

## **Talk in Class, Play in Class: Teaching History the Gamer's Way**

Games are beloved by all, improving the enjoyment of people throughout the course of history, if ancient artifacts and today's toy stores are to be believed. Because they specifically create an artificial arena of play, games are sometimes denounced as a waste of time or an escape from "real" life, which can certainly be true of any situation if the participant wishes this to be. However, many gamers realize the fact that life also occurs during gameplay and some would further argue that life is a series of games. In fact, gaming can actually be an active, engaging, collaborative form of dynamic learning.

As a child, and perhaps more so as an adult, there were times when I would be told by the "authorities" to quit playing and get to work. Implicit in this statement is that play and work are mutually exclusive, or that enjoyment of a task makes that task frivolous. I was clever enough to renounce this philosophy of education at an early age, thanks to the help of numerous wise teachers and family members. It was simply much easier to learn something, anything, when enjoying it and having fun with the content. I was drawn to the field of education as a gigantic game, where everything I learned was like adding to an unlimited "score." With the exception of the dreaded classes graded on a curve, in the Game of Education, I could increase my learning score and hone my skills yet not even have to take points away from my fellow students to do so. Unlike so many war-based, winner-take-all games, no one had to fight over which one of us "got"  $1+1=2$ , and the teacher certainly did not have to remove that piece of information from their brain in order to give it to someone else. In the classroom, we could all share the knowledge—whether there were twenty students or 200. With class electives and program majors, we students could even "choose our own adventure" in a way reminiscent of the beloved

*Choose Your Own Adventure* and *Twistaplot* gamebooks that emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, in most cases, the more my fellow students scored, the more I could score. This was because I could ask them questions and learn from their expertise in a way that was decidedly different from the traditional teacher-towering-over-tots method. For those who feel intimidated by their teachers, a fellow student can be a saving grace in an otherwise isolating classroom. Teachers who are frequently if not permanently pressed for time and overburdened with work would be wise to let their students “play teacher” to each other. This shatters the myth of the teacher being the only source of information and can inspire students to become future educators in the process. As a young student, if I happened to score fantastically, I loved helping other students game the system to improve their own scores, even if I was labeled a mere student rather than a teacher by the “authorities.” After leveling<sup>2</sup> through school scenarios K-16, I chose the teaching credential program as my next adventure, where I was granted the title I had been unofficially performing as for all those years: student-teacher.

As an adult in the social science credential teaching program, I was excited to contemplate how I might educate students and improve their lives by applying history in an interesting and effective way. Since that time, I have been pleased to find a growing body of literature that acknowledges that games are not limited to recreational use and can actually serve practical and productive purposes in teaching.<sup>3</sup> Trailblazing educators have advocated on behalf of this “kids’ stuff,” incorporating historical simulation and role-playing games to the delight of their lucky students.<sup>4</sup> A gamer myself, it seemed only natural to use game activities in the classroom to teach lessons to our ever-multi-tasking students. In the teaching credential program, many of my colleagues knew firsthand the collaborative, interactive nature of gaming

communities, and how these communities stood in stark contrast to classrooms where students are not allowed to talk. “Shut your mouth and get to work” might sound productive on a list of rules, but in practice, it makes for a desolate and, yes, boring educational wasteland. Waxing nostalgic and yearning for fun—and perhaps, too, because as Children of the Eighties, we were born and raised during an explosive era of Atari, Texas Instruments, Nintendo, Sega, and plenty of other gaming consoles and computers—we realized the draw of gaming and recognized how the best players used their hard-earned experience points to gain even more. Today, game master; Tomorrow, master teacher.

### **History and Internet: Endless Connections, Eternal Networks**

While other scholarship might focus on methods to implement historical simulation software, which unfortunately may demand hefty licensing fees, extended orientation sessions, and other implementation issues,<sup>5</sup> I would like to discuss here a selection of Internet-inspired games to demo<sup>6</sup> the pedagogical potential of cost-free classroom gaming. Facing restrictive funding, many teachers end up digging through their own pockets to pay for classroom projects, but these games do not require any additional game pieces or expensive computer equipment and software. Although these games do not require computers or online access, I cannot stress enough that teachers should still familiarize themselves with computer gaming and Internet cultural histories, since many students are already immersed in this digital world of gaming and global communication.<sup>7</sup> Incidentally, several endnotes contain background information as a quick introduction to terms that might raise questions from those new to the computer gaming scene. I do not mean to overstate the presence of students on the web, because the Internet is by no means accessed universally; there are countless reasons why a potential user would be denied access, whether technical, financial, social, political, and so forth.<sup>8</sup> With educational institutions

facing severe budget cuts, many teachers might discover themselves saying what too many students have unfortunately had to say all along: “I can’t afford a computer.” This is precisely why the games discussed here, while inspired by Internet communities, have been adapted for the computerless classroom. These games can be played by all students, regardless of grade levels, income levels, or technology levels. Ideally, of course, those who wanted computer and Internet access would have it upon demand. For those students fortunate enough to have access to such tools, we as teachers can show them how to use their technology diligently and delightfully.

Like millions of children across the world, I would find games to play after school, and found that the absence of a classroom did not equate to an absence of learning. My brother, who at the time had never taken a computer course in his life, “played around” with motley computer components and created for us a fully functional computer in the process. This homemade home computer in particular allowed me to communicate with fellow students not just from my own neighborhood, but also from locations and cultures around the world. Far away from the walls of my school classrooms and sometimes long into the hours of the night, I would dedicate myself to improving my language skills, historical knowledge, critical analysis, cultural experience, and interpersonal relationships. This was achieved through gaming. The following gaming activities are just a few examples of how to cook up teaching resources from the honey flowing through the endlessly creative Internet hive mind.

