

'Terra Fabula': Developing a Classroom Game for Exploring 'First Contacts'

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Developed by Schoolhouse Studio in Sydney, 'Terra Fabula' is an innovative classroom game designed to give school students an appreciation of the impact of First Contacts and colonisation. Designed to be run within the incoming 7-10 syllabus or the current K-6 syllabus, the game invites participants to create their own worlds. They chart a vast land of majestic ranges, rugged coastlines and winding rivers; icy tundra and dense rainforest; sweeping savannah and parched deserts. Then they imagine a people who come to live on the land, building dwellings and creating a community. They shape the way the people live, what they believe and the stories they tell. They connect with other nearby communities, perhaps working together or trading resources. They design a symbol that represents their people: their history, their identity, and their hopes for the future. And then, the explorers and settlers arrive. The following article explores the development of this innovative educational resource, discussing our influences and rationale as non-Indigenous developers, the experiential learning theory underpinning the approach, key design choices, our classroom testing process and the learning outcomes we have seen as a result.

About the game

'Terra Fabula' is a low-tech, analogue game, generally run over four sessions of 60-90 minutes each. Each student uses a piece of A3 sized paper to create a map, and several small, printed booklets that take them through each chapter of a story. All materials are available to download for free (see link at the end of this article), including a Teacher's Guide which gives tips on running the sessions, and accompanying PowerPoint presentations.

Students work through guided map-making, drawing and writing activities to create a land which they then populate with a pre-industrial culture. They imagine daily life for this community and connect with other neighbouring groups. Without warning, the game changes tone as colonising explorers and settlers arrive, often with dramatic consequences for the communities the students have built.



Figure 1. Example of a map drawn by Stage 2 student playing *Terra Fabula*, Cranbrook School, Bellevue Hill, NSW, 20 May 2024. All photos: Brett Rolfe

While 'Terra Fabula' was designed to address the 'First Contacts' topic of the NSW Stage 2 History Syllabus, it also has obvious relevance to the Stage 4 'Expanding Contacts' Depth Study on 'Aboriginal and Indigenous Peoples, Colonisation and Contact History' (6d). The game's setting is intentionally abstract, and no explicit connection to real-world events is made until after the game concludes. We suggest that Terra Fabula is played at the beginning of a unit of work, to foster an understanding and empathy that students can then bring to their exploration of actual historical events in their local context.

Rationale

The Terra Fabula project was the result of an intentional process to find points in the NSW History syllabus where immersive experiential activities might be beneficial for students. Informal discussions with numerous teachers indicated that the Stage 2 material covering the impact of British settlement on Indigenous Australians was an area



Figure 2. Printable student and teacher materials for 'Terra Fabula'

of opportunity. The syllabus indicates that this is an area requiring more than simple understanding of facts, where instead, students need to 'identify and empathise with the varying perspectives of individuals and groups over time and attempt to understand the actions, values, attitudes and motives of people from the past'.¹ It also presents an opportunity to 'deepen and enable students' capacity to participate in the ongoing development of a just and equitable Australian society that genuinely reconciles with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples',² in line with the cross-curriculum priorities.

While 'First Contacts' is recognised as crucial content given its contemporary social importance, it is a topic that many teachers find challenging. Many talked about being more comfortable spending time on the First Fleet and convicts rather than Indigenous narratives. Some teachers with little personal experience of Indigenous culture, particularly those who did not grow up in Australia, found the topic daunting. Others were conscious of the sensitivity of the topic and were concerned they would not do justice to it, or even cause offence. When planning the 'First Contacts' topic, teachers often decide that achieving empathy with pre-colonial Indigenous culture is best achieved through experiential activities, such as excursions and multimedia content.

Given this context, we decided to develop a classroom experience that encouraged students to empathise with the experiences of Indigenous Australians during the early stages of European colonisation. The goal was to produce something that any teacher could deploy with relative ease, requiring no special materials or training. As non-Indigenous developers of a game that would ultimately be used by non-Indigenous teachers and students, we were mindful about the potential sensitivities of asking students to explore Indigenous issues in this way. However, as a wealth of academic literature within education and psychology suggests that taking on the perspective of others can be an effective way of building empathy,³ we decided that a simulation of some type would be a useful tool to foster empathy with Indigenous peoples

(not only in Australia) at a particular historical moment.

