

# Stimulation, Not Simulation: An Alternate Approach to History Teaching Games<sup>1</sup>

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GAMES ARE MUCH IN VOGUE as a pedagogical tool in history classes today.<sup>2</sup> But what exactly do they accomplish? Obviously, any technique that increases students' interest and makes learning more enjoyable deserves consideration. The problem is that many of the games used to teach history are fundamentally ahistorical in nature. True, one can use rote-memory games to get students to learn names, dates, and basic facts, and have them compete in something analogous to a spelling bee.<sup>3</sup> However, this does not really teach historical thinking, help students to see the organic and interconnected nature of historical phenomena, or encourage analysis of historical processes and problems.<sup>4</sup> Beyond that, after a couple of rounds, students are likely to find it boring, and that is the kiss of didactic death.

There are a variety of more creative—and presumably more engaging—approaches to history gaming that involve students participating in historical simulations, but many of these are problematic as well.<sup>5</sup> History is, by definition, an empirically based discipline, one that requires knowing—that is, one must know facts, circumstances, sequence of events, cause and effect, and all sorts of particular details. Even where the imagination may be useful in connecting facts into a larger narrative, the goal is still to discern the reality of the past.<sup>6</sup> Suppose, however, that an instructor asks a student to imagine what it was like to be a slave or a soldier. That does not lead to knowing—for no one who has not been a

slave or a soldier can genuinely “imagine” that experience in a way that produces real knowledge. To know—or at least approach knowing—what it was like, a student must read accounts that slaves or soldiers have written about their lives and empathize with their experience.

Consider the case in which an instructor gives students an actual historical scenario, assigns them roles as real historical figures, but then allows them to play it out in whatever way it may develop. This is what happens, for example, with war games. However, if a battle proceeds differently in a role-playing situation than it did in actuality—which is almost inevitable—students are not learning history. They may acquire some understanding of strategy and tactics, but if, say, Robert E. Lee wins the game version of the Battle of the Gettysburg, that teaches students nothing about the real general, the real battle, or the real Civil War.

What I offer here is a selection of games that I have developed in my own classes that utilize admittedly ahistorical gimmicks to focus students’ attention on real people and events and get them to argue about various interpretations based on real evidence. The nature of the gimmicks themselves is so ridiculous that there is little chance of students mixing up the games with historical reality. This is important, for it is easy for students, educators, and the creators of national and state standards and assessments to confuse the two—they might emphasize the “processes” that games seem to teach, measure student success in learning those processes, and conclude that if they are successful at the game, they have “learned history.” In fact, one can learn to play simulation games quite well without acquiring much knowledge at all of real history.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, to play the games I offer here, students must know the material. Another advantage is that my games cost absolutely nothing and do not “belong” to me in any proprietary sense.

I use various versions of my games for book discussions. Here is why. One of the most successful ways of engaging students with historical scholarship is through in-class discussions of common readings. This can be particularly effective if the subject matter is controversial—as most history is—and if the instructor can entice students into a civil but vigorous debate. The challenge is to get the class to participate in the first place. Students may be shy, insecure about their knowledge, or just “too cool” to get involved. This can force the instructor into practicing pedagogical dentistry—that is, metaphorically “pulling teeth,” and that very quickly becomes painful for the students and even more so for the “dentist.” What my games do is to introduce an element of competition, with a twist of popular culture and a dash of silliness. The examples I discuss below are not meant to be prescriptive; rather, they merely show how giving discussions a lighthearted competitive edge can lead to real learning.

