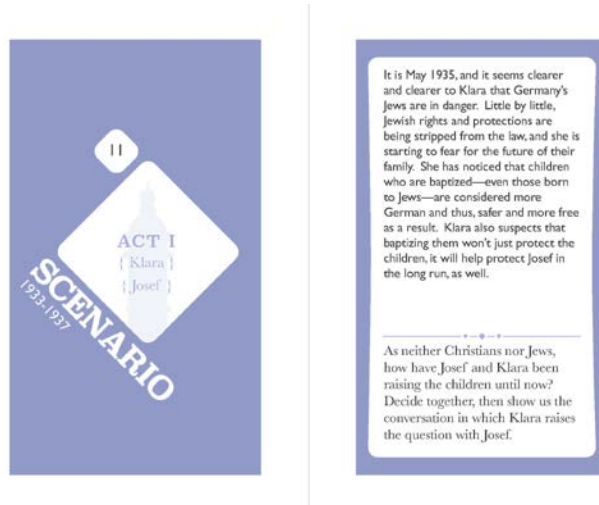


Figure 3: A sample scenario card.

Each scene is presented on a card, and reprinted in a guidebook for facilitators. In addition to the text on each scene card, the facilitator’s guidebook includes additional instructions for the facilitator and suggestions for how they can support players in that scene. Not all scenes are used in a given game of *Rosenstrasse*, as players’ choices can cause some cards to be discarded.

There are three different types of scene card: scenario, update, and complicity cards.

Scenario cards ask the facilitator to read text from the card, typically followed by a question or prompt directed at the characters named by the card. For example, one scenario card asks Klara and Joseph to role-play a conversation about whether to baptize their children, and then to decide whether they will do so. The facilitator may also have other actions to take as a result of the scenario card. For example, one scenario card asks the facilitator to distribute yellow star tokens to the players.

Update cards are distributed to the players between acts and provide new information about their characters. Update cards are read privately by each player, then summarized back to the group.

Complicity cards come in pairs. Each pair of cards is handed to a player, who silently reads them and must decide which one to inflict on the character named by the card. They then take the facilitator role, reading the card aloud and asking the affected character how they

behave. Unlike scenario and update cards, which are focused on the central characters, these cards describe acts of complicity by ordinary Germans with the Nazi regime.

The facilitator also has a risk matrix for the male characters, a tracking sheet that allows them to identify what actions have made them more or less vulnerable to the Nazi regime. For example, baptizing one's children before 1935 decreases risk, while coming to the attention of the authorities in any way increases it. The facilitator is instructed not to show the risk matrix to the players, or to answer questions about what they are tracking.

Additional game materials include character sheets for each of the eight characters (each player receives two sheets); yellow star tokens, to be worn by relevant characters after 1935; a set of postcards used during the epilogue; and optional sound files that can be used to enhance the experience of specific scenes. A facilitator app, which can replace the printed guidebook, is currently under development. The app automates some facilitator functions, such as card selection, and logs player decisions for later reflection and discussion.

### **Playtesting and Data Collection**

Full sessions of *Rosenstrasse* have been run at game festivals such as Fastaval, at game conventions such as Metatopia, at synagogues and Jewish centers, and in private sessions for historians and educators. A formal research study is currently ongoing, with preliminary data presented here. Across all contexts, more than 25 sessions of the game were run involving over a hundred players and facilitators.

Recruitment for playtest sessions was performed through the organizations involved with the playtest, including advertising in local museums and libraries. Data collected from playtest sessions included facilitator observations of play, player feedback forms, and summaries from

the post-game debrief. This data was used to identify design issues with the game and perform design iterations. The exact data available varied across contexts and by facilitator. Additionally, nearly 10% of playtest participants independently contacted the designers to provide additional feedback on the game.

Recruitment for the research study was conducted on and around the campus of a private university in a moderate-sized American city. All game sessions were recorded, as were post-game debrief sessions and interviews. Demographic data was collected from all players, including their prior knowledge of the Holocaust. When four players could not be recruited for a given session, a research confederate played with the group. A preliminary dataset of interviews were transcribed and open coding was used to identify key themes.

