What Has Mystery Got to Do with It?

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Overview

Should history be playful? Fun to do? If it should be, at least as presented in secondary schools, it is not. Most students would be sympathetic to James Joyce, who said, “History is a nightmare from which I must awake!”¹ In our enthusiasm to cover the syllabus, to show the big picture, the vast canvas of history, we have squeezed both the fun and the fascination out. To go from “Plato to NATO” we take the flesh from the stories and deliver only the skeleton.² Typically, we ask students to commit this to memory and regurgitate it at exam time instead of teaching the detective work—the critical skills of the historian applied to evidence from the past. The most able teachers have shown us for centuries that we can make history engaging while we teach its most important lessons. Now, as we are able to explore the affinities between game-based learning and the goals and tools of history teaching, we have some new tools at our disposal to make history “playful.”

In a 2006 article, Richard Van Eck argued that it is time that discussions about digital game-based learning (DGBL) move beyond research that has, by this point, already convincingly demonstrated its efficacy as a place for, or site of, learning.³ We need to move on now, he argues, to create “research explaining why DGBL is engaging and effective” and to provide “practical guidance for how (when, with whom, and under what conditions) games can be integrated into the learning process to maximize their learning potential.” We take up Van Eck’s challenge to explain and prescribe appropriate uses for history-related games as we explore links between our DGBL history project, the Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History, and recent
Fig 1.1: Victoria students exploring the “Death on The Kettle Valley Railway” mystery. Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History project. Used with permission.

Fig 1.2: Original homepage of the Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History website. Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History project. Used with permission.
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research and writing about historical thinking and knowing. (See figures 1.1 and 1.2.) More specifically, we draw on two separate academic discussions, one exploring research into the teaching and learning of history in the schools and the other relating to theoretical and methodological developments within the discipline of history itself. We suggest that the intersection, or overlap, of these two areas provides a research- and theory-based explanation for how the Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History project works to include playful elements in the teaching of serious history. In the process, we also help to explain why this online history education project has become so widely used and so critically acclaimed as a way of teaching history.

The History Educators

Recent years have witnessed an increasing amount of research in the field of history education. Educators, long interested in how to teach students to think scientifically, have turned their attention to what constitutes historical thinking, or, in the current parlance, “historical literacy.” There are a number of factors involved in this renewed interest in history education, but perhaps most often cited is the decline of the more general social studies movement in the wake of research documenting students’ staggering historical ignorance about the origin and accomplishments of their own particular nation-state—this in an era of globalization with its increasing unease about the loss of national and religious identity following the end of the Cold War. Notwithstanding clear evidence that nationalism and indeed patriotism have been the engines driving often-intense public discussions about the purpose of history education, responses to the recent perceived crisis of historical understanding have been varied. 5

Conservatives have lobbied unapologetically, and sometimes successfully, for a highly partisan, nationalistic “return to basics” move within schools and museums, but there has been a significant movement in quite another direction as well: history researchers and educators alike are encouraging students to do their own “document analysis”—the interpretation of original historical or archaeological evidence from the past—as an important pillar of history education.

Their motives have varied. Many teachers and public historians (in museums, heritage villages, and other historical sites and monuments) have discovered that students are simply more interested in history, and seem to remember more of it for the final exam, when they can actively engage with original historical sources; because it keeps students busy, occupied, and apparently learning, this approach is widely perceived to work as an
educational strategy. As a result, compilations of primary documents along with supporting educational materials have become a major industry, particularly in the United States.⁷

Researchers in the field of history education do not deny that students can be more engaged by working with primary documents, but their strong advocacy of teaching students to use primary documents in the history classroom is not related just to the immediate appeal that working with these documents provides to students. Rather, researchers and theorists in the field of history education tend to share a conviction that, because history essentially is a dialogue among people about the interpretation of evidence left over from the past, then history education must, to be effective, at the very least introduce students to what history is by inviting them to participate actively in the process or practice of what doing history involves.⁸ Like the revolutionary science educators of an earlier era, history educators are suggesting that historical knowledge, like scientific knowledge, is not about knowing facts so much as it is about understanding processes. For teachers who see science as a kind of knowledge or process of knowing rather than simply the final product or conclusion, Bunsen burners and the techniques of scientific observation overshadow the memorization of complicated nomenclatures. For teachers who see history as a kind of knowledge or process of knowing, primary documents and the techniques of inquiry-based interpretation overshadow the memorization of events, names, and dates. As Peter Seixas has argued, it is only in this way that students can become truly engaged in the “community of inquiry” that comprises the disciplinary, evidence-based critical inquiry that history is.⁹ (See figure 1.3.)