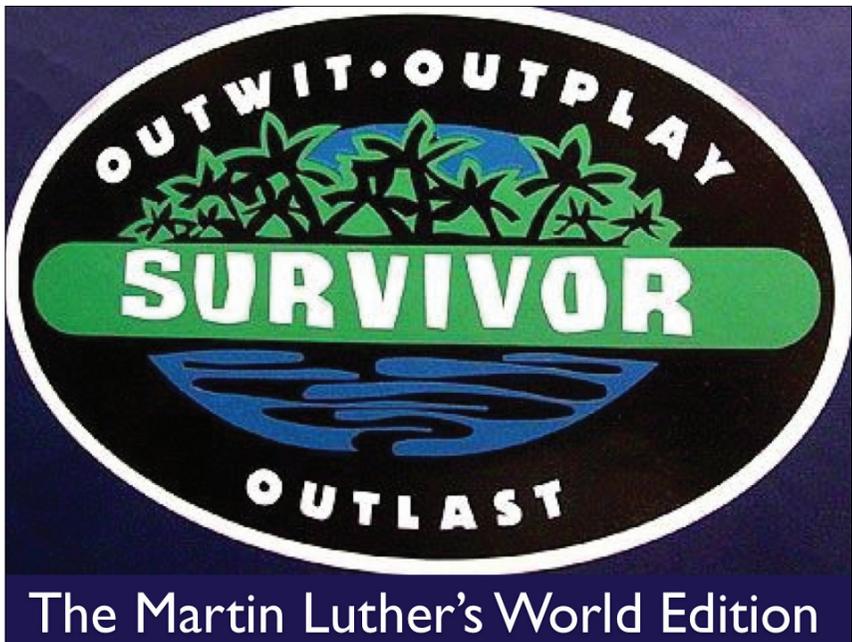
Typically, my upper-level classes are divided into three more-or-less chronological units, each with an exam. Each unit references a textbook, a book of readings and/or documents, and a supplemental book. For example, in the Reformation Europe class, students might read one book on Martin Luther for the unit on 1517-1558, one on the witch craze for the unit on 1558-1610, and one on the religious wars for the unit on 1610-1648 (a reminder—this is just an example). For each of the supplemental books, students must write an analytical book review of three typed, double-spaced pages, of which half is a concise summary of the book's content and the other half critical analysis of the argument, sources, and so on.

The length is critical. Thus, I tell my students that two-and-a-half pages is too short, three-and-a-half too long. For one thing, three pages is about what a professional historian is allowed in a typical refereed journal. But more important is that this restricts every student to about the same number of words and forces each to identify what is most essential about the work in question and to say as much as possible in as few words as possible. On the day that the book reviews are due—always a week before the unit exam—an in-class discussion takes place. Again, the goal is to get students to determine what is most worth remembering about the book, though in this case, they can be much more verbose. Here are some examples of how it works.

### ***Survivor: The Martin Luther's World Edition***

A couple of years ago, I had my senior-level university class on Reformation Europe read Martin Marty's biography of the German reformer Martin Luther,<sup>8</sup> write a review, and come to class prepared for discussion. At the time, the CBS reality television show *Survivor* was at the peak of its popularity. Although I did not watch the show regularly, I knew that many of my students did. So I announced that we were going to play a game based on that show. I then advised the students that the (putative) goal of the game was to identify the ten most important individuals in the book. Their goal, of course, was a highly subjective matter, but my real goal was to get students to think, talk, and argue about who belonged in the "top ten," i.e., to interpret based on the evidence in their readings which individuals had the greatest significance for Luther's life and career. The procedure was for students to nominate as many candidates as they wished and then go through the list and "vote off the island" all but the ten most worthy.

I told the students—as I always do with these games—that there are two fundamental rules: 1) I make all the rules, and 2) I can change them anytime I like. Not only did this get a laugh, it reinforced the arbitrariness of the



**Figure 1:** *Survivor: The Martin Luther's World Edition* title card.

game, which is useful for reasons that will become clearer as we go along. I began the game by encouraging students to nominate individuals and modeled how it should be done by nominating Luther myself and writing his name on the whiteboard. This got another laugh, further relaxing the students, and pretty soon, they were nominating additional candidates faster than I could write them. I try to make it a rule that a student who nominates a particular candidate must defend his or her inclusion in the list, but that is one of those rules that I will change if it seems like a good idea.

In short order, the entire board was full of names—Luther, his father Hans, his mother Margaret, his wife Katherine von Bora, his teacher Johann von Staupitz, his lieutenant Philip Melancthon, his hero-turned-adversary Desiderius Erasmus, his fellow reformers Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin, his polemical adversary Thomas More, radical reformers like Andreas Karlstadt and Thomas Müntzer, Holy Roman Emperors Maximilian I and Charles V, Frederick the Wise of Electoral Saxony, George of Ducal Saxony, Popes Leo X and Clement VII, Cardinal Thomas Cajetan, Archbishop Albert of Mainz, Dominican indulgence peddler Johann Tetzel, Francis I of France, Henry VIII of England, and so on. We all agreed that Luther should stay on the “island.” But from that point on, it became highly contentious.