Games for creating historical empathy

The development of Terra Fabula was inspired by an anecdote related by US video game designer Brenda Romero, describing her seven-year-old daughter Maisa coming home from school during Black History Month, having learned about the Middle Passage, the shipping route that carried African slaves to the New World.

Romero observes that her daughter had 'learned all the buzzwords, sans emotions', and described the Middle Passage as if 'the black people went on a cruise'. When Maisa then wanted to play a game, Romero devised a simple simulation for her. She gave her daughter about forty plain wooden game pawns to paint and group into families. Then she randomly took a handful of them and put them on a boat, represented by an index card.

The rules of the Middle Passage game were simple. It took ten turns to cross the ocean. The boat had only thirty units of food. Soon, Maisa realised they were not all going to make it.

'Mommy', she asked, 'what are we going to do?'

'Well,' her mother replied, 'we can either try and make it all the way across and hope the people don't die, or we can put some people in the water.'

Her daughter was seven. She knew what that meant.

She looked at her mother.

'Did that really happen?'

'Yes, honey. That really happened.'

Then Romero describes having a conversation with her daughter about whether families got separated, whether they got back together in America, whether they could ever return to Africa. When her half-Irish, half-black father got home she had many questions for him. Did he ever think about the people who were left behind? Did he know where they are? While walking in the street, might he pass someone to whom he is related, and not even know? Romero concludes:

All these amazing questions came about... not because she saw a movie, not because she got a poster, not because she got some interactive lecture, but because she made characters, she spent half an hour with those characters, and those characters mattered to her... and those characters' lives were affected by this Middle Passage that happened on an index card.⁴

Romero is not the first to observe the potential of games and simulations to create powerful connections with historical events, and to spark both empathy and curiosity. A 1989 review⁵ described a range of educational simulations including *Starpower* (exploring wealth and social mobility), *Bafa Bafa* (exploring cultural difference and ethnocentrism), the *Thorps Game* (exploring social privilege and inequity in education), and *Hierophant's Heaven* (exploring the sociological functions of religion). More recent research has looked at the use of commercial video games⁶ and custom-built board games⁷ in the History classroom.

While there is generally more commentary on the way that commercial games perpetuate negative prejudices regarding minorities, marginalised peoples, and the disenfranchised, there have been occasional attempts to address this, such as the positive depiction of the protagonist's Native American heritage in *Assassin's Creed III*, and *Mafia III*'s unflinching depictions of racism in 1960s America⁸. There have also been several independent games that intentionally foreground the lived experience of First Nations cultures, such as *When Rivers Were Trails*,⁹ a video game about the impact of colonisation on Native Americans in the 1890s; and *Potlatch*,¹⁰ a card game about Native American economics.

The learning that occurs through historical games and simulations might be best conceptualised through David Kolb's Experiential Learning Model.¹¹ In Kolb's model, students engage with an activity (Concrete Experience), reflect on the activity (Reflective Observation), form theories based on their experience and reflections (Abstract Conceptualisation) and then apply those theories in new situations (Active Experimentation). This creates a cycle of experience and learning, which players may move through multiple times within a given simulation.

Several authors have written on the challenges involved in classroom simulations of marginalisation and poverty. While acknowledging that students' feelings about the plight of people living in poverty can change as a result of a simulated experience of their daily life,¹² considerable care must be taken to approach such simulations critically, creating opportunities for reflection and transformation rather than reinforcing existing power dynamics and invalidating the lived experience of some students.¹³

Research and development

Thinking about the experience we wanted to create for students, a game about Indigenous Australia and First Contact led to several key design choices. One critical decision was the role of the player and the immediacy of the experience. On the one hand, if the experience was too abstract or removed, the impact would be greatly reduced. On the other hand, the subject matter can be highly confronting, and some have even suggested that this type of material should be off limits for classroom games.¹⁴ Finding a suitable point on this spectrum informed the type of game we would create. We felt that a traditional board game with counters, squares, and dice movement would lack the necessary immediacy. At the other end of the spectrum, a role-playing game where students inhabited individual characters was problematic as it demanded a lot of students to adopt such different perspectives; was fraught with sensitivity concerns; and would be too confronting given the destiny of many of the characters. As a result, we landed on a model where students would take a more abstract role and play 'as a community'. This would create a layer of distance, while still connecting them directly with individuals.