Many games, online and offline, use simulations or role-playing scenarios embedded in conflict-driven storylines.<sup>9</sup> Historians themselves may be partially to blame for this war-based mentality, since so many history texts express progression of time by jumping from one battle to the next. While *simulated* war can certainly be valuable in an educational gaming context, I

would like to explore an alternative in which students bond as friendly collaborators rather than battle as enemy combatants. Open-ended word games encourage competitiveness while simultaneously promoting cooperation with and appreciation for one's "opponents." They also let students determine the outcome of a game rather than have to wait for software to load pre-programmed worlds or issue verdicts on whether or not they chose "correctly." With open-ended games, even the non-winners are winners, because everyone in the classroom is entertained and educated in the process. One such game is *Acrophobia*, a multi-player game that was released online in the 1990s to great fanfare.<sup>10</sup> It can be adapted to any classroom, whether or not there are computers in the room. In fact, this Internet game echoes an earlier 1991 board game called *Acronymble*.<sup>11</sup> Though a formal dictionary may define acrophobia as "fear of heights," Internet gamers know the playful, pun-based alternate definition, "fear of acronyms."<sup>12</sup> Generally speaking, an acronym is a type of abbreviation created with the initial letter of each word in a given phrase, though etymologists might argue a stricter definition requiring the abbreviation to form a pronounceable term rather than a gibberish collection of letters. Some acronyms appear in official text as "alphabet soup" (such as USA for United States of America; URL for Uniform Resource Locator; HTML for HyperText Markup Language; or IRC for Internet Relay Chat), while others have been formally or informally recognized as new words unto themselves (such as laser for Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation; scuba for Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus; or, as some students might insist, lol—pronounced "loll," "lull," or even "ell-o-ell," depending on the culture—for Laugh[ing] Out Loud).<sup>13</sup> Acronyms are perfect examples of how terms containing just a handful of characters can represent a wealth of information. Of course, "hidden" meanings are not unique to acronyms.

### ***Game of the Name is the Name of the Game***

One of the most amazing things history teachers can do is help students to recognize that every single thing they see, do, and say is embedded with history and meaning. *Game of the Name* is an easy way to demonstrate this complex historical concept. Even something as seemingly inconsequential as a recreational game is rooted in a network of human cultures stretching through vast amounts of time and space. At the risk of being overly optimistic, the title of a game alone can spark infinite avenues of historical discussion. *Game of the Name* (or *The Name Game*) explores names and words beyond their superficial appearances. Names and words are abbreviations in their own right, serving to encapsulate potentially endless details and events into bite-sized nominalizations just a few characters long.<sup>14</sup> *Game of the Name* can be played aloud with students by posing simple questions designed to elicit multifaceted answers and historical thinking. Capitalizing on students' inherent interest in games, a teacher could ask the class increasingly provocative questions about popular game titles: Why might a world domination game be named *Risk*? Why does Parker Bros. buy the rights to so many other games besides *Monopoly*? What motivates citizens to rush out and answer the *Call of Duty*? Why do stores that prohibit shoplifting want their customers to participate in *Grand Theft Auto*? Teachers can promote student-led learning by asking students to brainstorm titles of their favorite games and ponder what these words mean about the games they represent and the worlds in which they are played. *Game of the Name* can be conducted as a fun and informal group discussion involving all of the class, allowing students to play around with titles of their own pastimes, to bond with each other over their shared interests, and furthermore to train themselves to apply historical thinking in their own lives and everyday experiences.

The game can also be adapted into a more formal historical exercise, complete with an official assignment. Digging into their history curriculum standards, teachers might ask why geographic locations such as Los Angeles, Washington, Colorado, Vermont, Leningrad, or Istanbul (not Constantinople), etc., were named in their respective manners. Teachers should also have students explore the names of their own homelands, again, to encourage everyday historical thinking and to highlight the fact that history is not something that is just contained in a book—history permeates through every aspect of their present-day lives, and everyone’s history is valuable. When students are permitted and encouraged to talk in class, they can choose their own educational adventures, leading the way to groundbreaking discoveries. *Game of the Name* can be played with any name, place, or concept, and therefore any teacher can use this to explore terminologies relevant to their course curriculum. A “scorecard” can take the format of a simple Before-During-After (BDA) chart, in which students brainstorm their prior knowledge in the Before Column, record their discoveries in the During Column, and finally synthesize their findings in the After Column (See Figure 1 for sample *Game of the Name* scorecard). Lauded as a terrific pedagogical tool, the simplicity of the BDA format is conducive for elementary students or English language learners, and advanced writers can use the chart to launch formal history papers or presentations on the deeper historical meanings of the names, places, or concepts they are studying. The winners of the game are those who learn to perceive situations and sound bites beyond a superficial level.

Even if they play nothing else at all, teachers of history, and indeed teachers of any subject, should encourage their students to play with *Game of the Name*. Etymology—the study of the history and meaning of words—should be introduced to every student, as it encourages them to explore how they and others create meaning. As a historian recognizing the importance

of language in conveying information, I recommend providing etymological discussion whenever possible, particularly when dealing with new or significant terminologies. Etymology can be utilized by any teacher in any subject to provide an instant history analysis activity as easy as *one, 2, III*. Regarding the name of the aforementioned *Acrophobia* game, English-speaking students unfamiliar with ancient Greco-Roman philosophies, languages, or medical discoveries may be surprised to know that the word “acrophobia” invokes these elements of the past—and many more. This or any other word can be investigated with a global/world history approach, allowing students to analyze current definitions, past definitions, eras/regions of creation, eras/regions of acceptance or widespread use, roots in other languages/cultures, reasons for creating the word in the first place, etc. This one-word instant history analysis activity is inherently adaptable. English language learners will benefit from the simplicity of focusing on one word, while advanced speakers can learn even more about the language they thought they had mastered. A pre-school student could describe a term with one or two words, while a post-graduate student could offer a rigorous thesis or dissertation of 100 or 200 pages. These etymological discussions can be as brief or extensive as time permits and they are valuable at any curricular or language level.