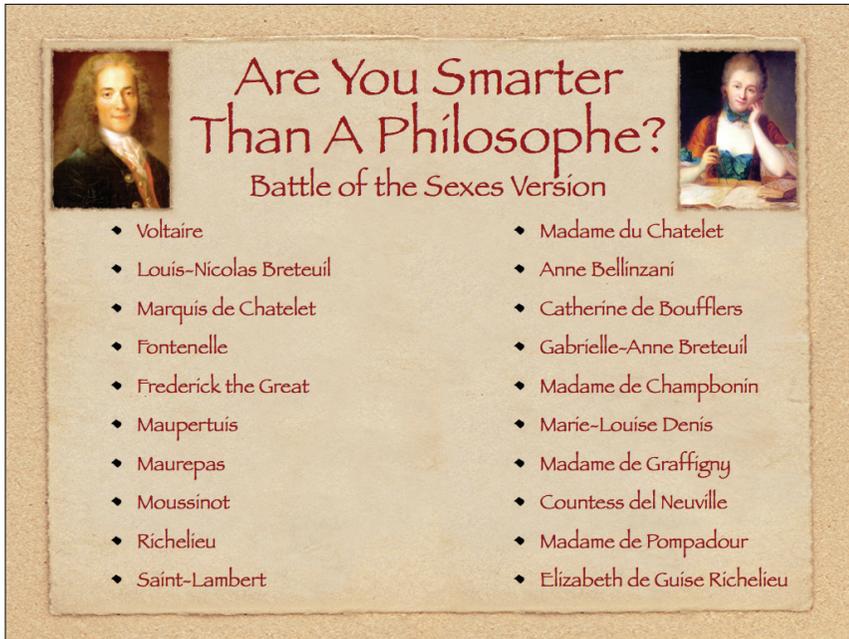


**Figure 2:** *Fourteen’s Fifteen* title card.

As we got to each new name, some students enthusiastically defended the individual’s inclusion, while others argued just as vigorously against it. The more competitive the game became, the more students called upon their newly acquired knowledge for more information to support their arguments. Many surprised themselves (and me) with how much they knew about Luther and his contemporaries. Moreover, they argued some pretty fine distinctions, for example, who was really to blame for the sale of indulgences that inspired Luther’s famous *95 Theses* in 1517—Pope Leo X, who proclaimed the indulgence, or Johann Tetzel, who sold them in northern Germany. In almost every case, we quite literally had to vote to see who “stayed on the island” and who did not. One of the best moments came when the students had identified nine of the ten “survivors.” A fierce debate erupted about whether Leo X or Luther’s mother Margaret had a greater influence on his development and thus the better right to “survive.” The class ended with this dispute unsettled.

### *Fourteen’s Fifteen*

Another game, in my class on Europe in the Age of Reason, concerned Antonia Fraser’s *Love and Louis XIV: The Women in the Life of the Sun*



**Figure 3:** *Are You Smarter Than A Philosophe? Battle of the Sexes Version* title card.

*King*.<sup>9</sup> This time, I actually selected a “top fifteen” list of women myself and then asked the class to rank them in order of their influence on Louis.<sup>10</sup> Although the “goal” was to rank them all, we spent almost the entire class period picking number one. The winner emerged only after a particularly intense debate, a very close vote on multiple candidates, and, ultimately, a run-off. The class finally selected Anne of Austria, with Louis’s mistress and eventual second wife Maintenon as runner-up. The other contenders were Marie Mancini and Maria Theresa. Of course, the ranking is not what really matters; rather, it is that the class thought and argued long and hard about the relative importance of these women and, in the process, discovered that they had learned quite a lot about both Louis XIV and the women in his life.

***Are You Smarter Than a Philosophe?***  
***Battle of the Sexes Version***

In the same course, we also read David Bodanis’ *Passionate Minds: Emilie du Chatelet, Voltaire, and the Great Love Affair of the Enlightenment*,<sup>11</sup> and I came up with a pretty effective game for that, too



**Figure 4:** *Who Should Go To Jail? The South Sea Bubble Edition* title card.

(it was one of my better semesters). Voltaire presumably is well-known to readers. Gabrielle Émilie le Tonnelier de Breteuil, Marquise du Châtelet (1706-1749) was his lover for a time, but remained his intellectual partner even after the romance ended. She was a brilliant mathematician and physicist who produced a French translation and commentary of Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica* (published in 1759, a decade after her death). A major theme of Bodanis' book is that in some areas—notably Newtonian physics—Châtelet was far more learned and adept than Voltaire. So I made a list of ten male *philosophes* and ten female intellectuals from the Enlightenment, and we played a game called *Are You Smarter Than a Philosopher?—The Battle of the Sexes Version*,<sup>9</sup> a play on Jeff Foxworthy's Fox Network game show, *Are You Smarter Than A 5th Grader?*<sup>12</sup>