Considering the challenges inherent in managing the interactions between students we decided to make the experience solitary, with each student telling the story of

their own community. Framing the activity as a story in this way led us to explore similar genres of games, where creativity and narrative are more of a focus than mechanics and competition. Examples of other solo story-telling games include *Thousand Year Old Vampire*¹⁵ and *Artefact*,¹⁶ where players generate their own stories in response to questions and provocations provided by the game. Another key influence was *The Quiet Year*,¹⁷ a map-making game where a group of players collaboratively build the story of a community by drawing a map on a large sheet of paper, in response to prompt cards.

There was an obvious link between students drawing their community and the process Romero described of her daughter painting game pieces to create families. This became the way that students would develop the sense of connection and empathy that would then inform their response to the impact of European contact. Thinking about Indigenous communities, it became clear that the physical landscape in which they existed was also a critical consideration. As with so many First Nations peoples, Indigenous Australians expressed a unique and powerful connection to the land that was an important aspect of their experience of colonisation. Recognising this, we reframed the game to be the story not only of the community, but of the land. From this we arrived at the name *Terra Fabula* (The Story of the Land), which both expressed the primacy of the environment as part of the narrative, as well as alluding to the idea of *Terra Nullius*, the term used by British colonisers to describe land over which they believed no previous sovereignty had been exercised.

So, we had the basic premise of a game. Students would begin with a blank sheet of paper and create a landscape. They would populate this landscape with a community of Indigenous occupants. They would take the perspective of this community to create connection. And then their community would experience the impact of First Contact and the early stages of colonisation.

Design choices

This structure led to a series of further design choices. What community and conflict would students be simulating? How would we scaffold the illustration of a landscape and a community? What could we do to connect the player to their people? How could we stage the arrival of explorers and settlers without them being represented by another player? And how could we responsibly manage the experience, given the confronting nature of the later parts of the narrative?

Early on we made the decision that the game would not be a simulation of any specific historical events. There were three reasons for this. First, making a game that authentically relates to an individual historical context creates a raft of necessary content and mechanics that may not be necessary to achieve the broader objectives. Second, it would necessarily limit the freedom and creativity of the player in ways which were likely to diminish their connection and engagement with the community they create. Third, representing a specific historical context introduces a range of issues around sensitivity to the community being portrayed and



Figure 3. Example of a map drawn by Stage 2 student playing *Terra Fabula*, Cranbrook School, Bellevue Hill, NSW, 23 May 2024

the applicability of insights to other contexts. As a result, *Terra Fabula* invites players to imagine and depict their own fictional context, albeit one that will have enough in common with the narratives of First Nations peoples around the world to make it a powerful and resonant experience.

The amount of inspiration and scaffolding required to support students in creating their own maps was a result of the style of illustration. We drew on a wealth of online resources for fantasy map drawing to create a set of instructions and examples that guide students through the process of sketching out a landmass and adding natural features, from mountains and rivers to vegetation specific to various biomes. Playtesting showed that students were highly engaged and able to create rich, detailed landscapes. Considering the logistics of a student working with an A3 sheet of paper on their desk, we decided that the instructional content would best be delivered through small A5 booklets.

To create the connection between the player and community we explored a range of different activities. First, they drew the community on their map. We used dots to represent individuals to address any concerns students may have around drawing people. The dots were placed around small, stylised dwellings inspired by historical styles of housing construction. Students were encouraged to take on the perspective of their community through mapping tasks such as naming sites of cultural significance and writing tasks where they described animals their people encountered or retold the story of their arrival. Following the suggestion of a teacher in an early playtest, we added an activity where students designed a symbol representing their community and constructed a card headpiece featuring this symbol. This created a strong sense of identification, and most students chose to wear their headpiece for the remainder of the game.

