

Colonisation of Southeast Asia

A Games Approach in Teaching and Assessment

Lim Teck Huat
Teacher of Nan Hua Primary School in Singapore

Keywords: Colonisation, empire, games, games approach, games pedagogy, assessment, teaching, decision making, Southeast Asia, problem solving, problem scenarios, perspective taking.

Abstract

“If you have the chance to change the history of Southeast Asia countries, what kinds of decisions will you make? How will your decisions change the face of Southeast Asia? Are you fighting for God, Gold, Glory or Global Peace?”

This opening starts a lesson in a Social Studies class for primary 5 Gifted Education Pupils (GEP)* in a Singapore school. The lesson takes the form of a competitive, turn-based board game where students play different western empires in the colonisation history of Southeast Asia. Decisions fall into adjusting Military, Economic, Cultural and Political strengths to fight for the territories, and choosing to occupy which territory with each territory having different resources. As the game evolves, scenario cards will be introduced. Pupils will get to experience the intricacies of diplomacy and politics, and learn the importance of managing resources and the effect war has on a country's economy among many others.

This paper will describe observations on how the game engages the students and their interactions. It will also introduce how informal and formal assessment of pupils' learning can take place.

* Social Studies as an examinable subject for GEP pupils. The content level is akin to secondary one and two pupils in Singapore.

Rationale

This lesson is introduced as a game instead of traditional teaching so that pupils become active learners and discoverers of concepts as opposed to passive learners of facts. Pupils are more engaged because their actions will determine the outcome of the game and lesson. How the game events turn out will be dynamic and different depending on how the pupils react to each other's moves every turn!

In a traditional teaching classroom, a pupil can look awake and not learn whereas in a games-based teaching classroom, a pupil who is not participating (and hence not learning) is very easily identifiable. In the primary school context, non-participating pupils in a games-based classroom are very rare as young children are naturally very receptive to anything that is potentially fun and packaged as a game.

Games Approach

It is clear that children, teenagers and even adults, find games engaging and motivating. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1977) “[Good] games induce the flow state i.e. positive subjective experience is increased, thereby enhancing motivation.” It is high time that we, as educators, embrace this powerful medium called game and exploit it to support student learning. Nonis (2006) argued “With increased levels of motivation and engagement, instruction can be made less painful for the student.”. All these boils down to excellent game design and mechanics that keep the player engaged through constant reward systems so that the players learn about the game (and in some games such as today’s Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games, there is really a lot of things for the player to learn). The question now is how to tie the motivational factor of good games with our instructional objectives so as to have a lively and positive classroom climate whereby both the teacher and pupils are happy.

Informal Assessment of Pupils’ Learning

Tuning them in

Pupils were suddenly wide-awake when I announced that their lesson was going to be learnt through playing a game. Eager pupils moved forward to offer me help with putting up the laminated Southeast Asia map on the whiteboard with magnets. Competition was in the air as pupils assumed themselves to be advisors representing the five Western Powers - the British, the Dutch, the Spanish, the Portuguese and the French. A brief explanation (about 10minutes) of the process of the game is carried out and each group was given an envelope of placards to start off the game. Their objective is to be the dominant Western Power in Southeast Asia, and they can achieve this via four different ways: military victory, economic victory, cultural victory or political victory.

Strategising begins

Pupils have to actively sift through the information on the placards and determine which are vital for them to lead their empire into victory in Southeast Asia. For instance, I marvelled as one quick-witted pupil quickly explained to his members that they need not dwell too much on the placard that shows the extent of their current Empire territorial possession as it means little to winning control of Southeast Asia. Pupils learn to **prioritize their time and attention** on issues that will fulfill their goals and less on past achievements to stroke their ego. True to his word, another group who spent too much time “celebrating” their British Empire as the largest territorial empire for most of their 1st round discussion actually made a poor move that has little bearing on their victory goal. This British group soon learnt their painful lesson and was very focused and on task after this.

In addition, it was common for pupils to discuss and agree upon one strategy to win for their empire based on whether their starting empire was strong in Military, Economic, Cultural or Political Strengths. Pupils learnt that events in the real world are often not under their control (through the introduction of scenario cards later in the game) and they had to learn to adapt or be kicked out of Southeast Asia.