Ken Osborne has pointed out that the idea that students need to “do history” in order to understand history—that is, analyze and interpret primary historical documents—is not new; the history teacher Fred Morrow Fling was actively advocating this practice more than one hundred years ago, and the idea has been an important component of progressive reform in educational circles ever since.¹⁰ The idea may not be new, but research in the field of history education is now documenting just how difficult it is to convey this to students. One of the unanticipated consequences of the increased use of primary documents in the classroom has been research documenting that, engaging as they are, these primary sources cannot on their own be relied on to provide an increased understanding of history. In his well-known 1991 study, Samuel Wineburg asked students and historians to think aloud as they read historical texts, both primary and secondary.¹¹ He noted that whereas historians entered into a complex dialogue with the multiple meanings of the text, students were generally able to marshal only one question about what they were reading: is it true? With little familiarity
with primary documents, without the appropriate background knowledge, and without an understanding of the processes of critical inquiry, students were simply not able to engage in constructing historical knowledge from the documents. As Wineburg has argued since, historical thinking really is an “unnatural act” that involves thought processes that are counterintuitive to most students.12

Wineburg’s work demonstrates that students need considerable scaffolding if they are to learn to use primary documents to construct knowledge about the past. The research of history educators such as Peter Lee, Ros Ashby, S. G. Grant, Bruce Van Sledright, Keith Barton, Linda Levstik, and Stella Winert has provided considerable evidence about how students as young as age 6 or 7 can successfully be taught the kinds of critical, evidence-based thinking they need to think historically.13 But it turns out that, left to themselves, students are reluctant to critically engage primary sources. Andrew Milson argues that students using web-based materials regularly sought out the “path of least resistance” when looking for ways of constructing historical knowledge, rather than searching for a more complex understanding.14 Other research has documented that rather than evaluating information from multiple sources, students using primary documents on the world wide web moved directly to search engines to find sites they thought would give them
all necessary information to accomplish their task\textsuperscript{15} as quickly as possible, and in a way that was most likely to meet the approval of the teacher.

Barton’s study of fourth- and fifth-grade American students highlights the problems. His research documented students’ remarkable ability to engage critically with such issues as the contingency of historical narratives and the constructed nature of historical documents. But after students had critically examined the historical documents, Barton discovered “one remarkable and unexpected problem”:

After three days of this [critical inquiry] activity, the teacher pulled students together to discuss their conclusions. . . . Each student had an opinion, and they were eager to share. But none of the opinions had any relationship to the evidence that they had just spent three days evaluating. Students did not use the evidence to reach conclusions; they were just making up what they thought must have happened\textsuperscript{16}.

Barton aptly entitled his article “‘I just kinda know.’” European educators have noted a similar reluctance in their students to bring critical inquiry to bear on history education in the classroom, and new research into levels of historical consciousness and differences between historical knowledge and historical belief is now underway to account for the phenomenon whereby students know about history as critical inquiry, but refuse to take it seriously.\textsuperscript{17} Keith Barton and Linda Levstik have argued that the solution to the problem is to be found in the articulation of a coherent purpose for history education, and have found it in history’s unique suitability to provide students with the kind of humanistic education they need to participate in a democratic and pluralistic society. The study of primary documents, they argue, provides an important foundation for the kind of evidence-based reasoning that members of a participatory democracy need to deliberate on, and make decisions about, their society.\textsuperscript{18}

On a slightly different tack, Ruth Sandwell has argued that the problem is essentially epistemological: students do not engage with a critical evaluation of historical evidence because, in spite of what they learn about critical inquiry, they still believe that history really is a set of received truths that they must memorize and tell back to their teachers.\textsuperscript{19} Conducting reasoned, educated interpretations of evidence becomes just one more example of busywork in the classroom. And why wouldn’t they? After all, knowing “the facts” rather than understanding the process is what they are most often, and most rigorously, evaluated on. As Peter Lee puts it, if students do not “get” the idea that history is dialogue among people about the interpretation of meaningful evidence about the past, and believe instead that it exists only by
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authoritarian fiat or only through the always-flawed accounts of individual eyewitnesses, then it becomes impossible, meaningless, or both, for students to understand history.20

The Historians

Historians have changed a lot over the past fifty years. Since the defeat of fascism and the triumph of American modernity, historians have been increasingly rejecting the notion of a single unified narrative of history in favor of histories that are more complex and varied. They have expanded their studies beyond one class, gender, or ethnically defined group, and beyond their earlier, predominant interest in public life and formal political systems. As a result, historians’ research and writing has become much more interdisciplinary, and much less the narrative of “the winners.” This concern with a wider range of peoples and issues in the past has, furthermore, encouraged some historians to take (and admit to) a more active role in contemporary concerns, particularly those involving historical injustices based on gender, class, or ethnicity. They have become much more open about their concerns about contemporary, relevant issues, and the ways in which these contemporary issues have helped to shape their professional interests. As Christopher Dummitt phrased it in his article “Beyond Inclusiveness: The Future of Canadian History,” “by far the largest fields that historians now claim to be affiliated with are those generally associated with inclusive history: social; women and gender; and cultural.”21

Dummitt goes on to articulate some of the problems that the new consensus on inclusivity has created, but this is not to diminish the fact that historians have become much more cognizant of the relationship between knowledge and power than they used to be. Not only do they believe that history involves more than the single narrative about the winners in the past, but many historians argue that portraying history as a particular one-dimensional narrative only helps to maintain structures of power within today’s society.22 These changes are aspects of historians’ growing awareness that their research is more a process of critical inquiry, a kind of knowledge, than it is a series of authoritarian, factual statements, let alone final judgments, about the past. The past is gone, and all historians can do is try to understand some of its meaning and complexity through ongoing discussions about how best to interpret evidence from the past that is meaningful in the present, albeit for a wide variety of reasons.23 (See figure 1.4.)

In moving beyond the positivism that largely defined nineteenth-century historical writing, historians are openly acknowledging that history is a process
of critical inquiry, a painfully meticulous process of piecing together—constructing—into a narrative, pieces of evidence about a meaningful past in the context of what other historians have written about. Acknowledging that history is an interpretive act where historians enter into an ongoing dialogue with others about fragmented, contingent evidence from the past has had an important influence not only on what historians study, but on how they present their work. Increasingly, historians are arguing that it is not enough to be more inclusive in who we consider legitimate historical subjects, or how we represent them: our history needs to articulate more clearly the dialogical nature of our work. As historian Lyle Dick has recently argued, historians have identified the need to move beyond a focus on diversity of content toward embracing a greater diversity of form. In this regard, we might consider replacing univocal narratives or harmonized syntheses relying on partial perspectives or evidence with forms incorporating a larger selection of voices and perspectives. Instead of weaving the different strands together into tight narratives, we might be trying to combine different forms, genres, and voices into looser structures. Rather than seeking resolution and coherence, we might be juxtaposing conflicting and even contradictory materials to more accurately represent the contested character of the Canadian past and the actual diversity of perspectives bearing on its interpretation.24
Like history educators, historians are increasingly declaring the importance of the processes of historical practice to good historical thinking. Three decades ago, the craft of conveying the complex interplay of forces was recaptured by European scholars in a method called “micro-storia” or “micro-history.” Micro-history is a return to the story of real people with all the messy, fascinating, sometimes microscopic details of their lives. But the goal in exploring the details is to see the larger forces at work, forces that are invisible when the scope is much larger:

By reducing the scale of observation, it becomes possible to document the ways that particular people work out their lives within a shifting set of patterns—beliefs, practices, relationships—in which they make sense of their own lives, adapting themselves to each other and to their environment, or by changing their environment to suit their society. It is in people’s day-to-day practices that they make the “innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules.” It is in these practices that microhistorians hope to see and sometimes explain variation and change in history.25

Micro-history is the asking of the big questions of history and looking for the answers in small places.26

_The Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History Project_

As we have argued above, history educators and professional historians now agree that understanding history means understanding the dialogical processes involved in interpreting evidence from the past in the context of what others have thought relevant. History is a conversation about interpreting evidence. The project that John Sutton Lutz, Ruth Sandwell, and Peter Gossage established, _Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History_ (www.canadianmysteries.ca), is a web-based history education project that explicitly sets out to introduce students to the unnatural act of doing history. As we described the history of the project in 2009:

When we first imagined the site, we were intrigued by the dissonance between using late 20th century technology to investigate a mid-19th century murder. What John and I had originally liked about the technology was the strange co-incidence between web based technology and late 20th century ideas about history. We felt that the lecture format and the textbook, both first developed in the 19th century
as important ways of teaching history, were used by earlier generations of history teachers because they were particularly well suited to particular 19th century understandings of history. That is, history is “just the facts,” plain and simple; a chronicle of events told in an epic format, with good guys and bad guys (and we mean guys) and a strong, simple and one dimensional plot line. The world wide web, by contrast, was, we thought, particularly well suited to late 20th century ideas of what history is: not a linear, authoritarian declaration by an eminent historian about what “really” happened, but a broader, more inclusive discussion of varied peoples in varied places, discussions that were sensitive to race, class, gender, sexual preference, regional differences. History involves multiple perspectives, ambiguity and dissonance. It also involves some very particular disciplined approaches to evaluating evidence, to building reasoned arguments, and to making persuasive claims about the past.27

What we had created was, in effect, a digital game-based learning site where visitors to the site would “do history”: in interacting with the materials on the site, they would engage in, or would at least be forced to confront, complex forms of historical thinking as they used the primary documents on the site to come to a reasoned interpretation of the real-life historical mystery they were presented with in each of the twelve mysteries.

The premise of the *Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History* project is simple. Take an intriguing mystery—a story that has no single, clear resolution—put all the kinds and range of evidence you can find on the Internet, and challenge students and others to solve the mystery. In fact, we provide the first part of the story and the tools for students to write the ending. The method is micro-historical so the mysteries are not random. They involve some of the big issues that concern historians: race, gender, ethnicity, immigration, religious intolerance, terrorism, war, climate change, aboriginal–non-aboriginal relations, wrongful convictions, and child abuse, to name a few.

Between 1997 and 2008 the project created twelve mystery websites, each available in their entirety in French and English. Each website is a multi-media archive based on the particular mystery, with dozens and even hundreds of documents, each totaling about 100,000 words of text, along with dozens of images; several have oral interviews, 3D re-creations, and video. They range from some of the big questions (where was the Viking Vinland and why did it not survive?) through the burning of Montreal in 1734, an Indian war of the 1860s, to mysterious deaths and murders, including that of the well-known artist Tom Thompson and the Canadian diplomat hounded by the CIA, Herbert Norman. These are great mysteries, not because they
are famous, but because of the amazing access they give us to the lives and issues of real people facing dramatic and often violent crises.

To provide the necessary pedagogical support for the mysteries, an educational director (Ruth Sandwell) was appointed to create materials for teachers and students interested in developing and refining the techniques of primary source document analysis. These include introductory lessons for interpreting historical evidence complete with teachers’ notes and fully developed unit plans comprising several lessons and support materials for teachers and students. We also created an entire MysteryQuests website (www.mysteryquests.ca) that contains thirty-nine student-focused and age-specific lesson plans that pertain to the individual mysteries. Other forms of teacher and student support (see the Teachers’ Corner for each of the mystery sites) make it easier to use the mysteries to teach history within elementary, secondary, and even university classrooms. (See, for example, figure 1.5.)
Further testing is needed to confirm exactly how and to what extent the sites work at conveying new ways of thinking about and doing history, but our preliminary studies indicate some success in providing willing viewers both the raw materials of an engaging micro-historical mystery, and the intellectual and pedagogical support to interpret them.

The mysteries take two forms. Some of them present a historical puzzle for the student to solve. Others take a crime, or a mysterious death that might have been a crime, and invite the student in as a detective-historian. In some cases, the students find themselves absolving convicted murderers they believe were wrongly convicted and hanged in a travesty of justice. In others, they identify potential murderers who have walked free. All the mysteries were chosen because there is no single “correct” solution. In all cases, students are assembling a narrative out of a diverse, unordered, and sometimes contradictory set of evidence, and having to make the case that their solution is more plausible than the alternatives.

Let us give an example of the first type, “Where was Vinland?” chronologically the first in our series. (See figure 1.6.) All of our websites were created...
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by leading scholars in the field who, in most cases, pitched the mysteries to the directors in a national competition. In this case, the research director, archaeologist Birgitta Wallace, had spent her entire career studying the Norse in North America and is acknowledged to be one of the world’s experts. Only one Viking-era settlement site has been documented in North America at L’Anse Aux Meadows, in northern Newfoundland, and it does not seem to coincide with the description from the Viking stories, or sagas, which identifies Vinland as the “Land of Grapes.” The site where Europe first met America is of global significance. Proponents locate Vinland in many places between Rhode Island and Labrador. So the website presents all the saga evidence and virtually all the archaeological evidence of Vikings in North America; extensive cultural and linguistic evidence from the Norsemen of the era so we can learn what “grapes” or wine might have been to them; and the flora and climate in eastern North America in 1000 C.E. It also examines the prominent Viking hoaxes. We know so much about the extensively excavated and documented L’Anse Aux Meadows site that we were able to create a 3D immersive environment for students to explore as well as scan many of the key artifacts in 3D and present them virtually on the website. A hint: the butternut root fragment is a significant piece of the puzzle. (See figure 1.7.)
The other type of mystery, based on a crime, offers students the chance to play the ever-popular role of detective, or crime scene investigator, which, as it turns out, is very analogous to that of the historian. But where detectives are often satisfied when they have identified the immediate cause of death and the specific perpetrator, the historian is even more interested in the context that created the crime and the contributing causes. The mystery “Who Killed William Robinson? Race, Justice, and Settling the Land,” which was the first one launched, is an example. When three black men were killed in 1867–68 in the small farming settlements on Salt Spring Island between Vancouver Island and Vancouver, native people were widely blamed. Only one of these murders, that of William Robinson, resulted in a conviction, and in that case an aboriginal man named Tshuanahusset was hanged. A closer look at all the cases suggests the possibility that it was easy to blame and convict a native person at that time when they could not speak the language of the courts and were widely seen as savages. The jury deliberated a full five minutes before Tshuanahusset was convicted on flimsy and conflicting circumstantial evidence, and his alibi was overlooked. When one explores motive, the case starts to point to members of the settler community who later are associated with a series of questionable activities relating to Robinson’s valuable waterfront property. The case is not just a “who-dunnit?” but an opening into the whole process of settlement of British Columbia, the dispossession of aboriginal people, the role of black settlers, and the question of whether justice was possible in such a race-based society. In this case, like Vinland and the other ten cases, small mysteries open up big questions.

Playful has proven popular. Every day, on average, more than 2,000 students use the website. Last year there were more than 800,000 user sessions, primarily in Canada and the United States but also in 50 countries around the world. The project has been extensively peer-reviewed (see http://www.canadianmysteries.ca/en/reviews.php) and it has won major prizes in the field. In 2008 the series won the award for the best online teaching resource in history from the MERLOT network and the Pierre Berton award from the National History Society of Canada for exemplary work in the dissemination of history. We continue to work on the project and a new mystery on the lost Franklin expedition is due to be launched in 2015.

The success of the project stems from the convergence described above: new ideas in historical pedagogy that support the active engagement of the learner at the center; new models of how historical thinking develops, particularly through primary source evidence relating to a micro-historical problem; a new technological format that provides both the fertile ground where a rich body of evidence can be accumulated, displayed, and widely accessed and the pedagogical scaffolding that allows visitors to research and analyze the evidence within online multimedia archives. Bringing these threads together,
the Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History project shows that the fascinating stories from the past can be used as a window to engage students in the big questions of then and now. Much more research is needed to examine the ways in which site visitors actually use the mysteries to build their historical understanding, and to test and refine the pedagogical support available on the site. But so far, the project seems to be providing just one more example of how learning history can be serious and playful at the same time.

A Full List of the Mysteries Available on The Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History Website

Where is Vinland?

Use archaeological, historical, climatic, and environmental clues with a new 3D reconstruction to solve one of the most intriguing mysteries in world history: where did Europe first meet America?

Torture and the Truth: Angélique and the Burning of Montreal

When Montreal caught fire in April 1734, suspicion fell on a Black slave called Marie Angélique. But did she really start the fire?
Life and Death in the Arctic:  
The Mystery of the Franklin Expedition

In 1845 2 ships with 110 men, the elite of the British Navy, set off from England to find the Northwest Passage and were never seen again. [To be launched in spring 2015.]

Jerome: The Mystery Man of Baie Sainte-Marie

On September 8, 1863, a stranger was found on the beach of Sandy Cove in Nova Scotia, alive but with no legs and unable to speak. Who was this “mystery man”?

Who Killed William Robinson? Race, Justice, and Settling the Land

When three Black men were murdered in the space of eighteen months around 1868 on bucolic Salt Spring Island in British Columbia, alarm bells went off. An Aboriginal man was hanged, but was he guilty?

We Do Not Know His Name: Klatsassin and the Chilcotin War

As dawn broke on April 30, 1864, some twenty-five Tsilhqot’in men surprised the sleeping camp of a crew building a road to the Cariboo gold mines, killing fourteen. Was this war?

Heaven and Hell on Earth: The Massacre of the “Black” Donnellys

In 1880 the Donnelly farm in Ontario was burned to the ground and five family members were murdered. No one was ever found guilty of the crimes despite considerable evidence. Why?

Who Discovered Klondike Gold?

For a century, controversy has swirled around the question of who deserves credit for the discovery that set off the greatest gold rush in the history of the world. You be the judge!

The Redpath Mansion Mystery

Who killed Ada Redpath and her son in their Montreal mansion in 1901? Find out what really happened as you look into the lives of the rich and famous in their elite neighborhood.
Death on a Painted Lake: The Tom Thomson Tragedy

Investigate the mysterious 1917 death of artist Tom Thomson. Was his drowning accidental?

Aurore! The Mystery of the Martyred Child

The corpse of a young girl was found in a quiet Quebec village in 1920. What is the story behind this tragic case, and why does it still haunt the collective memory of the Québécois?

Explosion on the Kettle Valley Line: The Death of Peter Verigin

An explosion on a train killed the leader of the pacifist Doukhobor religious community in Castlegar, British Columbia, in 1924. Investigate the many theories about who did it. Accident or murder?

Death of a Diplomat: Herbert Norman and the Cold War

What would persuade the Canadian ambassador to Egypt to jump from a Cairo building in 1957?

MysteryQuests

This website consists of thirty-nine interactive, user-friendly lessons designed for use by individuals working alone or with a partner; suggestions for adapting these resources for use by an entire class are found in the teacher notes attached to each MysteryQuest.

NOTES


4. See Margaret McMillan’s Uses and Abuses of History (Toronto: Penguin, 2009) for a recent articulation of the relationship between the revival of interest in history


6. For the way this was worked out in the American context, see Linda Symcox, *Whose History?: The Struggle for National Standards in American Classrooms* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002).


23. This section has been adapted from Sandwell’s article “School History vs. the Historians,” International Journal of Social Education 30, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 10.


