Jewish History Outcomes in the Jewish Court of All Time (JCAT)
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Nature of the Research Project
This study seeks to explore the Jewish history outcomes for middle school students “playing” in the Jewish Court of All Time (JCAT), an online simulation of a current events court case with historical roots (http://jcat.icsmich.org). Through an online platform across several schools, students research and play historical and current personalities invited to “Masada” to debate and eventually decide a complex issue. What do they learn about historical content, about history-as-discipline and as-process generally, and about Jewish history, in particular? By investigating student outcomes, we hope to

1. Articulate the nature of [Jewish] historical learning in JCAT, and
2. Begin to articulate the benefits (and constraints) in such a way as to encourage others to experiment with role playing in both face to face and online contexts for exploring Jewish history.

Brief Description of JCAT
Several activities take place over the course of the 10-week program. Students choose and research their characters, posting brief bios or “resumes” in their first foray on the JCAT site. In early weeks they participate in introductory conversations designed to facilitate speaking in voice and introduce themselves to other characters. Next, as the substance of the court case is introduced, the “guests” are invited to “exhibit halls” where they view and comment on primary sources related to important case themes and history. The JCAT guest list includes politicians, artists, military heroes, rabbis, entertainment figures and sports heroes, etc.

The later stages of JCAT revolve around the trial itself. Characters campaign to be selected as justices who will decide the case. Once selected, justices must make their positions clear and compete for votes from their fellow guests. Simultaneously, the prosecution and defense share their opening statements and witnesses enter the “courtroom” to post their testimony. All characters are invited to comment. While all of this main action is taking place, characters initiate their own conversations and actions, related or unrelated to the content of the case. The 2015 case revolved around the plight of two fictional teenage characters, one French Jewish and
one French Muslim, bringing a joint suit against the French government and its law banning the wearing of “ostentatious” religious symbols (head coverings) in public places including schools.

**Research Rationale**
This year marked the sixth year of JC AT, building on the success of Place Out of Time (POOT) a general education online simulation program developed at the University of Michigan’s Center for Interactive Communication and Simulations. While JC AT claims to be a Jewish history program, previous JC AT research has not focused on this aspect. Anecdotally teachers are pleased with JC AT for many reasons. They appreciate the opportunity for students to forge their own learning path, particularly in an online context. They capitalize on the chance for students to practice writing, research and communication skills in a creative way, and they speak generally about the opportunity for their students to experience and debate multiple perspectives. It is clear that Jewish history makes an appearance in JC AT through elements of the court case and the biographies of many participating characters, but how do these elements interact with the overall JC AT experience to produce some type of Jewish history learning?

**Research Design**
Our study focuses on the JC AT experience of students at two schools in the 2015 simulation. In School A, a seventh grade class of twenty-two students participated with the facilitation of an experienced Jewish history teacher who is also a veteran JC AT teacher. In School B, a sixth grade class of fourteen students participated with the facilitation of a second year Judaic studies teacher who is also a JC AT novice. Data collection included in-character postings on the JC AT site, a student survey and review of classwork reflecting on the JC AT experience, reflective interviews with selected students and 2 interviews with each of the teachers.

For this exploratory paper we are focusing on a slice of the online character data, pushing ourselves to see “what is there” separate from what we have heard from teachers and students reflecting on their experiences. We have chosen to explore the postings of three characters: Golda Meir, Coco Chanel and Leah Goldberg. Together their postings over ten weeks provide close to 70 pages of transcripts. We coded the data separately and compared our codes for each character and across characters; our code list is continuously evolving.
Findings

Our findings show that JCAT provides opportunities for Jewish history learning in terms of both content and skills: in the character role playing, through the background of the court case, through primary source analysis in the exhibit halls and through the debate around the big ideas of the case. (It is important to note that we identify opportunities for Jewish history learning; due to the infinite number of learning paths in an online simulation, these opportunities are engaged to differing extents by each participant. Further, because we did not conduct assessments of prior skills and knowledge, we can speak only of what students demonstrated, with varying degrees of confidence as to whether JCAT was the specific vehicle for learning.)

Cultural literacy/Name Recognition. At a perhaps elementary cultural literacy level, JCAT participants are exposed to a “who’s who” of Jews throughout history, from biblical times to the present, from all corners of the diaspora and from Israel. Through the biographical research they do for their “resumes,” students often demonstrate understanding of specific time periods and events, as well as the accomplishments and challenges experienced by the characters. Golda Meir, Coco Chanel and Leah Goldberg all lived through and were impacted by major events of the mid-twentieth century in Europe and Israel and reference these frequently in their comments. Significantly, while some biographically Jewish characters engage only peripherally with their Jewish heritage in their JCAT conversation (i.e., Jon Stewart) some non-Jewish characters were very involved in major events in Jewish history and therefore engage in Jewish history interactions in the simulation. For example, Coco Chanel served as a Nazi spy in occupied France and was involved in conversations about whether or not she “really didn’t like Jews” or just did what was necessary in wartime to protect herself and other family members.

