

ALL GAMES TEACH

MASS-MARKET GAMES IN HIGHER-EDUCATION CLASSROOMS

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BACKGROUND

In 2004, Ken S. McAllister reminded his audience that play is “always instructive” (p. 68). Though he was discussing video games in particular, *play* is an important instructional tool that can teach that which is difficult to grasp — it moves outside of the digital and can be found on the playground, in the home, and within the workplace. Where humans are, play can be found. It is therefore logical play can be found within classrooms, as play provides meaning-making opportunities that can fuse abstract ideas with real objects (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 98).

Bogost (2010) started the arguably unintentional move towards gamification with his descriptions of procedural rhetoric, or the “practice of using processes persuasively” (p. 28). Games, he argued, persuade players through enacting processes. Industry latched onto procedural rhetoric, attempting to gamify work. Plass, et al. (2016) define gamification as “adding game elements to an existing task that may be unengaging, tedious, or boring” (p. 278). However, gamifying an action does not necessarily mean

there is *play*, and *play* is needed in games to help facilitate the solidification of abstract ideas about complex topics through playful learning.

Though play has been recognized as an important instructional tool in development and has found a presence within elementary education, its move into higher-education classrooms has been relatively slow.

Gamification should not be the goal of game-based learning, as it’s an easy route to failure due to low buy-in. Incorporating games produced for entertainment — those that don’t necessarily fall under the “serious” games umbrella — has potential for success. Crocco, et al. (2016) suggest game-based learning “is most effective when used to foster higher-order thinking” (p. 17), meaning games are useful for “promoting deep learning” (p. 17).

All games teach, but the question is: teach what? The aim is to direct the lessons learned using proper scaffolding.

SCAFFOLDING GAMES

It’s important to establish that a game can’t just be grabbed off the shelf, spliced into a curriculum, and expected to work. Incorporating game-based learning requires careful scaffolding towards desired learning outcomes (Figure 1).

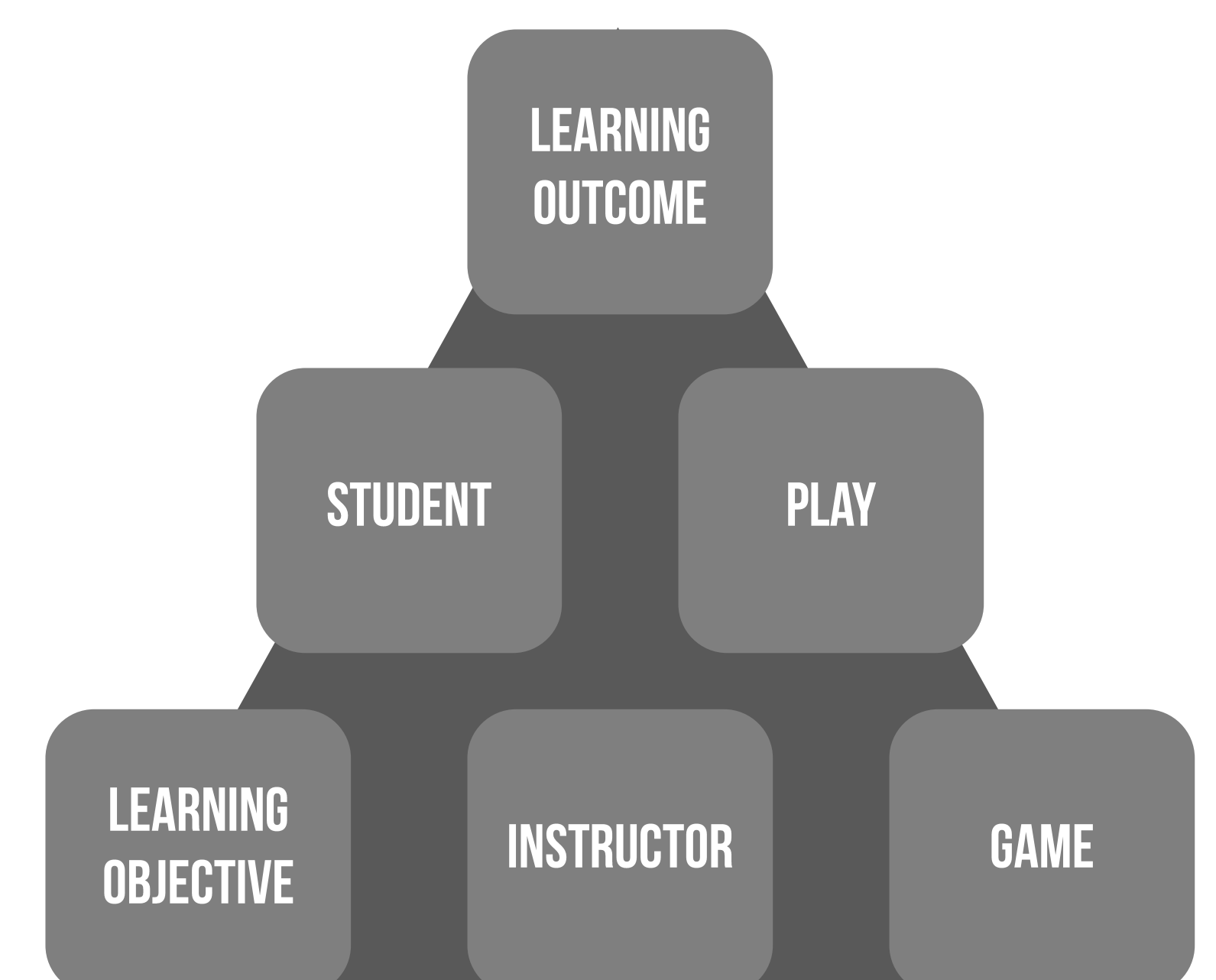


Figure 1. Instructors should incorporate a game with a learning objective in order to achieve a learning outcome.

CASE STUDY: SUPERFIGHT

After breaking down the research paper into teachable units, I looked for teaching objectives that could potentially be taught using games. I chose the unit about using sources for a topic to support a thesis statement, as the unit paired well with the goals of *SuperFight*, thereby allowing the game to support the learning objective rather than detract from it.

By the end of the activity, students were able to articulate strategies for relating sources to topics to support a thesis in their own words and able to discuss how some sources are better than others at supporting thesis statements.

Game Setup

The objective of *SuperFight* is to have the best fighter.

Each player should:

- Draw three black cards and three white cards to their hand.
- Choose one white card and one black card from their hand. This is their fighter.
- If they are instructed by the cards to draw or otherwise use additional cards from their hand, they should do so now.
- Discard the remaining cards.
- Draw one additional black card to add to their fighter.

Rounds

Players should face off in two- or three-person brackets. They will debate and create arguments that their fighter is the best fighter. The remaining students in the class will vote anonymously through PollEverywhere to determine who has crafted the most convincing argument for best fighter. The winner of each bracket advances to the next round.

Continue the cycle of play (creating characters and using elimination brackets) until one player is victorious.

