

Role-playing as an immigrant increases trust, finds study

December 2 2022



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Games and role-playing could generate trust of immigrants and perhaps tolerance for people from other countries, according to a new study by researchers at the University of Arkansas.

The researchers used Citizenship Quest, a role-playing [game](#), in online American National Government classes. Students who participated in the

game role-played as immigrants from Mexico, China and India. After playing, they reported significantly higher levels of trust in immigrants, compared to [students](#) who did not play the game.

"Results suggest that role-playing as diverse others promotes trust in differences through the development of shared experiences," said Brandon Bouchillon, assistant professor of journalism and strategic media in the Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences. "This trust can radiate to other seemingly related groups and to immigrants in general. Playing games like this could establish faith in new people, as a means of encouraging diverse social contact for the future."

Bouchillon and Patrick Stewart, professor of political science, used the citizenship role-playing game in five sections of an online American National Government class—two sections in the fall of 2021 and three in the spring of 2022. There were four control groups, two sections from each semester. In all, 68 students participated in the game, and 77 were in control groups.

Students worked through the game in stages. In the [first stage](#), they customized their character, which included selecting a gender and being assigned a name from a list of the most popular names by country. Stage 2 involved developing their character's background. Students wrote about politics back home and why they were immigrating to the United States. At the end of this stage, students completed an Application for Naturalization form, or N-400.

In the third stage, participants role-played the process of voting at their local polling location for the first time. They wrote about why they were proud to become U.S. citizens and identified what they thought was the most important political issue facing their new community. During the fourth and final stage of the game, students took the citizenship exam, which is the same exam given by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration

Services.

To measure the effects of the game, a post-test was given to all students during the final week of the course. Students who played Citizenship Quest had significantly higher levels of trust in immigrants than did the control groups. They demonstrated faith in different kinds of people after the game was over and reported trusting immigrants from China, India and the Middle East in particular. Players also trusted Middle Eastern immigrants more willingly than the control groups did, despite the fact that Middle Eastern characters were not included as part of the game.

"Immediacy," defined as a [game](#)'s ability to create a sense of being there, had a powerful effect on trusting as well. Students who felt Citizenship Quest was realistic, immersive and engaging had higher mean values of [immigrant](#) trust than students in the control groups. Immediacy was particularly valuable for trusting when role-playing as Chinese immigrants, who are the least visible group in the region of the three groups being role-played.

"Feeling immersed in the experience of characters related to positive attitudes toward outgroups," Bouchillon said. "Users perceived their characters as entities with which they had a meaningful relationship, but was not their own personal identity. In other words, a second self."

This is important because diverse social contact has been declining in the United States over the past 50 years, despite the fact that the U.S. population has become more diverse, with foreign-born nationals now comprising 14% of the country. Citizens appear to feel threatened by differences, which has led to a lack of trust in new people. This can be especially true during crises, such as the coronavirus pandemic, when prejudice and even violence against immigrants was increasing.

The researchers' study is published in *Computers in Human Behavior*.

More information: Brandon C. Bouchillon et al, Computer games, trust, and immediacy: Role-playing as immigrants in the South, *Computers in Human Behavior* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chb.2022.107571](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2022.107571)

Provided by University of Arkansas

Citation: Role-playing as an immigrant increases trust, finds study (2022, December 2) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-12-role-playing-immigrant.html>

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