Turning their research into a first person narrative seems to help the students to engage with the content. Similarly, applying biographical content to new situations (i.e. Golda Meir offering an opinion on Benjamin Netanyahu’s exhortation to French Jews to make Aliyah) or ahistorical interactions (i.e. Golda Meir emailing with Coco Chanel) pushes students to use content in imaginative and creative ways, albeit sometimes incomplete or inaccurate. The students we studied all demonstrated research beyond Wikipedia—both Golda Meir and Coco Chanel quotes
referenced primary sources, and Leah Goldberg summarized a Hebrew parable “she” authored about a pig and a cat.

Jewish history content/primary sources related to “the case.” The JCAT case takes place in the present but has historical roots. In the 2015 case students were introduced to the general history of the French approach to secularism (laicite) as well as aspects of the experience of Jews and Muslims in France/under French rule. While much of the exploration of the historical background of the case takes place offline at the discretion of the teacher, specific chunks are embedded in the online simulation and engender dialogue. For example, “Alfred Dreyfus” served as a witness in the case as a vehicle for exposing students to the Dreyfus Affair. In addition, some documents in the exhibit hall add historical dimensions. Students were introduced, for example, to the Declaration of the Rights of Man, to comments by De Gaulle about French Algerians and to more recent “historical” footage of reactions to the Charlie Hebdo incident of January 2015. Not all of these historical chunks focus specifically on Jewish history, but all can be related to thinking about the Jewish experience in France.

Big ideas. Each year the case is purposefully structured around “big ideas” intended to be timeless and applicable to multiple perspective taking and debate. This year’s “big ideas” as showcased specifically in the prompts and documents in the exhibit halls, were freedom and limits on religion and freedom and limits on dress. Related ideas that emerged included separation of church and state, public safety v. rights of the individual, national and personal identity, discrimination, and feminism.

Although not as easy to identify, certain “historical big ideas” emerged as well, for example, articulations of historical continuity. Reacting to Dreyfus’ biographical testimony and plea for more stringent efforts to enforce a secular public sphere, Golda Meir wrote, “This also shows how long this [anti-semitism] has been going on for because Mr. Dreyfus fought for France in 1894, and it's 2015 almost 2016 and we are still dealing with this.” Other historical big ideas included examples of turning points, cause and effect and the power of the individual. For example, Leah Goldberg set up a weekly “blog” on her “wall” where she updated readers on turning points in her journey from Lithuania to Israel.
**Historical Thinking Skills.** Related to the idea of historical big ideas are historical thinking skills, which in turn, overlap with general critical-thinking skills. To our knowledge, no unique skills have been articulated for the study of specifically Jewish history, as opposed to any other kind of history. JCAT provides a forum for students to experiment with and practice these skills, both directly and implicitly. Prompts in the exhibit halls build skills of primary source analysis. They encourage students to point to specific parts of a document that provide evidence for their point of view, and to take into consideration the context of a document or the perspective of its author. In addition, providing parallel narratives, for example, of a Muslim teenager and a Jewish teenager, or varied French Jewish narratives, pushes students to compare and contrast. More generally, by interacting in such a large and diverse character pool, students contribute multiple perspectives and have the opportunity to reflect, in character, on the existence of multiple perspectives.

**Historical empathy.** Role-playing provides the students with the opportunity to practice historical empathy. Endacott and Brooks (2013) define historical empathy as a “cognitive and affective engagement with historical figures to better understand and contextualize their lived experiences, decisions, or actions.” Students who develop historical empathy can identify how the past is different from the present, articulate multiple perspectives held by people in the past and can use historical evidence to support their explanations (Jensen, 2008). In JCAT students experiment with historical empathy both as twenty-first century middle school students playing [historical ] characters AND as characters interacting with characters from different time periods prior to or after their lifetime. An important demonstration of historical empathy in JCAT is a student’s ability to remain in character, authentically adapting what is known about the character to new situations or interactions. This is challenging for middle school students who must often work hard to figure out their own real life response to a particular prompt and then consider how their character might respond. Ironically, for some of the more extreme characters, consistently maintaining an authentic point of view can come into conflict with the more politically correct recognition of the legitimacy of multiple perspectives in public debate.
Appendix: Expanded description of JCAT

**Overview.** In the Fall of 2015 JCAT was played in three parallel games by approximately 650 students at twenty-four RAVSAK day schools in North America. The games are facilitated by professors and graduate students at the University of Michigan, University of Cincinnati, JTS and Hebrew College, who, in addition to envisioning and designing the simulation background materials and learning activities, participate in character. JCAT is funded by the Covenant Foundation.

**The role of the classroom teacher.** JCAT is designed to be co-implemented with the participating classroom teachers. Teachers are encouraged to spend class time facilitating character research and in person role playing, supporting primary source analysis, coaching students on writing and helping them to explore the historical and other contexts of the case. Significant resources and professional development are provided by the project directors. On the other hand, the JCAT “curriculum” is meant to be flexible so that each teacher can structure their students’ participation to best meet their students’ needs and to maximize time and curricular parameters.

**References**