Across all sessions, players varied in their knowledge of the Holocaust and in their relationship to the Holocaust. Players have included the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, the grandchildren of Holocaust perpetrators and collaborators, professional historians, and players who had never learned about the Holocaust before. Players also varied by age (18-80), by gender, by country of origin, and by racial and ethnic identity.

Finally, Holocaust educators performed a heuristic evaluation of the game text and other game materials.

### **Design Challenges and Game Analysis**

*Rosenstrasse* faced a number of design challenges related to its subject matter and its transformational goals. We describe these challenges, how we addressed them as designers, and what we observed from playtests and preliminary research studies.

### **Beyond Victimhood**

One challenge of Holocaust media is that it often flattens Jewish stories into a single story of victimhood (Schweber, 2004). Not only does this dishonor the complexity of Jewish lives, it also allows non-Jews to implicitly cast themselves as the heroic saviors of the helpless Jewish people. *Rosenstrasse* seeks to brush history “against the grain,” recovering the lesser-known stories of women during wartime. However, focusing only on the women of the *Rosenstrasse* story would play into the dominant narrative of the non-Jewish rescuer, when in fact the vast majority of Germans were either complicit with or actively participating in the Nazi regime.

By requiring every player to have two characters, one a Jewish man and one a protesting woman, we were able to focus on the heroism of the women while still centering Jewish voices. We were also able to complicate the stories of two of the female characters to incorporate Jewishness. Klara is racially classified as Aryan, but must keep her Jewish grandmother a secret or be reclassified as *mischlinge*. Ruth is a Jewish woman married to an Aryan man (Hans, portrayed by the facilitator). She is personally safe, but can do much less to protect her brother Izak than the other women can do to protect their husbands. More broadly, we chose social situations for our characters that would show the diversity of Jewish lives. There is no single story of what it meant to be a Jew in wartime Berlin. The characters vary in social class, in political outlook, in their relationship to Judaism, and in the relationships they have with their spouses. This diversity complicates typical Holocaust narratives.

We observed players comparing and contrasting the experiences of different characters in the game. These contrasts illuminated the “crazy” and “shocking” rules of the Reich, which players felt were both irrational and inescapable. These comparisons drove players to action as

their characters. For example, one player explained that “I feel like why I did half of what I did as Ruth was that I felt guilt ... like when the [Jewish] stars came out, that [Izak] got one and I didn’t. It felt wrong and unfair. Our lives weren’t that different ... we were siblings and our biology is the same, we have the same parents. But by virtue of who we married and the fact that [Izak] was a man and therefore married a woman who couldn’t carry her protections onto him, that parallel felt really wrong and guilt-inducing.” Players also reported comparing the two characters they personally portrayed, e.g. “I felt [a stronger connection] with Josef than with Ruth. Like, by the end I very much felt like Josef. When he lived, I lived.” Finally, players reported learning about new categories of Jewishness, such as *mischlinge*. Both the *mischlinge* characters (Kurt and Klara) are treated as Aryan early in the game and only revealed as Jewish later on. This mid-game revelation caused players to internalize and process the characters’ Jewish identities. For example, one Klara player chose to keep her Jewish grandmother secret for part of the game because “I hadn’t come to terms with it yet.” Note the player’s use of the first person to describe the process.

### **Supporting Participation at Varying Levels of Historical Knowledge**

As a role-playing game, *Rosenstrasse* faces additional challenges related to history. Players do not simply consume game content, but also contribute to it through the choices their characters make. However, we wanted to make the game accessible to players who might not know very much about the Holocaust or about Berlin under the Reich. How could players make meaningful choices and contribute to the game without a strong grounding in history?

To address this, we asked players to ground their participation in emotional rather than historical expertise. Each player is situated in two different long-term relationships, one for each of their characters. They can use what they know about sibling relationships and/or marriages to

inform their choices, and they are explicitly instructed to do so as part of the game instructions. Scene prompts are written to support a relational approach to the material, and embed the history in character-centric decisions. For example, one scenario card asks Max and Annaliese to describe how they comfort one another while huddling in a coal cellar during a bombing (Figure 4). The historical information, which is that Jewish families were not permitted to use bomb shelters reserved for Aryan Germans, is embedded in the text read by the facilitator and made actionable by the content of the prompt.