Though I expected this discussion to produce a division into male and female, the class as a whole rather quickly concluded that Madame du Châtelet was “smarter than a *philosophe*,” and indeed the brightest of the entire group. But they went to great and surprisingly technical lengths to explain why she was a much better scientist than the more famous Voltaire, assessing the significance of particular experiments that they conducted, as well as their respective works. They also noted how Châtelet's gender

at times held her back and the way in which she sometimes humored the sensitive Voltaire. They also proved quite adept at separating both the male and female “contestants” into genuine intellectuals and also-rans. Finally, they were not at all shy about assessing the character of Voltaire, the scandalous Richelieu, and others.

***Who Should Go to Jail?***  
***The South Sea Bubble Edition***

One further example should suffice. In my Hanoverian and Victorian Britain class, we read Malcolm Balen’s *The King, the Crook, and the Gambler: The True Story of the South Sea Bubble and the Greatest Financial Scandal in History*.<sup>13</sup> This is an especially good candidate for a game as it describes the scandal surrounding the British South Sea Company that threatened to ruin George I’s reputation and helped bring Robert Walpole to power in 1721. The South Sea Bubble occurred at the same time as the more familiar Mississippi Bubble associated with the Scottish financier John Law in early eighteenth-century France—though at least the French bubble was based on real (if overvalued) land in the Louisiana territory, whereas the British bubble was based on completely fraudulent reports of nonexistent trade. It also has some obvious parallels with more recent stock scandals, notably the Silicon Valley or dot-com bubble, which Balen highlights by prefacing each chapter with excerpts of recent news stories.

The scandal brought down the ministry of James, 1st Earl Stanhope and Charles Spencer, 3rd Earl of Sunderland, and led to the impeachment of several ministers, the temporary imprisonment of Chancellor of the Exchequer John Aislabie, and the disgrace of Postmaster General James Cragg the Elder, Secretary of State (Southern Department) James Cragg the Younger, and South Sea Company Director John Blunt. But most of those involved suffered little, if at all. Thus, the game for this book was *Who Should Go to Jail?* The class proved to be tough and indignant jurors, ready to incarcerate far more of the guilty than went to prison in reality. But when pressed to explain why, they were able to offer substantial evidence for “convicting” or “exonerating” each individual we discussed and were quite willing to assign varying degrees of culpability. Again, the point is that this exercise compelled them to think hard, muster evidence, and draw fine distinctions.

**Conclusion**

All of these are, of course, just examples. I have used this approach with many other books and invented a variety of other games to go with

them.<sup>14</sup> There is no doubt in my mind that the competition motivates students and that the whimsical element helps them to relax and get involved. Inevitably, in the Age of Assessment, readers will want to know if the games lead to better scores on book reviews and exams. That is impossible to quantify because there was no “control group” during any of these assignments that discussed the book without playing the games. Nor is there any satisfactory metric for determining whether the games encourage students to write better reviews the next time around or to do better on the exams that fall a week after their book discussions. But there is no doubt that the games work in getting more students to participate more enthusiastically in book discussions, and thirty years of experience in the undergraduate and graduate classroom has proved to me over and over again that the more students talk about what they read, the better they understand it. Moreover, it is my distinct, even if anecdotal, impression that these game-driven discussions do improve test scores, not least because students’ exam essays often echo arguments made during the discussion.

Ultimately, my suggestion to other teachers is to give it a try and see how it works. You can use games like this for books, for articles, even for films that your students have watched. But if you do, make sure you are completely invested. The more enthusiastic you are—indeed, the more you are willing to risk looking a little silly if necessary—the more students will take the chance of investing themselves completely. Have fun, and they will have fun. Act like it matters, and they will act like it matters. Keep it friendly and redirect potentially hostile commentary. Make participation in the discussion a portion of the students’ grades on the review, and reward them accordingly. And when you get to the end of the class, remind students that the real purpose of the game is to understand what they have read, to sift out what is really important, and—because history really is an enjoyable enterprise—to have fun.

## Notes

1. I would like to thank Janet Allured, Charles Elliott, Harry Laver, Bill Miller, Ben Price, Jerry Sanson, Craig Saucier, Reginald Span, Ann Trappey, and Ron Traylor for reading and commenting on a draft of this essay and all of the students who have played and helped to shape my games in History 419/519: Renaissance Europe, History 423/523: Reformation Europe, History 424/524: Europe in the Age of Reason, History 429/529: Europe in the Age of the French Revolution and Napoleon, History 433/533: Nineteenth-

Century Europe, History 437/537: Ancient and Medieval Europe, History 438/538: Tudor and Stuart Britain, History 439/539: Hanoverian and Victorian Britain, History 440/540: Modern Britain, and various versions of History 498: Special Topics.

2. At the National History Education Clearinghouse website, [www.teachinghistory.org](http://www.teachinghistory.org), one can use the search term “games” to access an abundance of information about games for teaching history. The accompanying commentary is highly favorable, which is not surprising, given that many of the commentators produce such games. For example, the participants in an online roundtable discussion on “Games and History: A New Way to Learn or Educational Fluff?” include James Paul Gee, author of *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Jeremiah McCall, author of *Gaming the Past: Using Video Games to Teach Secondary History* (Routledge, 2011); and Dan Norton, founder of Filament Games, a “design and development shop dedicated exclusively to creating learning games.” A number of articles that have appeared in *The History Teacher* over the last four decades argue for the value of games in teaching history: Thomas Arnold, “Make Your History Class Hop With Excitement (At Least Once a Semester): Designing and Using Classroom Simulations,” vol. 31, no. 2 (February 1998): 193-203; Martin C. Campion, “War Games: World War II in the West,” vol. 10, no. 4 (August 1974): 575-585; Clair W. Keller, “Role Playing and Simulation in History Classes,” vol. 8, no. 4 (August 1975): 573-581; Andrew McMichael, “PC Games and the Teaching of History,” vol. 40, no. 2 (February 2007): 203-218; James B. M. Schick, “The Decision to Use a Computer Simulation,” vol. 27, no. 1 (November 1993): 27-36; and Susan L. Speaker, “Getting Engaged: Using the Time Machine to Teach History,” vol. 28, no. 4 (August 1995): 513-522.

3. For example, this is the basic concept of the Brain Quest Challenge for elementary school students: <http://www.brainquest.com/teachers/>.

4. For useful discussions of these matters, see Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg, eds., *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives* (New York: New York University Press, 2000) and Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001).

5. These range from fairly elementary simulations for grades 5 and up, like those in Max W. Fischer, *American History Simulations* (Westminster, CA: Teacher Created Resources, 2004) and the *Easy Simulations* series from Scholastic Teaching Resources, to far more sophisticated games like *Civilization III* (<http://www.civ3.com/>), which is used in some university classrooms.

6. This is not the place for a lengthy defense of historical empiricism against its postmodern critics. It is sufficient to say, for the present discussion, that the author believes history to be the study of things that actually happened, based on evidence of a real past (incomplete and imperfect though that evidence may be), and that the best account of that past is the one that most accurately depicts it based on the evidence available (for more of my thoughts on that subject, see my reviews of Keith Jenkins, *On “What Is History?”: From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White*, and Frank Ankersmit and Hans Kellner, eds., *A New Philosophy of History*, in *Clio: A Journal of Literature, History and the Philosophy of History* 28 (1999), no. 3: 354-364 and no. 4: 464-473, respectively). Regrettably, history is not reproducible in the way that scientific experiments are, and there are no “laws” of history, the efforts of George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Leopold von Ranke notwithstanding. However, history and science do have something important in common. Science seeks to accurately describe nature, and nature *is what it is*, whether we like it or not. Regardless of how much some non-scientists may object, say, to the theory of evolution, that theory best describes the known evidence. Historians seek to accurately describe the past, which

was what it was, whether we like it or not. Regardless of how much anyone may wish to recast it for their own ideological agenda or fictional fantasies, an accurate study of real history must conform to the evidence. Multiple interpretations certainly are possible and even plausible, but interpretation does not extend to outright invention.

7. Arguably, students can learn as much about “process” by playing *Dungeons and Dragons* or *Risk* as they can from most historical simulation games.

8. Martin Marty, *Martin Luther* (New York: Viking, 2004).

9. Antonia Fraser, *Love and Louis XIV: The Women in the Life of the Sun King* (New York: Anchor, 2007).

10. The women in question were Louis’ mother Anne of Austria; his first love Marie Mancini; his wife Maria Theresa of Spain; his mistresses Louise de La Valliere, Françoise-Athénaïs Marquise de Montespan, Angélique de Fontanges, and Françoise d’Aubigné Marquise de Maintenon; his sisters-in-law Henrietta Anne (Minette) of England and Elizabeth Charlotte (Liselotte) von der Pfaltz (first and second wives of Philippe 1st Duke of Orleans); his illegitimate daughters Marie Anne (wife of Louis Armand I Prince of Conti), Louise-Françoise (wife of Louis III Prince of Condé), and Françoise-Marie (wife of Philip 2nd Duke of Orleans); his daughter-in-law Maria Anna of Bavaria (wife of Louis the Dauphin); and the wives of his grandsons, Marie-Adélaïde of Savoy (wife of Louis Duke of Burgundy) and Maria Louisa of Savoy (wife of Philip V).

11. David Bodanis, *Passionate Minds: Emilie du Châtelet, Voltaire, and the Great Love Affair of the Enlightenment* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007). By the way, this points up another of my methods, which is to sometimes pick supplemental books with a common theme, in this case, women during the Age of Reason.

12. On the male side were Voltaire; Louis-Nicolas le Tonnelier de Breteuil (Émilie’s father); Florent-Claude, Marquis de Châtelet (her husband); Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle (essayist on science and philosophy and secretary of the *Académie des Sciences*); Frederick the Great (“enlightened” king of Prussia); Pierre Louis Maupertuis (French mathematician, philosopher, and director of the *Académie des Sciences*); Jean Frédéric Phélypeaux, Count of Maurepas (minister to Louis XV); Abbé Moussinot (Voltaire’s correspondent); Armand de Vignerot du Plessis, Duc de Richelieu (soldier, diplomat, and notorious womanizer); and Jean François de Saint-Lambert (poet and Émilie’s lover). On the female side were Madame du Châtelet; Anne de Bellinzani (novelist); Madame Catherine de Boufflers (artist, poet, and mistress of Louis XV’s father-in-law, Stanislas Leszczynski); Gabrielle-Anne Breteuil (Émilie’s mother); Madame de Champonin (Voltaire’s portly patron); Marie-Louise Denis (Voltaire’s niece); Madame Françoise de Graffigny (novelist, playwright, and hostess of a French salon); the Countess del Neuville (Voltaire’s neighbor); Jeanne Antoinette Poisson, Marquise de Pompadour (Louis XV’s chief mistress and Voltaire’s patron); and Elizabeth de Guise Richelieu (wife of the Duc).

13. Malcolm Balen, *The King, the Crook, and the Gambler: The True Story of the South Sea Bubble and the Greatest Financial Scandal in History* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2004).

14. For example, playing off the old Brooke Shields ad for Calvin Klein jeans—“Nothing comes between me and my Calvins”—which I showed to my students, my Reformation class discussed Bruce Gordon’s *Calvin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009) via the “*Nothing Comes Between Me and My Calvin*” Contest, in which students argued about which of his contemporaries had the greatest influence on Calvin. I have used numerous variations on *Survivor*, for instance, *Survivor: Vienna* for discussing John Stoye’s *The Siege of Vienna: The Last Great Trial Between Cross and Crescent* (New York: Pegasus, 2008). On several occasions, I have borrowed Keith Olbermann’s “the worst person in the world” bit from his days on MSNBC to play *Who Was The Worst*

*Person in the World*, for example, while discussing W. Travis Hanes and Frank Sanello, *The Opium Wars: The Addiction of One Empire and the Corruption of Another* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2004), Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-1849* (New York: Penguin, 1992); and Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Boston, MA: Mariner Books, 1999)—there were plenty of candidates from each book! In Ancient and Medieval Britain, after reading Lisa Hilton, *Queens Consort: England's Medieval Queens from Eleanor of Aquitaine to Elizabeth of York* (London, United Kingdom: Pegasus, 2010), students had to select the winners of various “Lizzie” Awards (named for Elizabeth I and featuring a cobbled-together, Oscar-like statuette), such as Most Consequential Angevin Queen, Least Consequential Angevin Queen, Most Important Wife as Queen, Most Important Mother as Queen, Most Important Military Administrator as Queen, Miss Congeniality (for laughs), and so on. Kate Summerscale, *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher: A Shocking Murder and the Undoing of a Great Victorian Detective* (New York: Walker & Company, 2008) offered a great opportunity for my Hanoverian and Victorian Britain class to play a game of “Who Done It?” The possibilities are pretty much endless.