### ***Zombie Words: The Dead are Undead***

Thanks to etymology, the name of *Acrophobia* alone can spark historical discussion and analysis with our students before we even get a chance to play it! With *Zombie Words*, teachers can show how bits from bodies of “dead languages” are resurrected everyday in the words of our current languages. The *Zombie Words* game can warm up students by having them tap into their prior knowledge to brainstorm modern-use English words containing ancient roots like “acro” (height/top), “phob” (fear), and “onym” (name). Teachers could provide a list of common Greek



or Latin (or other) roots—such as “pro” (for), “anti” (against), “bi” (two), “tri” (three), “ultra” (beyond), etc.—if they want to up the potential zombie pool. The friendly competition could involve individual play or simply dividing the class into two teams and seeing which side “captures” the most zombies in  $x$  amount of time. Teachers with more than one set of students could arrange a grand tournament between classes and even ask if their colleagues want their classes to enter the tournament too (allowing their fellow teachers to get in on the gaming action). In the spirit of gaming, and to encourage participation, titles could also be awarded for players capturing the biggest zombie, smallest zombie, funniest sounding zombie, most obscure zombie, etc.

Students can hunt zombies in a “Free-For-All” or with “Target Practice.” If students are challenged to use only memory, this will stimulate the recall process and have the additional benefit of providing teachers with a way to gauge their students’ vocabulary levels. The adapted Target Practice version in which students can hunt in the dictionary will have the benefit of students increasing their vocabulary and seeing just how prevalent the past is in our present (see Figure 2 for sample *Zombie Words* lists). The gaming activity as opposed to teacher lecture will let students, once again, lead the way in their discovery of information in a simplified yet dynamic manner. Students critical of their own academic achievements and abilities will be encouraged when they start realizing linguistic patterns and discover that they literally speak other languages. The *Zombie Words* game succinctly shows them how names/nominalizations do not develop spontaneously in a vacuum, but instead gather their meaning via reconstructions of prior language. Students in the process of developing their self-identification may be delighted to see that countless others in history were likewise fixated with assigning meaning with names/nyms. Students may find that they know more about ancient languages than they

realized. Though an English-only student might not admit to knowing anything about Greek language, they will likely be familiar with synonyms and antonyms from reference books, acronyms such as KFC and MTV, pseudonyms of their favorite actors or musicians, or anonymous postings on the Internet. Whether they know it or not, students are reliving the words and ideas of people far removed from their present place and time. The thoughts of the dead become undead when they are reassembled and recreated by the living.

### ***Acrophobia: The Fear of Acronyms***

After introducing the term “acronym” via traditional lecture or *Zombie Words* activity, the main game begins to take shape. Acronyms, not heights, are at the core of *Acrophobia*. The original online version was released during the frontier years of mass-access to the web, played over Internet Relay Chat (IRC).<sup>15</sup> Players from around the Internet-accessible world could participate in game tournaments operated by a bot.<sup>16</sup> The text-only IRC version was further developed into an animated, mass-consumable game show format, released by Berkeley Systems to the Berzerk gaming community in 1997.<sup>17</sup> The game has since taken various forms (and names) in chatscreens, websites, official online gaming communities, and handheld device applications, with the objectives and procedures basically remaining the same. The object of the game is to create a clever or comical “backronym”—that is, players must reverse engineer an acronym relevant to a given category by coming up with words to match a randomized group of letters. For example, the bot would give players sixty seconds to come up with a sports-themed acronym involving the letters “ABC.” After the allotted time, the bot would compile a list of all valid entries (often called “Acros”) and each player could then vote for their favorite acronym phrase.<sup>18</sup>

Though the bot provided a mere handful of letters, the players' imaginations could unleash myriad Acro possibilities. Our sports-themed example is applicable for students at all levels of thinking. A student with lower levels of thinking may wish to offer basic identifications, such as "A Baseball Club" or "Archery, Bowling, Curling." The advantage of the open-ended answer, however, is that higher levels of thinking allow creative, clever, and complex Acros, each of which can provide teachers with insight into the mindset of their students. In gameplay, straightforward descriptive responses are often joined by playful jokes, puns, or "hidden messages," as the participants find innovative ways to manipulate complicated ideas into tiny statements. As opposed to the strictly descriptive Acro, student athletes might reply with "Annoying Basketball Coach" or "Abdominals Been Crunching," incorporating their own personal opinions and histories into the game. A student who identifies him/herself more as a fan than an athlete might offer yet another viewpoint: "Announcers Bring Commentary," demonstrating their knowledge of the fact that sports are not just for participants, but for observers as well. The more complicated (and usually more enjoyable) responses involve higher levels of thinking to decipher. For example, the Acros "All Bulls: Chicagoans" and "Alpine: Brr, Cold!" do not explicitly name a sport, but nevertheless reveal a deeper level of knowledge and a more sophisticated way of expressing multiple ideas with minimal words. A teacher reviewing a list of mere three-word phrases will find a wealth of student knowledge and talent within (see Figure 3 for sample response analysis).

This simple ABC/sports example already shows great potential as an anticipatory set that stimulates the brainstorming process, invites complex analysis, and encourages student interaction. In the official game of *Acrophobia*, however, this would constitute just one of ten qualifying rounds. In the qualifying rounds, the bot would serve players first with three letters,

then with four, five, six, and seven letters, repeating this cycle for a total of ten rounds. At the end of each round, players would vote on the resulting Acros. The highest scorer of each round earned the privilege of choosing the category for the following round. By the end of the qualifying rounds, the two top-scoring players proceeded to the face-off, a lightning round showdown in which the bot served the finalists three-, four-, five-, six-, and seven-letter combinations in rapid succession. The remaining players, still involved in the game, had the task of voting for the ultimate winner—the player with the highest face-off score would prevail.

### **Chatting, Voting, and For The Win (FTW)**

In the online version of *Acrophobia*, players had the opportunity to “chat” during gameplay in a chat screen alongside the main gaming area. Some players chose to socialize during the game (often connecting people from various locations and cultures from around the world), while others focused purely on creating Acros. Those who typed quickly enough could converse during the Acro round, while others waited until the voting period. When Acros were revealed for voting, the game room community became a congratulatory scene, with players complimenting their very competitors for their amazing skills.

The voting process can spark conversation just as well as a tried and true icebreaker, with players “ooh-ing and ahh-ing” over the variety of delightful Acros to choose from. Players excited about the clever Acros volunteered their opinions about which ones were their favorites. In this fashion, a spirit of camaraderie arises because the fellow players make the game more enjoyable, and participants learn and laugh from their Acros together. The chat aspect allows a player to receive “credit” or acknowledgement for their Acros even if they do not win that round. Chatting also reveals more about the players’ thought processes—voting might be confidential, but players would draw attention to their personal favorites by stating which Acro “GMV”

(“gets/got my vote”) “GMV” is an online equivalent to tipping one’s hat to a job well done, quite similar to the more prevalent “FTW,” the Internet-based acronym meaning “For the Win.” FTW (delightfully pronounced “for the win” rather than “eff-tee-dubble-yoo”) frequently pops up in gaming communities, but it is also easily located in message boards, blogs, and comments sections on media/information sharing sites like YouTube or Reddit. This shorthand method isolates the specific reason(s) why a viewer perceives a “win” in a given situation.

There is pedagogical value in FTW. As opposed to the negative FAIL<sup>19</sup> meme so prevalent on the Internet, FTW focuses on the positive and invites discussion on what is considered success. Each round of Acros will elicit a variety of comments, drawing students together with their common experiences. In our ABC/sports example, during the voting period, a player might compliment fellow players, “Loving the basketball references, but BULLS FTW! Go Chicago!” The Acro provides a point of unity for players—in this case, students are united as fans of the Chicago Bulls professional basketball team. Another student might share in the misery of their fellow player and lament, “Annoying coach FTW. Over in tennis, the coaches are just as bad. Trust me.” In this case, the student is relating their personal trials and tribulations to their classmate’s experiences, demonstrating empathy for another human being. Yet another student might appreciate the Acros that referenced lesser-known sports (as opposed to the eminently popular basketball) and state, “Curling FTW! I thought I was the only one who has heard of this! Stone on!” Students who have never heard of curling will learn something new, and those who already know will feel connected to one another, developing a sense of community. In another example, a student might conclude, “‘Brr’ is right! I went skiing last winter and nearly froze my fingers off! Hypothermia FTW!” Students may want to share their personal stories and they should be encouraged to talk with each other as fellow wanderers

through life. This communication reveals our shared human histories and invites students to teach to and learn from each other, independent from the history classroom. Cooperative learning FTW.

### **Developing Community, Language Skills, and Historical Thinking with Acros**

Beyond an anticipatory set, *Acrophobia* offers further pedagogical value for lesson plans as motivation, guided practice, and check for understanding. It can also be implemented as a form of independent practice or assessment, as well as a method for reviewing a topic at the conclusion of a unit in a dynamic collaborative study session. A resourceful educator can unlock teaching moments in just about every situation, and the process of voting itself invites yet another exploration of historical analysis. Primary and secondary school students, who are otherwise disqualified from the official democratic process due to their age, can participate in a true democracy and voice their opinions during their history classes via the game of *Acrophobia*.

Consider a hypothetical round in which students give similar responses for an Acro. In regular gameplay, there are instances when two or more players have verbatim or near verbatim answers. Interestingly, rather than adopting negative fallacies such as “I must be unoriginal,” reactions tend to be positive, invoking the jovial children’s game of “Jinx,” when different people “magically” say the same thing at the same time. When students give similar responses, teachers should emphasize that, although we are all individuals, we live in a society together and we should rejoice in our shared human experiences.

Similar responses also offer fantastic opportunities to discuss the importance of choosing language carefully when expressing ideas. Consider the sample Acros provided in Figure 4 in response to a three-letter, history-themed acronym. These are all variations of an excellent Acro that correctly states a historical fact, but their individual nuances may influence their success in

receiving votes. In this example, we see how minor changes in punctuation or word choice alter style, readability, and precision.

Each of these extremely similar Acros identifies Fidel Castro's leadership in the Republic of Cuba. Acro 1 uses an apostrophe to sneakily defy the three-word limit, and such "hacking"<sup>20</sup> is frequently rewarded by voters who appreciate those who can tweak a situation despite the governing rules. However, the resulting phrase, equivalent to "Castro is Cuban politician," uses awkward wording. Acro 2 uses yet another apostrophe to serve a possessive purpose. The resulting phrase, equivalent to "Castro is Cuba's politician," is grammatically sound and therefore might receive votes over Acro 1. Unlike the previous entries, Acro 3 does not use contractions and instead introduces "Castro, Cuba's Politician." This form is not only grammatically sound, it also presents Castro more dramatically, shifting the tone from the previous Acros. One could argue that Acro 3 is more accurate in that it stresses Castro as the preeminent figure of Cuban politics, and is thus more deserving of votes. Acro 4 uses the same punctuation as Acro 3, but employs a simple word substitution, replacing "politician" with "president." This minor change results in a major improvement in specificity, and voters might find Acro 4 more worthy of their votes. By the time we get to Acro 5, which simply replaces the comma with a more formal colon, we see the fluidity of punctuation, and how personal aesthetic preferences may influence our votes. If I were to choose between "Castro, Cuba's President" and "Castro: Cuba's President," it might very well hinge upon whether I felt like looking at "," or ":" at that particular moment. Finally, Acro 6 uses similar wording to Acro 5, but some voters might enjoy the use of Spanish—Castro's own language—to express yet even more information about the Cuban leader. On the other hand, in a predominantly English-speaking classroom, other voters might feel the foreign language is too divergent from the rules.

So which Acro should the students vote for? Unless there is a factual error or glaring historical inconsistency, all Acros are worthy of votes if they satisfy the letter and category requirements. In *Acrophobia*, students have the power to choose whatever they wish—a privilege seldom offered to students of any age group. In keeping with student-driven learning, the students themselves determine who wins each individual round and each overall game. It is a democratic process that allows all students to have an equal vote. Like any good citizens, however, they should be expected to base their votes on a series of criteria. Again, the students themselves can decide which criteria to reward (accuracy, specificity, analytical thinking, obscurity, comedy, hacking, etc.), provided they are able to explain their reasoning. Teachers can consult students for their opinion on what types of words and language are allowed, giving players a sense of responsibility for the rules. Students may in fact want to permit slang or foreign languages because it gives them more options as well as an opportunity to show off their extra vocabulary.