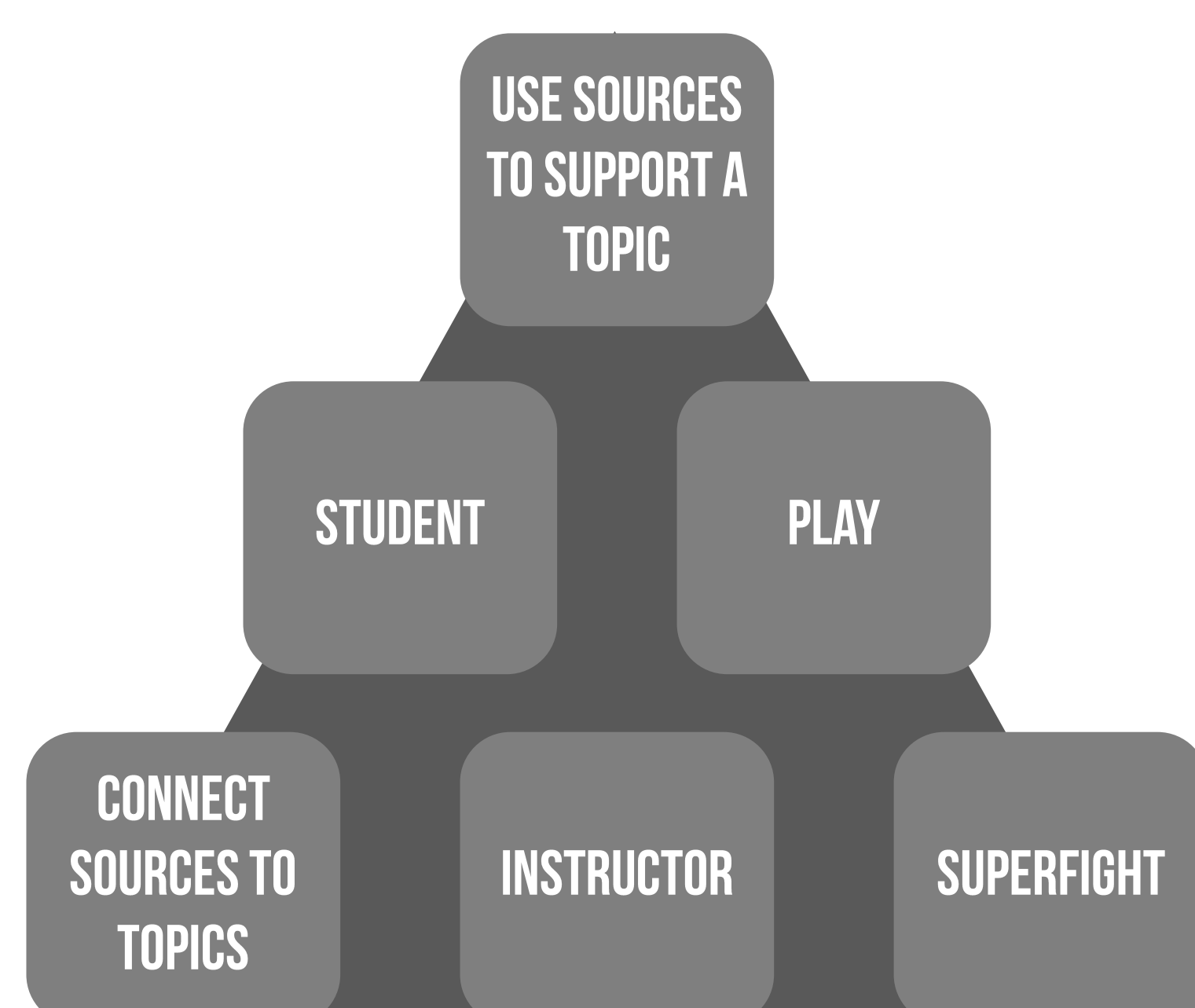


Figure 2. Pairing *SuperFight* with a learning objective in order for students to reach a learning outcome through play.

THESIS: BEST FIGHTER

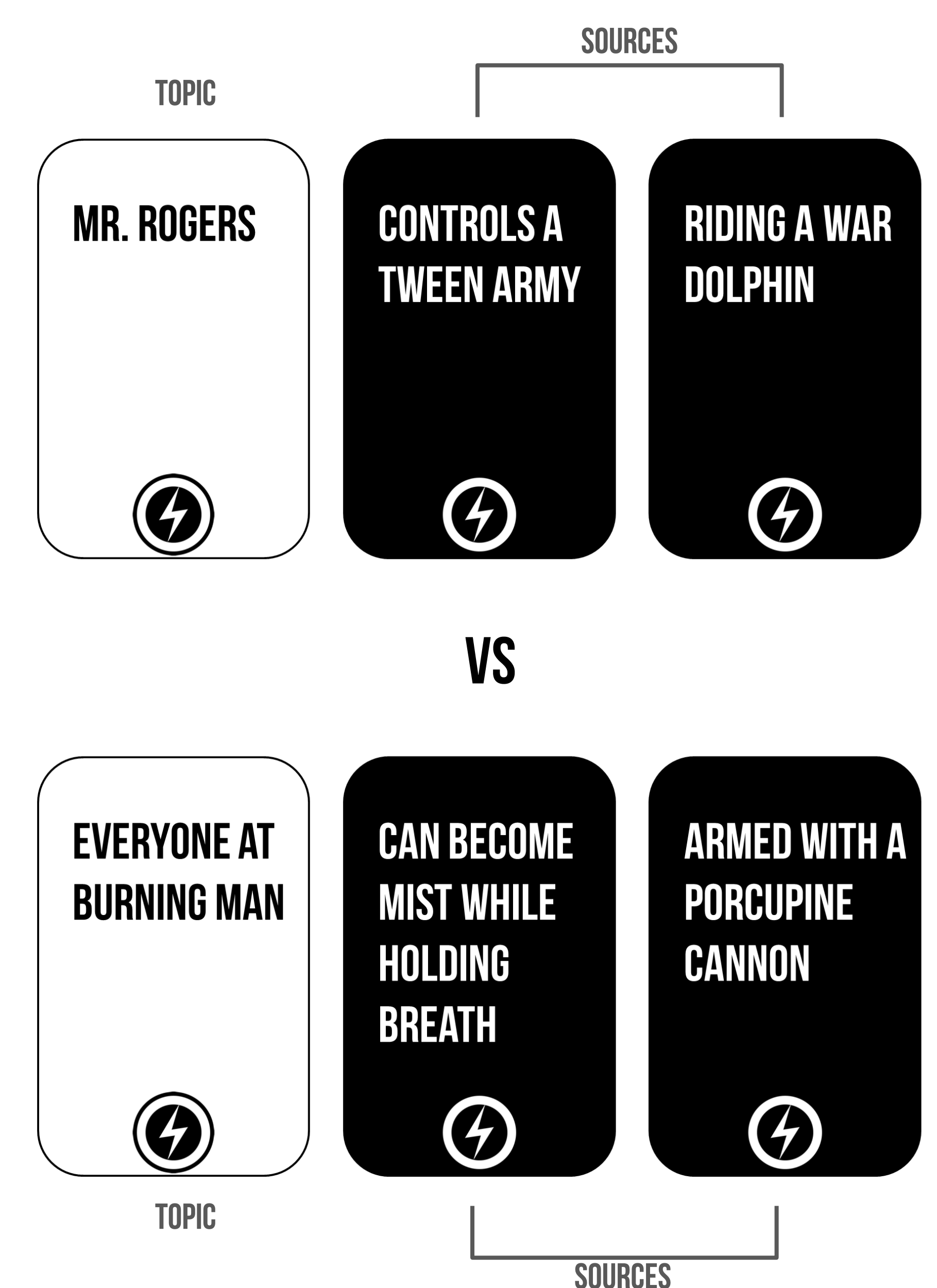


Figure 3. Example of two potential fighters, depicting the topic (white card) and sources (black cards) used to support the thesis (best fighter).

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