

Lesson Plan: Play and Protection

Subject Area: Visual Arts

Grades: Middle School, High School

Topic/Theme: Games and Cultural Interactions

Goals:

- To draw comparisons between medieval Islamic traditions and those of other cultures, including modern traditions, specifically through board games.
- To illustrate through board games lessons on cultural interactions in the Eastern Hemisphere in Era 4 (300 to 1500 CE), in keeping with Michigan and National Standards.



Gaming piece, Roman or Islamic, Egypt, millefiori glass. Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, 1970.03.1045.

This is a game piece found in Egypt and dated to the 1st century CE but it was still in use in the medieval period. Board games have been around for millennia and are found in many ancient and modern cultures around the globe. The oldest known board game is Senet, which is first attested to in 3500 BCE in Egypt. It is argued that the oldest board game that is still played today is Mancala, a word that derives from the Arabic verb “to move” or “to transfer”. Some have argued Mancala is even older than Senet but this has not been proven. However, Mancala was and is very popular throughout the Islamic world and is known by many different names, such as Oware, Bao, and Sungka. The board is composed of pits, cups, or dishes, usually in rows of two or four. The number of rows varies from culture to culture. The game pieces can be seeds, beans, pebbles, glass pieces (like above), and anything small and round in shape. Players begin by placing the same number of game pieces in each of the pits on the game board. A turn consists of removing all the pieces from one pit and transferring the pieces by placing one in each of the following pits in sequence. The pit in which the last piece is transferred is captured by the player and transferred to their store of pieces. The game continues until there are no more pieces in the pits and the winner is the player with the most pieces in their store. This game incorporates mathematics as a strategy for winning.

Have you ever played this game before? What name did you call it?

The game can be found in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. There are as many variations of this game as there are cultures that play it, roughly 800 different variations played today. In the version called Congklak, found in Malay, there are 98 game pieces and two rows of seven pits plus two larger pits, one for each of the players’ stores. The players’ stores are one of the pits that the players must drop pieces into as they move around the board, but players are only allowed to pull pieces from their assigned seven pits. In another version called Oware, found in West Africa, there are only 48 pieces and two rows of six pits. To capture pieces, there must be two or three in the pit you finish sowing with or else you cannot remove the pieces for your store.

What may be one reason why this counting game came to be in so many places?

Can you think of other things that these different regions have shared?

Classroom Activity:

Supplies: 14 shallow cups or bowls, beans/pebbles/seeds (enough to be evenly distributed between 12 of the cups, such as 48 so there are four pieces in each cup to start).

Place 12 of the cups in two rows or in a circle. Hand one of the remaining cups to each of the two teams or players. Evenly distribute the game pieces between the 12 cups on the board. Follow the basic game rules for the first game.

BASIC RULES:

Players begin by placing the same number of games pieces in each of the pits on the game board.

A turn consists of removing all the pieces from one pit and transferring the pieces by placing one in each of the following pits in sequence. The pit in which the last piece is transferred is captured by the player and transferred to their store of pieces.

The game continues until there are no more pieces in the pits and the winner is the player with the most pieces in their store.

What would you change to make this game more challenging or fun? Agree on your new rules and record them on the activity sheet below. Start a new game with the new rules.

How about now? What did you think of your new rules?

Another variation on this activity is to break up the class into different groups. Have everyone start with the basic rules for one round. Then within each group have them develop their own variations on the rules. After additional rounds of play to work out the new rules, have each group present their new rules to the class and see how each group approached the game differently.

Also, have the class try a computer version of the game:

<http://www.mathplayground.com/mancala.html>

Or this less traditional format:

<http://rocketsnail.com/mancala/>

What is similar to the traditional version? What is different? Do you play differently against a computer than against a person? Do you play differently with the snails?

Extension Activity:

Have the students build their own board game. Record rules and variations in rules.

Common Core Standards: G4.1 Cultural Mosaic; WHG4.1 Crisis in the Classical World, World Religions, Trade Networks and Contacts; WHG4.2 Growth of Islam and Dar al-Islam, Unification of Eurasia under the Mongols, The Plague

National Learning Standards: NSS-WH.5-12 Era 5: Intensified Hemispheric Interactions, 1000-1500 CE

ACTIVITY SHEET:

Step 1: Players begin by placing the same number of games pieces in each of the pits on the game board.

Step 2: A turn consists of removing all the pieces from one pit and transferring the pieces by placing one in each of the following pits in sequence.

Step 3:

Step ___:

Step ___:

Step ___:
