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Twisted History

Board game by Cartamundi

\$37.99 from zavvi.com.au

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When *Horrible Histories* first emerged all the way back in 1993 it almost immediately took history education by storm. The books gave an irreverent and witty take on the past that brought the study of history a sense of edgy subversion. Cartoons, skits and comics soon peppered the classroom and teaching materials, and the focus provided a refreshing alleviation from older models of teaching the past through triumphant nationalism.

This trend continued with the hit BBC TV series (2009–2014), which used an ensemble of popular sketch comedians who were already familiar faces from such programs as *Black Adder*. While some criticisms were raised at the time, in terms of shifting the focus to the sketch comedy and the loss of coherent historical narrative, the approach was praised as a fantastic entry-level approach to history education that levels some pointed, albeit tongue-in-cheek, critical perspectives on difficult topics

such as colonialism, gender and social class. As a historian and author who is extremely interested in historical engagement, I have developed a fondness for this approach given the way these histories draw attention to subaltern perspectives and diversity in the historical record.

The *Twisted Histories* board game follows a similar approach, drawing on the subversive and darker side of the historical experience. The game-play follows a model not dissimilar to *Trivial Pursuit* where up to six players traverse seven eras in time around a board. Successfully answering a question will allow a player to move forward to the next era, while unsuccessful answers will cause a player to move within the same era to answer a new question.

There is a twist, however, where unsuccessful answers will add a square to the player's historical execution device, such as a gallows or guillotine, and nine failed questions will lead to a player's removal from the game. As an optional variation, some questions will also feature an image of a coloured wheel that allows players to add cards to each other's devices, remove cards and mess with players positions on the board.

Effort has been made to be culturally diverse, with the 'medieval' and 'ancient' eras having questions on Asia, Africa and the Middle East. However, it's worth noting that the popular Western designation of eras and focus of the questions remains dominant. One of the eras is noted as 'Roman', for example, although questions on other areas of the world in the era of late antiquity are included.

The multiple-choice questions have all been well constructed. They are thought-provoking, clever and often subversive in approach.

I think this game would work very well in the classroom. The rules for play are simple, the questions provoke discussion, and a teacher could easily supervise multiple games and guide discussion.

While students do not need to pursue sources in the game, its 'Trivial Pursuit' style of game-play could easily be linked to exercises where students could verify claims.

The key component of critical thinking in this game is the manner in which questions seemed to spontaneously generate quite in-depth discussions about what caused some of the stranger examples of historical trivia and what it meant to the people of the era and its impact on the societies of the day. In game play our test groups found nearly every question generated significant discussions.

The only suggestion I would make in the classroom is the taboo nature of some of the questions, some of which can relate to historical sexual practices. This leads me to suggest that teachers should vet the questions they place on the game board for each era depending on the cohort, school, and the student's background.

The advised age is 14+ and I would think this is appropriate, with Year 9–10 students being ideal. While younger students would gain enjoyment, I would recommend teachers carefully vet the questions in this case and closely supervise.