### **Acrobatics: Adapting *Acrophobia* to any Learning Situation**

The original sports example would be a great practice round for Acro orientation. The category is not exclusive of any culture, and the three-word limit invites simple phrasing. Teachers can modify their classroom game as necessary to cater to students' specific curricular and pedagogical needs. I encourage teachers, too, to “play around” with their category choices, letter counts, and time limits to find optimal practices for their specific set of students.

There is no one “best” way to play *Acrophobia*, since each classroom—and each student—is different. A very general or generic category will give students more freedom in their Acro themes, but the vagueness may add the challenge of leaving overwhelming options to choose from. A very specific category will give students more focus, but may add the challenge



of having fewer options to choose from. Incorporating both general and specific categories throughout the course of the game promotes a global understanding of history and encourages students to think about history from macro to micro levels. Likewise, letter count adds another variable of play that furthermore challenges students' language skills. A three-letter round means there are less words to worry about, but also adds the challenge of limiting the responses to phrases or simple sentences. A seven-letter round means greater opportunity for word play and complex sentences, but also adds the challenge of demanding more words to juggle. Incorporating a range of letter counts promotes creative expression and teaches students to be concise, adept, and even playful with their language. Mixing up the categories and letter count will make for a more diverse set of Acros (see Appendix for additional samples). Each type of challenge offers students opportunities to come up with novel ways to express their thoughts and exploit the rules of the game to their own advantage. The Acros are essentially brainteaser puzzles, stimulating memory, logic, and problem-solving skills and offering many other personal and pedagogical benefits.

As mentioned, a computer is not necessary to play *Acrophobia*, and it can be recreated in any classroom. Though the online, bot-operated version would automatically offer category selections, choose letters, time the game, collect entries, disqualify invalid entries, and keep score, none of these tasks are beyond a teacher's capabilities. In fact, a non-computer version is superior for the classroom because the teacher can choose categories in concert with their scheduled curriculum and run the game at the students' pace. A teacher could use pieces of paper to draw letters of the alphabet out of a hat for randomization, or could even pre-plan the acronyms if they wish to avoid potential stumper letters like X or Z. Teachers can adjust the time limit as they see fit, using a clock, a stopwatch, or the always affordable "One-Mississippi,

Two-Mississippi” time gauge. The Acro could even be given as an overnight assignment, permitting students to reflect more deeply on their responses and consult textbooks and dictionaries (and the Internet) if they wish. Students can write their answers on slips of paper, run up to the board to write the answers, raise their hands to answer verbally, text their answers, or even hold on to all their responses for a cumulative voting structure. Once all Acros are collected/revealed, the teacher can facilitate student chat during the voting period in order to maximize the analytical deconstruction of Acros. Talking in class, unsuspectingly acting as student-teachers, students can explain their own Acros and decipher the Acros of other students. The educational value of the Acros does not disappear once the round is over. A simple writing assignment might involve students offering a few sentences or a paragraph on the meaning and significance of each of the class Acros. More advanced students can ruminate further and present more formal interpretations of the historical meanings within. Depending on time limitations, the teacher may wish to do just one round, a few rounds, or even a marathon review session during a special game day. Each teacher’s particular style of classroom management and available teaching tools will guide them to what adaptations work best for their students.

Methods of scoring points are also ripe for adaptation. In addition to the human votes, the *Acrophobia* bot would award seven bonus points to the player with the highest vote count in a round. Bonus points can provide extra incentive as well as help lagging scorers make heroic comebacks. In addition to the highest-vote bonus, teachers might echo the official game’s practice of awarding two extra points for the first submission. In online play, the speed bonus was initially “hacked” by certain players who would enter, for example, “Aa bb cc” in an attempt to score two easy points (or perhaps simply to troll other players for the lulz<sup>21</sup>). The bot was then modified to award the speed bonus to the earliest entry that receives a human endorsement as a

valid entry (i.e., a vote). Because players are not allowed to vote for their own entries, such nonsensical Acros are prevented from stealing a game due to the democratic process of human voting. Because teachers are of course much smarter than a bot, they can also make rulings on invalid entries, making sure to always explain to students the reasoning behind their actions.

Other adaptations might involve having students use one set of letters for multiple categories, increasing the challenge level as students search their brains for alliterative historical terms and synonyms. Students may work individually or in teams, and teachers may even wish to provide a list of historical terms if they are worried that students will be intimidated by the impromptu nature of the game or suffer from bouts of performance anxiety. Teachers may also offer an activity on the use of contrived acronyms—abbreviations that are reverse engineered for a specific political purpose. Contrived acronyms may elicit emotional responses from an audience, such as MADD for Mothers Against Drunk Driving or USA PATRIOT Act for Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001. Teachers could also segue into discussions about the use of hybrid acronyms in our society, such as radar for Radio Detection and Ranging; canola for Canadian Oil—Low Acid; and Nabisco for National Biscuit Company. Acronyms, visible and hidden, have a significant place in our language, whether in historical texts, scientific terminologies, governmental organizations, corporate advertising, or even popular culture and Internet culture.

Further avenues of exploration are limitless, especially when students are invited to talk in class and bring their opinions into classroom learning. These discussions will encourage students to be more thoughtful about the words they use and help them to recognize how language is developed, reinterpreted, and modified constantly. This is an important lesson for

any student of the historical process. What was slang yesterday might become acceptable today, only to become outdated tomorrow. Though we frequently speak of history in terms of the past, the “zombies” of yesteryear exist among us in practically every aspect of our present-day lives. If I may extend the zombie metaphor, these undead elements of history use the brains of the living to fuel their reanimation. It is the students themselves who bring history alive, and we can foster their interest in this much-maligned discipline with games. I ask my fellow students and teachers of history not to be afraid, but instead to join me in the delightful world of learning by gaming.