Discussions, Decisions and Interactions

There were lots of opportunities for **cooperative discussions** during each discussion round that lasted about 3 minutes before everyone returned back to their seat and remained silent for the next group to present their move. For instance, it was common to see some internal strife within a group as officials who were assuming different roles (They can either be a Military Advisor, Economic Advisor, Cultural Advisor or Political Advisor) argued passionately on why their empire should make a certain move instead of the other possible moves for their current turn. Pupils learnt to **persuade** others in their team to their point of view for a common goal! Their **decision-making skills** were also utilized as they had so many equally good moves to make in a turn but they could only choose one best move out of so many possible moves. They had to decide which land to occupy and what means to do so (is it a military, economic or cultural landing?). Different lands have different resources to be claimed, and pupils began **studying the resources and the map** as naturally as ducks take to water.

During this 3-minute discussion phase, it was common to see pupils acting as delegates on behalf of their empire on diplomatic “trips”. I saw trade zones being marked out on the map between countries, and pupils learnt to make friends with others through alliances, trade pacts and peace treaties. The most interesting scenario comes from a class where political delegates created a strong 3-nation alliance after several rounds of talks. When the alliance was finally formed, I can hear a quiet remark when the delegate of France returns to his team, “We shall be allies, for now. When the time is ripe, we will reap what needs to be sowed.” Now, this view was not solely his and I believe the other 2 delegates shared this mutual understanding that their alliance was temporary as ultimately, only 1 empire could be the winner of this region. Another pupil made a remark to this effect “There is no permanent friendship, only permanent interests.” Pupils understood the **intricacies of diplomacy and politics** as they themselves were experiencing them!

In fact, I was quite amazed that on the 2nd day of my lesson, none of the 18 teams from my 4 classes actually favoured a militaristically aggressive move towards any of the other empires. These pupils were the same pupils who proclaim themselves gamers and could rattle off their tongues

titles of violent games. This showed that by giving pupils 4 victory options (as opposed to only one military victory option available in so many commercial strategy games out there), pupils made choices that would not make them be seen as an unreasonable military aggressor. Perhaps they fear global community revenge. When I questioned, “Why isn’t anyone attacking anyone after so many turns? I thought you people understand that this is a potential war game!” Many pupils replied back to this effect, “It is not wise to use force to take away another empire’s colony as a military battle between us will only drain both of our resources.” Pupils understood the **importance of managing resources** and the **effect war has on a country’s economy** simply through the game! They need not have any prior knowledge. They simply need to play, observe and understand.

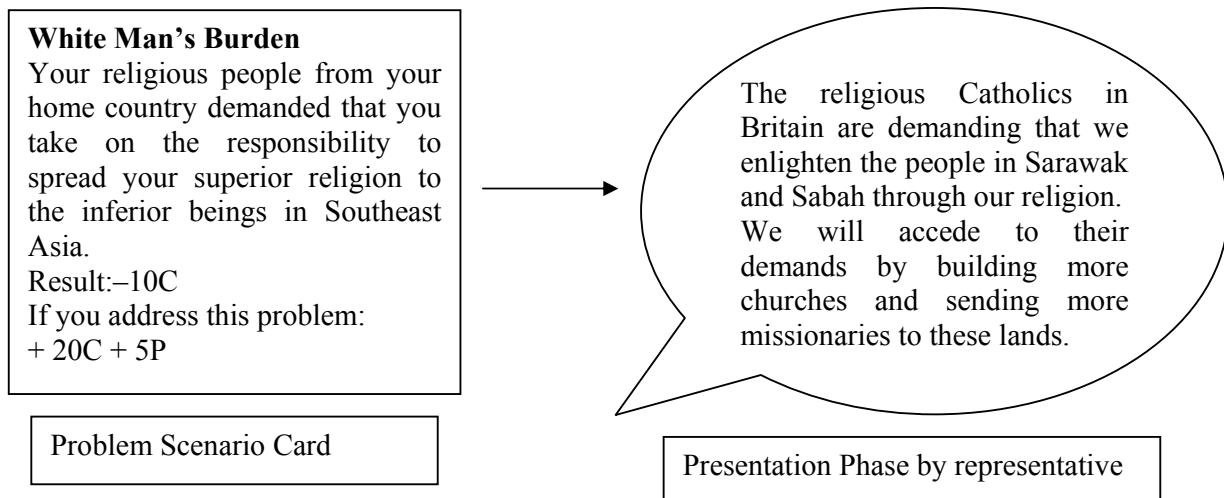
War did come for one class. There was a Spanish team that had been quietly making lots of moves over time to bolster their military presence in the Southeast Asia region, and when the other empires realized it, they began to panic. The allegiance to one’s empire or one’s ally was called into question when Spain began its first military offensive on one of Dutch’s occupied land. Dutch immediately sent a distress call for reinforcements from its ally, the French, but the French advisors had a long heated debate with each other as they had to forgo whatever move they had initially decided for this round to just send their military forces to aid their ally. In the end, the French decided that her own interest is paramount and the Dutch retaliated by calling off the alliance and even slapped a trade sanction on the French.