Nonetheless, allowing player contributions risks players getting something wrong about the history of the period or about the Jewish experience. One way we addressed this was giving the facilitator the role of gently steering the players around the history. They are explicitly instructed to ignore minor inaccuracies, such as a wrong date or pronunciation, but can suggest acceptable alternatives if players are truly far from the historical reality. Of course, facilitators also may not be knowledgeable about the history. To support this role, the facilitator's guide provides suggestions around scenes where playtesting revealed that players were most likely to make errors. For example, in one late-game scene, Annaliese is waiting for Max to return from work, when in fact he has been caught up in the roundup. In playtests we observed that Annaliese's player would commonly suggest that she

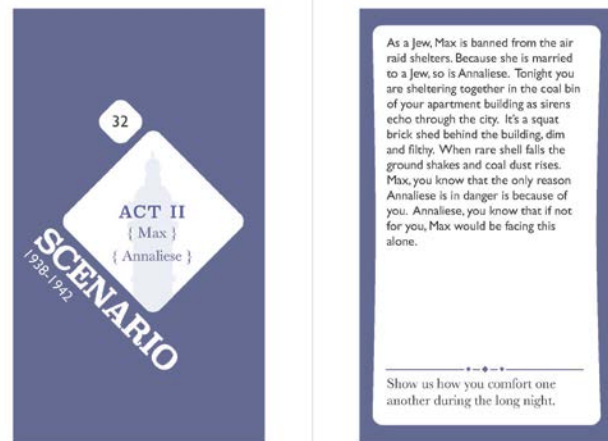


Figure 4: Annaliese and Max in the coal cellar.

call someone, when in fact she would have had no access to a telephone. A note to that effect was added to the facilitator's guide.

Many of the racial laws in Germany under the Reich were difficult, contradictory and hard to understand – and yet they would make a life-or-death difference to the characters and their children. Despite the fact that the game could not teach the minutia of how the laws worked, we needed to find ways to have facilitators effectively convey the information, and to help players understand how the law was targeting their characters and loved ones. For example, the laws around who had to wear a yellow star were particularly complicated. We created an extended scene in which the facilitator assigned stars and read pre-generated justifications for the decisions, so that they could be accurate in reflecting a complex system. As each Jewish character is addressed, they are given an emotionally evocative prompt to respond to. For example, Jews had to pay for their own stars. Max, the poorest of the characters, is asked which of his few possessions he will sell in order to afford the star that marks his persecution.

Even given these techniques, and even with relatively knowledgeable participants, there is still the possibility of groups making mistakes with the history. We considered inserting additional historical information, such as pre-game readings for the facilitator, but we discovered that players were motivated to verify the historicity of game elements after play. When team members conducted post-game interviews, typical questions included whether the protests really happened and whether other elements of the game were true. Because misunderstandings were likely to result in players conducting research after the game, and did not appear to risk falling into existing stereotypes or misconceptions, we chose to give participants the opportunity to make mistakes with the history during play in service of post-game engagement.



In practice, both players with high and low levels of historical knowledge were able to participate in the game. For example, a player who identified themselves as having “the least knowledge of the Holocaust” commented that you “probably can’t even imagine the details” of the atrocities in any meaningful way, but that “you can truly identify with [the game experience] at a human level” and “make decisions like the character would make.” In other words, rather than attempt to imagine the atrocities in detail, the character provided a lens to create “personal connection” and “context” for the history, as per Schweber (2004). Meanwhile, historically knowledgeable players, and particularly those with personal connections, described their historical knowledge as providing context and meaning over and above the gameplay. For example, one descendant of survivors said, “When [something that happened to my family] would come along, I would have this initial reaction of ‘Oh boy, here we go, here’s that thing.’ But the further along we got in the story and the more emotionally attached I was to the characters, the less it was this feeling of removed dread and it felt really personal.... I think the combination of the [historical] knowing and the relating back to the feeling of hearing the stories of people you do know, it sort of ties it home in a really real and emotional way.”