Not wanting to have other students play the role of the British colonisers, we needed a way to evoke the loss of control that Indigenous communities would feel on their arrival. We achieved this through the introduction of chance. Up to this

point, the students had made every decision affecting their narrative. When explorers appear, students roll dice to find out if they arrive by land or by sea. This is the first of several dice rolls that determine the fate of their community. This was such a powerful mechanic that students have cheered when they learned they were about to roll their last dice. Recognising that different students have different tolerances for conflict, the game also provides options for students who become too uncomfortable.

Having seen their communities decimated by colonisation, the game's final conceit is to return control to students, inviting them to write a 'resolution' narrative describing what happens next. While this was a necessary to give the class emotional closure, it has been fascinating to see how students choose to resolve their stories. In playtesting, only two or three students have described any form of treaty or agreement, despite this being a suggested narrative. A handful have depicted the tragic demise of their community in ways that resonates with the reality for many displaced peoples. By far the most common narrative is the triumph of the underdog, where Indigenous communities overcome more powerful, technologically advanced oppressors through destruction wrought by natural disaster, cunning guile, the relentless persistence of guerilla action, or the undeniable power of fairness that burns in the heart of a young student.

While the game may end with the resolution narrative, the process of debriefing plays two important roles, critical to the success of *Terra Fabula*. First, it builds a bridge to later content about historical events. For students to gain the greatest benefit, they need to draw connections between their experience and the material they encounter in the First Contacts topic. A whole-class discussion can make some of those links explicit and encourage further insights as time progresses. Second, debriefing encourages reflection, which is a critical part of building empathy. Facilitated by the teacher, but led by students, the debriefing process stimulates shared conversations about the experience,¹⁸ provides opportunities to share perspectives, 'memorializes the event in the minds of the players, and reinforces the narrative'.¹⁹

Testing and learning outcomes

Playtesting was conducted in 2023 at three NSW schools: Cranbrook School, Bellevue Hill; Wilkins Public School, Marrickville; and St Mark's Catholic Primary School, Drummoyne. Debriefs with teachers at all three schools revealed how students had been highly engaged, several bringing in maps they had drawn at home over the following days. When asked at the end of the term, many identified it as their favourite activity.

One teacher at Wilkins Public School observed that students were able to 'connect with the Indigenous perspective on settlement through the creation, development and eventual invasion of their own "world", which gave an age-appropriate understanding of repercussions and impacts of settlement on the Indigenous people. It also provided a great starting off point for rich discussions with the class.'²⁰

Unpacking how the following unit on First Contacts had been different from previous years, teachers at Cranbrook School found that students displayed a broader vocabulary, deeper level of understanding, and a willingness to empathise when discussing Indigenous topics. As part of the unit, students were given the choice of writing a narrative from the perspective of a child sent to Australia as a convict, or a child living in an Indigenous community during colonisation. In previous years almost all students had written from the perspective of a convict child. After playing Terra Fabula, the majority chose to write as an Indigenous child.

One aspect of creative and narrative games is that different audiences can bring their own capabilities and life experiences. Often this will generate very different outcomes, and players will take away different learnings. Within the incoming 7–10 History syllabus, Terra Fabula sits within the Stage 4 ‘era of colonisation’ unit. Within the current K–6 History syllabus, the focus of the activity is appreciating the effects of world exploration (HT2–3) and colonisation (HT2–4), as well as providing opportunities to address Geography concepts such as the ways people, places and environments interact (GE2–2), and different perceptions about the management of places (GE2–3). More broadly, it also relates to cross-disciplinary

outcomes including thinking imaginatively and creatively when composing texts (EN2–10C), composing texts from different perspectives (EN2–10D), and exploring agricultural processes related to the production of food, clothing and shelter (ST2–5LW–T).

Conclusion

Terra Fabula will not be for all teachers and all classrooms. We also realise that the nature of the activity invites teachers to adapt it, making it more relevant to their own context. Our hope is that those teachers who do run the game in their classroom will share their learning and experiences, enabling us to continue making the game a more seamless activity to facilitate, and a richer activity to experience.

More generally though, my hope is that Terra Fabula demonstrates that we can identify those parts of our teaching where we believe students can benefit from more engaging and immersive experiences, that we can draw on the wealth of resources available in the realm of games, and that we can intentionally build, test and share solutions that our students will be thinking and talking about for many years. ♦

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