I could remember one pupil who shared with the class at one point during the class “This is exactly how history turns out. History is repeating itself in our game but we did not consciously plan it that way!” I immediately took this opportunity to discuss the enduring understanding of why history repeats itself, and the importance of learning our history so that we can make more informed choices for our future. There are lots of **potential to share our wisdom** to pupils in a game!

Pupils began to get **creative** and decided to add valid moves that are perfectly possible in the real world, such as sabotaging their competitors’ trade routes to hurt their economy, sending missionaries to other colonies to spread their own cultural influence, and one group even considered building a monument of great stature and significance (a Wonder!) to compel the other empires to regard them as the pinnacle in mankind’s cultural evolution.

Problem Scenarios Cards

After a few rounds of game play, when the Western Powers had settled nicely into the region (preferably with a few colonies and trade routes going) the teacher introduced scenario cards for the groups to take back and discuss. These scenario cards are problem scenarios that have plagued most governments in history, and **concepts such as the White Man's Burden, Communist Threat, Overpopulation, Crimes** etc will be introduced to the pupils. During the presentation phase, representatives who presented their empire's move can either address this problem scenario, or ignore this problem scenario. Either way, everyone still gets to learn about the scenario even if they did not draw the particular card. Pupils learnt to rephrase the sentence structure written on their problem scenario card to present to their classmates. Points shown on the card were added to their score if the problem was addressed, and bonus points (also shown on the card) were further awarded if their solution was a sound one. Hence, it is lucrative for teams to **restrategise and rethink** their original plans.



All Good Time has to come to an End

When one Western Power reaches 100 points for Military Strength, Economic Strength, Cultural Strength or Political Strength, that Western Power is the dominant power in Southeast Asia and the game ends. Alternatively, when the lesson comes to an end due to time constraints, the dominant Western Power is the one with the highest total points. This total point is the sum of the four Strengths.

Formal Assessment of Pupils' Learning

A game-based lesson has a lot of potential to teach concepts that are out of the scope of our scheme of work. In particular for my case (just to state a few), pupils have to understand the impacts of colonialism on Southeast Asian people (e.g. slavery, exploitation of resources), the problems Western colonial rulers face (e.g. threats from other Powers, trade sabotages and piracy attacks) and the reasons why the Western Power wanted to colonise Southeast Asia (e.g. territorial expansion, economic prosperity).

The key aspect of formal assessment is for pupils to actually reflect back on their game to consciously consolidate concepts that they have unintentionally acquired and concretise them in words on paper. This was done through a conventional pen-and-paper worksheet.

What will they learn?

1. Impacts of colonialism on Southeast Asian people
 - a. Slavery
 - b. Exploitation. Natives suffer poor and long hour of working conditions
 - c. Poor and unhygienic living conditions, leading to the spread of diseases
 - d. Victims of Western belief that they are “Inferior beings”.
 - e. Benefit from Western technology (such as medicine, gunpowder, cars, machines etc)
 - f. Benefit from development of their land (such as building of infrastructure, education institutions, public civil service and other institutions)
2. Problems Western Powers face as a colonizing Power
 - a. Piracy attacks on their trading routes
 - b. Military attacks on their trading ships and colonies by other Western Powers
3. Reasons for the Western Powers to colonise Southeast Asia
 - a. Territorial Expansion of Empire
 - b. Improve status as a World Power
 - c. Economic Prosperity through trading resources taken from Southeast Asia
 - d. The belief that the cultures of the colonisers are superior to the cultures of the colonized
 - e. The need to spread one’s faith (i.e. The White Man’s Burden)

4. History repeats itself

Through the game, some students may realise that military and economic conflict will soon be inevitable if they really want to win the game to be the only Western Power in Southeast Asia. Alliances will be temporary and for the benefit of one’s own empire and the frantic race for resources and trade will soon take its course once again even if players initially decide to make peace with each other initially.