### **Managing Agency**

One concern of Holocaust educators is the problem of agency. The question “Why didn’t people just *do* something?” reflects a naïve approach to social systems and can sometimes be used to blame the victims of the Holocaust (Totten, 2000). This problem is amplified by the game context, which primes players to be able to make meaningful decisions. In a potentially open-ended tabletop game, players may try to stop the Holocaust or defeat the Nazis, instead of engaging with the limited agency possessed by ordinary people living in Berlin under a fascist regime. This is particularly important because the Aryan wives, extended families, neighbors,

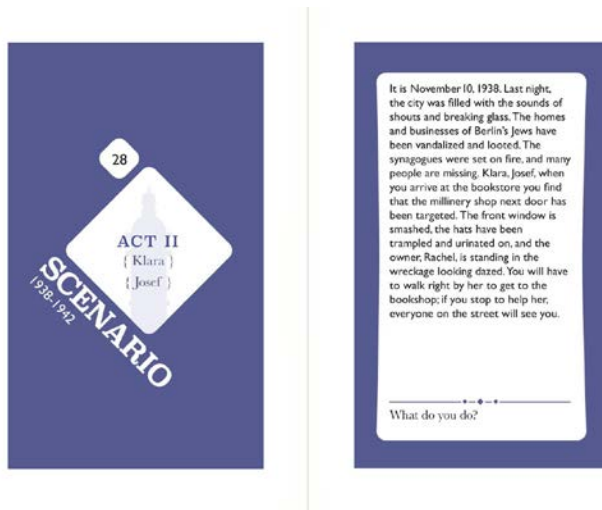


Figure 5: The morning after *Kristallnacht*.

colleagues, and oppressors in the story provide a system of individual people making individual choices that enabled the Reich to happen. These people were sometimes complicit in the oppression of Jews, they were sometimes resisting the oppression of Jews, and sometimes they were doing both at the same time. To convey that reality, players have to understand

what is and is not possible for their characters to accomplish.

One way we addressed this issue was through prompt design. Prompts cast the characters in intimate, domestic scenes, or as vulnerable when in public. For example, we knew we wanted to have a scene involving *Kristallnacht*. Instead of allowing the characters to play during *Kristallnacht* itself, we set the scene the morning after (Figure 5). Klara and Josef arrive at their bookshop, which was not damaged because Klara passes for Aryan. The choice they must make is whether to risk social censure in order to comfort their Jewish neighbor, whose hat shop has been destroyed. In playtests, we observed that the prompt issues a moral challenge and provides scope for emotional agency without inviting action-movie heroics. The characters develop their resistance not in immediate, dramatic action, but rather in the thick of everyday life.

Only at the end of the game, when the female characters collectively (and historically) protest, can players collectively resist the regime. Players reported rising tension throughout the game, often associated with looking at the card deck to see how many scenes were left. As cards

were removed from the deck, players knew that an inevitable and possibly dark ending was coming for their characters. As that tension increases, the prompts allow more direct confrontation for the female characters attending the protest. A woman screams at a prison guard. Another returns to the protest after being ordered to disperse. Players are typically quick to take up these offers of dramatic action, which contrast with the scope of the choices they are offered in the rest of the game.

After the game, players often asked whether their decisions changed the game's ending. For the female characters, the answer is no. All female characters always survive the game, though their life circumstances are affected by player decisions. However, player decisions do affect the ending for the male characters. There are four possible game endings, which are assigned to characters based on their vulnerability score. More vulnerable characters have worse endings, including deportation to Auschwitz. The facilitator tracks the vulnerability of male characters secretly, and players do not always know which actions will put their male characters at risk. Although players are often dubious whether their actions made a difference to how the game turned out, they nonetheless report feeling that their choices during the game were meaningful and important.

Players also reported that the game successfully captured “the frustration and helplessness that these people were feeling. There’s no way to be like, ‘Oh, there’s a friend who will get us to America’ in the early part of the game.” Another participant reported that it made them “more empathetic to those characters in history, especially when we say ‘Why didn’t they just leave?’ Like, this game shuts down that question entirely, which I think is really effective and opens you up to thinking more constructively about history and why human beings seem to repeat the same mistakes over and over again.” While players found the game’s constraints

experientially frustrating, they drew insights from them to obviate the question of why people did not act. At the same time, some players reported that a late-game scene, where an old friend of Klara's refuses to help her, left them asking why the women waited to protest until it was *their* husbands on the line. This tension is at the heart of what we hope to convey with *Rosenstrasse*.

### **Building Relationships**

Agency alone is not enough to carry the climax of the game, in which the women participate in the Rosenstrasse protest. To give the climax emotional weight, the first two acts of *Rosenstrasse* compress ten years of a Jewish-Aryan marriage into three hours. As part of this design goal, we took advantage of live tabletop play to create intimacy-enhancing physical cues. For example, players are assigned a consistent partner to play their spouse throughout the entire game. Periodically, each pair receives a single physical card that describes their next role-playing scene. The text on the card is deliberately small, so that the partners must lean toward one another and bend their heads together over the card in order to play. In playtests we observed that this physical closeness helped players feel connected, even when they never touched one another.

Part of making the marriages and the sibling relationship feel real meant including moments of connection, joy, and relief along with moments of oppression and fear. These moments also allowed us to highlight Jewishness outside the context of persecution. For example, early in the game, Izak and Ruth's families host a joint Passover Seder (Figure 6). The prompt on the card places Izak and Ruth in the position of benefactors, offering gifts to their children in exchange for the ritual-ending afikomen. It demonstrates the closeness of the characters and their families, and it shows that although both siblings are married to Aryan Germans, Jewishness is important in both their lives. We observed that these moments of

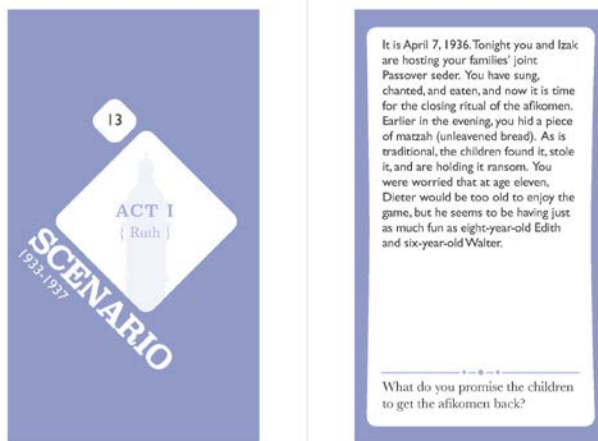


Figure 6: The Seder scene.

intimacy heighten the heartbreak of the sad times; players felt that they had something of value to lose.

We also generated tension between the characters relating to the intersections of race and gender. Under the guidance of the Reich, the priorities of a woman were expected to be husband, family, children, and home (Stoltzfus 1996, Koonz, 2013).

Women did not have access to a lot of influence outside of that framework. But in their mixed marriages, these women often found themselves with a sudden power over their husbands, and conflicting priorities from the government. They were under constant pressure to divorce and abandon their husbands, and they knew that if they did that their husbands would not survive it. Inge, for example, is explicitly asked to divorce her husband Kurt by her Aryan family members; her players describe this decision as appropriately momentous, no matter what they choose.

Players described their in-game relationships as intensely motivating. In describing a late-game scene where Izak is arrested, Ruth's player explained, "How do you get the officer out of your house? What do you do? You have to care for your kids but you also have to care for yourself and your brother." The relationships felt profound and real to the player, providing a driving emotional baseline for the scene. Another player described the game-ending protest: "So like everybody there loves their husbands, but in different ways. They love their children and are thinking about them all the time. They're thinking 'Can I afford to lose my life? Will this be

successful? Is there any point to trying to get this person out? Should I give up?' .... Here's everyone protesting, 'I'm here because I love this person, I want them back. Let's just go forwards.'" Not only did the player feel a deep connection to their in-game spouse, they also directly connected it to why the protest felt so important to them during play.

### **Takeaways**

Finally, there is the question of the impact of the game on players. As designers, we considered the Rosenstrasse story as part of a history of protest. Many people think of the Nazi regime as a great, unshakable, ultimate evil that could not be challenged. While that is not an undeserved reputation, it is also not the whole truth. In accepting that narrative, we excuse ourselves from action, in the past and in the present and in the future. *Rosenstrasse* fundamentally challenges this narrative and reveals it as the lie it is. This group of women—average, everyday women, who themselves were in very vulnerable situations, who had no support or personal power stood up against the Reich in a peaceful and unorganized protest and the Reich capitulated. This challenges players to consider the idea that maybe there was more people at the time could have done, and that there might be opportunities for them to resist injustice today. This opportunity for transformative play is the key this game, because we are not asking people to play a game about the Holocaust for fun. We ask people to submit themselves to a game about the Holocaust to learn something, to see the world differently, to act differently in it, and to find new courage in themselves.