## Figures

<b>The Name is: COLORADO Well, whaddya know?</b>		
<b>Before</b>	<b>During</b>	<b>After</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· U.S. state</li> <li>· West/Southwest</li> <li>· mountains</li> <li>· mesas</li> <li>· shaped like this chart! (rectangular border)</li> <li>· national parks</li> <li>· open wilderness</li> <li>· skiing</li> <li>· Denver Broncos football team</li> <li>· Colorado Rockies baseball team</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Ancient populations— Indigenous tribes first to inhabit region</li> <li>· Rocky Mountains and Colorado Plateau geography (snow, rain, runoff, river, sediments, red/rust colored dirt and silt)</li> <li>· Spanish explorers and settlers at “Rio Colorado”</li> <li>· Green River and Grand River (a.k.a. Colorado River or Red River)</li> <li>· “colorado” is Spanish for “red”</li> <li>· 38<sup>th</sup> state of the USA (1861) named Colorado</li> </ul>	<p>The Southwestern state of Colorado joined the United States in 1861 and the land was named for its geographic features. The Colorado River, in contrast to the name of the nearby intersecting Green River, appears reddish and rusty-colored due to silt from the red mountains of the Colorado Plateau. The region was first inhabited by indigenous tribes, but Spanish settlers renamed the river <i>Rio Colorado</i> (or Colorado River). “<i>Colorado</i>” means “red” in Spanish.</p>

Figure 1: *Game of the Name* Scorecard (BDA Chart)

<b>The Zombie bits are: ACRO   PHOBIA   NYM Start hunting!</b>	
<b>Free-For-All (brainstormed list)</b>	<b>Target Practice (researched list)</b>
acronym acrophobia acropolis arachnophobia hydrophobia xenophobia Islamophobia synonym antonym pseudonym	acrocephaly acrogen acrolect acrolith acron acropathy acrophony acrospore acrostic acroterium

Figure 2: *Zombie Words* Scorecard

<b>3-LETTER ROUND</b> <b>The category is: SPORTS</b> <b>The letters are: ABC</b>	
Sample Across	Sample Student Achievements
A Basketball Club	Identifies sport (basketball) Identifies team system (club) Utilizes straightforward phrasing
Archery, Bowling, Curling	Identifies sports (archery, bowling, curling) Utilizes straightforward phrasing Utilizes punctuation
Annoying Basketball Coach	Identifies sport (basketball) Identifies team/staff members (coach) Identifies human behavior (annoying) Assesses human behavior (annoying) Utilizes straightforward phrasing
Abdominals Been Crunching	Identifies sport (gym training, inferred) Identifies anatomy (abdominals) Identifies exercise technique (crunch) Utilizes straightforward phrasing
Announcers bring commentary.	Identifies sport (all sports, inferred) Identifies team/staff members (announcer) Identifies human behavior (commentary) Identifies human behavior (media, inferred) Identifies non-players (audience, inferred) Utilizes punctuation/sentence structure
All Bulls: Chicagoans	Identifies sport (basketball, inferred) Identifies team system (Bulls) Identifies team/staff members (Bulls) Identifies geography (Chicago) Identifies human identity (Chicagoans) Argues logic (Bulls, therefore, Chicagoans) Utilizes punctuation/sentence structure
Alpine: Brr, Cold!	Identifies sport (skiing, inferred) Identifies geography (Alpine) Identifies climate (cold) Identifies human behavior (brr, cold!) Argues logic (Alpine, therefore, cold) Utilizes punctuation/sentence structure Utilizes onomatopoeia (brr)

Figure 3: *Acrophobia* Demo and Student Achievement Analysis

<b>3-LETTER ROUND</b> <b>The category is: LATIN AMERICAN HISTORY</b> <b>The letters are: CCP</b>
1. Castro's Cuban Politician
2. Castro's Cuba's Politician
3. Castro, Cuba's Politician
4. Castro, Cuba's President
5. Castro: Cuba's President
6. Castro: Cubano, Presidente

Figure 4: Acros and Nuances in Language

## Appendix

### Historical *Acrophobia* Demos

<b>4-LETTER ROUND</b> <b>The category is: HISTORY OF EDUCATION</b> <b>The letters are: BTWL</b>
Bureaucratic tape was legislated.
Blending Theory With Life
Blackboard: The Whiteboard's liaison.
Boring tests will lobotomize.
Books: Teaching with letters
Before, teens weren't literate.

<b>5-LETTER ROUND</b> <b>The category is: CIVIL RIGHTS HISTORY</b> <b>The letters are: KLMTG</b>
Klan: lynch mob terrorizes gruesomely
King, Luther, Martin: Thoughtful Genius
Kind laws make territory great.
King led marches to glory.
Kennedy legalized many terrific gains.
Kennedy, Lincoln: Milestones to Greatness

<b>6-LETTER ROUND</b> <b>The category is: WORLD WAR II HISTORY</b> <b>The letters are: YMLER</b>
Young men prepare long expeditions ruefully.
You might panic: Launches enter Russia
Years may pass, long era remains.
Yalta means "Please, let's end rage."
Yikes! My professor lacks European retrospects.
You must prevent lawlessness—exile rogues!

<b>7-LETTER ROUND</b> <b>The category is: MIDDLE EASTERN HISTORY</b> <b>The letters are: TIMSUEB</b>
The Iranians might say U.S. encroached broadly.
Tigris: In Mesopotamia, Sumerians understood Euphrates' brother
Talking Islam: Muslims, Sharia, Ummah, Eid, Bedoins
Tunisia is Maghreb. Still, upper Egypt belongs.
Turmoiled Iraq might seem unstable; exploding bombs!
There is money sitting underneath Emirate businesses.