Players reported that they learned new things about the Holocaust from playing *Rosenstrasse*. For example, one player reported that despite doing “Jew school” for many years, they had never heard of the Rosenstrasse protests: “Everyone always talks about the *suffering*... *Kristallnacht* gets covered ad nauseum, they talk about Auschwitz and Birkenau and Bergen-

Belsen, and they talk about people who helped hide Jews and get them out. But they don't talk about the ways that people tried to resist.... The protest for me was the shock." While implying that protests were common would be inappropriate – they were not – the game provided a useful contrast to the dominant narrative.

Players also connected the game to their personal responsibility to resist oppression. For example, one player commented that "it's quite easy to just sit back and let things happen... unless you were the one being directly affected by it, and it shows that sometimes you just need to put yourself out there and put yourself in other people's boots, step into the characters boots or step into another person's boots, and try to figure out what they might be going through to help. Cuz its, I mean it's really easy to walk away from all this and say 'I'm not going to bother myself' like... Klara could have said I don't have to wear the Star of David. And Inge could have just stayed back home, but they didn't. And I guess, personally out of the game as well, I can choose not to do a lot of things as well and just sit back and enjoy my life, but what's the point?" Here we see the player identifying with the female characters, all of whom are safe from being directly targeted by the regime. Rather than focus on the moments of complicity, the player describes moments where these women chose to stand in solidarity with the Jewish men in their lives; they then connect these moments with their personal choices to help others and show solidarity.

Finally, the game seems to have a significant and lasting effect on at least some players. In addition to the feedback provided immediately after play, nearly 10% of players have independently contacted us months or even years later to talk about their experiences in the game. Three separate players have sent us photographs from the Rosenstrasse memorial in Berlin, and one reported adding Berlin to their itinerary specifically so that they could visit the

memorial. Multiple players cited the game as “the most honest conversation [they] have ever had about the Holocaust,” particularly those for whom family legacies had previously made such conversations fraught. At least one of those players reported subsequently beginning a difficult family conversation as a result. Some players have simply reached out to let us know how much they enjoyed playing the game, despite its difficult emotional content, and to ask when they can play again.

### **Conclusion & Future Work**

This paper describes key design decisions for the historical tabletop role-playing game *Rosenstrasse*. In particular, it examines techniques used to reduce the need for players to know history; to manage the risk of historical inaccuracy; to address the necessary limitations on player agency for a game set under the Reich; and to make the connections between the characters feel real, meaningful, and motivating. While a formal study of the impact of *Rosenstrasse* is beyond the scope of the present work, our evidence to date suggests that the game is an important and meaningful experience for players. In the long term, we hope to evaluate the impact of *Rosenstrasse* around three transformational goals. What do players learn about history? How does *Rosenstrasse* change their thinking about resistance to oppression? Does playing the game with “weak ties” - people that know each other, but not well - help them build networks related to activism? We look forward to better understanding the impact of our design choices on the game’s transformational outcomes.

We also look forward to addressing some of the challenges of deploying *Rosenstrasse*. Because the game requires approximately four hours and exactly five participants, one of whom is willing to take the role of a facilitator, coordinating sessions can be complex. To partly address this, we have created a short demo of the game that can be used to raise player interest, and we



are developing a facilitator app that can lower the burden of facilitation. However, there are also larger questions of where, when, and by whom this game is played. Beyond festivals and conventions, what is the right setting for the game? For example, we have turned down several opportunities to integrate *Rosenstrasse* into formal history curricula, because we believe that making gameplay mandatory may induce reactance in players (Heeter, Lee, Magerko, & Medler, 2010). How might the game need to be adapted for global play? We look forward to exploring these questions of deployment and accessibility, and to engaging new audiences with our game.

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