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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This successful series of gamebooks created an interactive approach to reading by offering audiences a choice on where a story would go next. A non-digital form of hypertext, these books were not designed to be read from cover to cover in linear numerical order. Instead, these stories would jump backward and forward through the text, taking readers from one chunk of story to the next. At the end of each section, readers had the power to adjust the plot as they wished by selecting an option to pursue. After setting up a cliffhanger, an author would ask readers how they wanted to respond to the adventure and advise them to turn to page *x* or page *y* (or page *z*) to make their choice. Demian Katz has assembled an exhaustive list of gamebooks from Bantam's *Choose Your Own Adventure* and Scholastic's *Twistaplot* series at Gamebooks.org (see <[http://www.gamebooks.org/show\\_series.php?name=Choose+Your+Own+Adventure](http://www.gamebooks.org/show_series.php?name=Choose+Your+Own+Adventure)> and <[http://www.gamebooks.org/show\\_series.php?name=Twistaplot](http://www.gamebooks.org/show_series.php?name=Twistaplot)>).

<sup>2</sup> In computer and gaming cultures, “leveling” refers to a player completing one or more levels in a game, improving their score or rank in the process. Leveling can indicate a linear progression from Level *x* to *y* to *z*; it may also indicate development of skill levels in a more abstract sense. In the latter case, a player might “level up” from Beginner to Intermediate to Expert to Deity, though individual games contour their ranking titles to embellish the theme or setting of the game's storyline.

<sup>3</sup> Reasonably skeptical, some may balk at educational gaming due to scare campaigns about “edutainment,” a pejorative term that wrongly implies that education presented in an entertaining manner is of no value. Scholars have been chipping away at this stereotype throughout the years and have effectively opened up a new frontier in pedagogy. See Ntiedo Etuk, “Educational Gaming—From Edutainment to Bona Fide 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Teaching Tool,” *MultiMedia and Internet@Schools* 15, no. 6 (November/December 2008), free access to article at <<http://www.internetatschools.com/Articles/ReadArticle.aspx?ArticleID=59693>>.

<sup>4</sup> In addition to delivering content and fostering critical thinking skills, games promote a number of social and emotional benefits for students due to the unique form of collaborative learning. See Robyn Hromek and Sue Roffey, “Promoting Social and Emotional Learning with Games: ‘It’s Fun and We Learn Things,’” *Simulation and Gaming* 40, no. 5 (October 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Although teachers may have interest in using computer gaming in their classrooms, a number of factors can dissuade them or prevent this from happening. Extensive quantitative and qualitative survey analysis on this matter includes Young Kyun Baek “What Hinders Teachers in Using Computer and Video Games in the Classroom? Exploring Factors Inhibiting the Uptake of Computer and Video Games,” *CyberPsychology and Behavior* 11, no. 6 (2008) and Jonathan Moizer, Jonathan Lean, Michael Towler, and Caroline Abbey, “Simulations and Games: Overcoming the Barriers to Their Use in Higher Education,” *Active Learning in Higher Education* 10, no. 3 (November 2009).

<sup>6</sup> In computer and gaming cultures, a game “demo” (derived from “demonstration”) refers to a pre-programmed preview of a game. A demo usually shows brief clips of the game during various levels of play, but some demos are actually playable rather than for viewing only. Demos show potential players what sorts of challenges are presented in the game so they can decide if they want to play too. As visitors to gaming arcades know, demos can offer viewers a taste of the visuals, music, sound effects, and excitement of a game without requiring them to relinquish any coins.

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<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth S. Simpson discusses the unique cultural characteristics of the gaming generation and their impact on the future of teaching in “Evolution in the Classroom: What Teachers Need to Know about the Video Game Generation,” *TechTrends: Linking Research and Practice to Improve Learning* 49, no. 5 (September/October 2005).

<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that even if a person has the necessary computer equipment, telecommunications infrastructure, and technological know how, they still might be restricted from accessing the Internet. Many countries exercise unilateral authority in determining what materials are available to the citizenry, censoring individual websites for social or political reasons. Additionally, many government officials claim the right to initiate a “kill switch” or enact a total Internet blackout, as was seen during the 2011 wave of revolutionary movements, when the entire citizenry of Egypt, consisting of approximately 80 million people, was effectively eliminated from the Internet in a matter of minutes on January 27, 2011. The Renesys blog documented this event (see James Cowie, “Egypt Leaves the Internet,” 27 January 2011, <<http://www.renesys.com/blog/2011/01/egypt-leaves-the-internet.shtml>>) and offered a remarkable animation of this process, “Egypt Goes Dark—A Time-Lapse View of Prefix Withdrawal,” available on YouTube at <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b\\_jRcxuemtg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_jRcxuemtg)>.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew McMichael offers a delightful and candid analysis of his success (and struggles) implementing historical simulation and role-play, particularly with the use of *Civilization III*, in “PC Games and the Teaching of History,” *The History Teacher* 40, no 2 (February 2007). Roberta Devlin Scherer and Nancy B. Sardone include an annotated bibliography of thirteen digital games in “Digital Simulation Games for Social Studies Classrooms,” *The Clearing House* 83, no. 4 (May 2010), free access to article at <<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/section?content=a925461212&fulltext=713240928>>. A general discussion on the implementation of simulation games is offered by M. Mawdesley, G. Long, S. Al-Jibouri, and D. Scott, “The Enhancement of Simulation Based Learning Exercises through Formalised Reflection, Focus Groups and Group Presentation,” *Computers and Education* 56, no. 1 (January 2011), free access to article at <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2010.05.005>>.

<sup>10</sup> Michelle A. Hoyle, “Just the FAQs: Acrophobia (TM),” <<http://www.eingang.org/Games/acrosfaq.html>>.

<sup>11</sup> AcronymWits, “The Official Acronymble www Site,” <<http://www.acronymble.com>>.

<sup>12</sup> Computer users often purposely defy rules of language such as traditional definitions, grammar, capitalization, and spacing, creating new words to express nuanced ideas or to save time, typing strokes, and file storage space. This word play can also provide entertainment and function as a shibboleth or secret code in computer/gaming sub-cultures. Language choices can reveal cultural information about the person doing the speaking or typing. A person might refer to the Internet as the Net, the World Wide Web, the Web, online, or even the baffling “series of tubes” or poetic Nineties imagery of the Information Superhighway. Abbreviations in particular are a fruitful source of new words, such as the recent addition to many dictionaries, “blog” (derived from “web log”). Abbreviations do not always follow the standard format. For example, in an online community, “abbreviation” might be modified to “breeve” rather than “abbrev.” Computer scientists are known to refer to a computer as “puter” rather than “comp.” Creative construction of new words from abbreviations is not unique to computer users. Non-computer users with a refrigerator or Frigidaire in their kitchen likely have referred to it as a “fridge” rather than “refrig.” or “Frigid.”

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<sup>13</sup> In computer and gaming cultures, “lol” or “LOL” is an important term in a world where humans interact with each other using written language on a screen rather than verbal and non-verbal language in face-to-face encounters. An electronic screen does not change expressions or emit noises, despite the human emotion that may be occurring on the other end of communication. While laughter may be expressed instantly and automatically in person, a computer user would need to type such a reaction manually. LOL is an effortless way to express an emotion the instant it is experienced, something that cannot be achieved by typing complete sentences such as “I am laughing right now.” or “You just made me laugh.” Because L and O are right next to each other on the standard QWERTY keyboard, the three-characters of “lol” can be released with a wriggle of a finger, much easier than even the mere four characters of the onomatopoeic “haha.” Use of lol has become so widespread, it has developed its own linguistic branch, sprouting terms such as lol’d, lolled, and lulled (meaning “laughed”); lolling and lulling (“laughing”); and lols and lulz (“laughs”). It remarkably even finds its way into offline spoken communication, since many computer users have conditioned themselves to think “lol” whenever they find something comical.

<sup>14</sup> Enchantingly, a word is not always just a word. Luciana C. de Oliveira elucidates the nominalization process of “packaging” meaning into nouns and nominal groups, and offers exercises for teaching this concept to students in “Nouns in History: Packaging Information, Expanding Explanations, and Structuring Reasoning,” *The History Teacher* 43, no. 2 (February 2010).

<sup>15</sup> As one of the game’s programmers, Michelle Hoyle offers plenty more information about the game’s background, as well as a demo of *Acrophobia* in its IRC format at the aforementioned “Just the FAQs: Acrophobia(TM)” site.

<sup>16</sup> In computer and gaming cultures, a “bot” (derived from “robot”) refers to a chunk of code or a computer program that in many ways operates like a [super]human using a computer. A bot does not have the physical body or extremities of a robot, but nevertheless automatically handles commands, functions, or other assigned tasks so that humans do not have to do so manually. A game bot might serve multiple positions as the announcer, host, rule-enforcer, scorekeeper, timekeeper, etc. Some bots can also play games themselves, such as when someone wants to enter a multi-player game, but does not have another human being to play with. Other types of bots are used to monitor chats, messages, or discussion boards as an automatic, all-seeing, all-powerful behavior police. Yet even more bots might navigate the Internet to collect data about the web and its users much more efficiently and thoroughly than a human could. Like the “apps” (application software) that can be downloaded to mobile phones and handheld devices, bots can be programmed for infinite uses.

<sup>17</sup> Mike Tanner, “Acro-Gameshow Launches on the Internet,” *Wired*, 29 September 1997, <<http://www.wired.com/culture/lifestyle/news/1997/09/72637>>.

<sup>18</sup> The *Acrophobia* game show version by Berkeley Systems disappeared from the Internet despite its legions of fans (myself included). Players were left scrambling to find replacement versions, with the most similar arriving in the form of *Acrobabble*. To the dismay of fans, this version was also inexplicably discontinued and, like *Acrophobia*, it now only exists as a memory. Luckily, video of gameplay still lingers online. Grainy footage of the 1998 version of *Acrophobia* is hosted on YouTube (at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v8UVyXoWUfo>>) and is downloadable in various file formats at the Internet Archive (at <[http://www.archive.org/details/berkeley\\_systems\\_acrophobia\\_1998](http://www.archive.org/details/berkeley_systems_acrophobia_1998)>). More impressively, user

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El\_Sledgo's sleek, dynamic video demo of *Acrobabble*—which includes notes on Acro-game history as well as special effects that highlight Acro entry, voting, scoring, and even the game room's community and chat area—is also available on YouTube (at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uZh5IRVnTaY>).

<sup>19</sup> FAIL Blog hosts perhaps the largest online exhibition, but millions of other locations on the Internet demonstrate this cultural meme in which images (such as photographs or screenshots), videos, or other displays of failure, disaster, incapability, or idiocy are starkly superimposed with “FAIL.” or, worse yet, “EPIC FAIL.”

<sup>20</sup> In computer and gaming cultures, as well as in offline life, “hacking” refers to using one's knowledge and skills to exceed the limitations imposed by rules or restrictions in a given situation. Amateur computer programmers may use hacking in earnest to add functionality to an existing program that does not suit their particular needs or to modify use of the program for a different function altogether. Hackers are frequently confused with computer “crackers,” who attempt to “crack” (break [into]) or circumvent security software to gain access to restricted accounts or systems. Hacks and hacking should not be equated with criminal activity, because hackers specifically capitalize on using existing rules to amplify their actions, transforming a flaw or weakness of a system into a source of strength.

<sup>21</sup> Internet “trolls” are known for their dedication to causing mischief, confusion, or disorder in online communities. Some may have specific nefarious intentions, while others feel allegiance to the philosophy of “doing it for the lulz” (laughs). In the latter case, the sake of laughter outweighs any other considerations, including whatever human costs may be incurred. Though our students are certainly not trolls, many teachers have encountered similar classroom management issues when a student insists on disruptive behavior or inappropriately timed jokes. Once identified, Internet trolls are often banned from their respective target communities by democratic vote or unilateral authority, unless the site has no moderators or administrators. Teachers thankfully do not need to rely on exile, and can reach out to disruptive students on a personal level so they can instead express themselves in more constructive manners.