5. Change is inevitable and is a stimulus for adaptation to occur

Whatever strategy and initial objective that they have planned out on turn 1 may not be kept as problem scenarios and other empires’ actions change the entire Southeast Asia landscape, eventually forcing students to keep changing their strategy and diplomatic relations. Students may generalize that all cultures rise and fall (as seen from the rise and fall in their points), all cultures are susceptible to internal and external influences (as evidenced from the problem scenario cards and others’ actions), the rigidity of a culture

6. **Decision-making processes the Western Powers experience**

- a. The division of Southeast Asian lands among themselves
- b. The need to prioritise one decision over the rest to ensure the survival of the empire.
- c. Who to sign trade agreements with
- d. Whether to collaborate with other Powers or be alone.
- e. New pressing conditions can affect one's original intention.

7. **Perspective taking**

Pupils understand the colonization period of Southeast Asia from the perspective of the Western Powers to get a more complete picture of the time. They will now have an opportunity to look at the actions of these Western Powers through a simulated experience via the game. This will complement the perspectives they could have imbibed from various authors of history books.

Future Plans

Ideally, this lesson package can be made either into a computer software to handle all the calculations to speed up the game phases, or into a board game whereby pupils can pick up anytime to play in their groups without the entire class being mobilized. Obviously, the discussion and presentation components of these two games will be reduced or not be present compared to the classroom game I have presented to you in this paper.

Most importantly, computer software has the potential to assess pupils on-the-fly during each turn as they can record their rationale for their moves by typing into the computer and get immediate feedback. The formal assessment worksheet can also be brought online and marked by the computer and answers given directly to the pupils for immediate feedback.

To sum it all up about Games Approach Pedagogy:

Knowledge is acquired through learning from other's experience,
Whereas
Wisdom is gained through one's own experience.
Both are necessary to be a learned Man.

Author Information

The author, Lim Teck Huat, is currently a primary school teacher teaching both the Gifted Education pupils as well as the mainstream pupils in Social Studies. He graduates with a degree with Honours in Psychology from the National University of Singapore. He welcomes like-minded educators who believe in a tangible and effective games pedagogy. He can be contacted at lim_teck_huat_a@moe.edu.sg. Educators are allowed to modify any part of the content found in this paper for use in their classroom. Acknowledgement of the author in the references section would suffice for any academic papers. Thank you!

List of References:

1. Gifted Education Branch 2008 *Southeast Asia* Scheme of Work.
2. Curriculum Planning & Development Division (2007). *Interacting with our World: Our Links with Southeast Asia and the World 6B* textbook. Marshall Cavendish Education.
3. Wood, J., & Harrison, K. (1998) *People of the monsoon: Continuity and change in Southeast Asia*. Auckland: Addison Wesley Longman.
4. <http://en.wikipedia.org>
5. http://www.seasite.niu.edu/crossroads/ty/COLONIALISM_%20IN_SE%20ASIA.htm
6. <http://www.seasite.niu.edu/crossroads/wilson/colonialism.htm>
7. Darren Nonis (2006). *Digital Games in Education*. Educational Technology Division, Ministry of Education, Singapore. http://www3.moe.edu.sg/edumall/rd/litreview/digi_games.pdf Last assessed on 4 May 2009

Many thanks to my 2009 Social Studies class pupils from 6FGJK from Nan Hua Primary for beta testing this game during their lesson and for their positive feedback.

Special thanks to Mr Aguss Bin Hasshim & Mr Eric Koh at Raffles Institution in their MOE Excel Fest sharing workshop titled “Teaching European Colonialism using commercially produced computer game Risk” for giving me the inspiration to introduce historical concepts using games approach. Without your spark of inspiration, this lesson would not be conceivable.

Appendix

Instructions for teachers

The real challenge for teachers is to determine whether to award the bonus points for students/groups who manage to address the scenario problem adequately. It is practically impossible to provide all “right” and “wrong” responses for such open-ended challenges, and hence teachers will need to have to make the right judgment call and reasoning when students provide their solutions to the problem at hand. Whether or not students ignore or address the problem, always add the results shown on the Problem Scenario card to their points. If their action directly addresses (need not be the best solution to solve the problem), add the bonus points shown on the Problem Scenario card to their points on top of the points that they get from their action. Students return the cards to redraw a new card at the beginning of every turn.

Every group or player will have the following placards:

1. “How to win this game” (page 1 of this document)
2. Country fact sheet (either one page from page 2 to 7 of this document)
3. Set of Military, Economic, Cultural and Political Actions (page 8 to 11)
4. One page of the “Resource Chart” chart (page 13)

Ideally, the sequence of play is (called one turn):

1. Students discuss about their strategy based on the country that they have for about 3 minutes. They can send diplomats to other groups.
2. Draw a Problem Scenario Card (Please skip this step for the first 2 turns for them to execute landings on lands first).
3. Empires take an action (military, economic, cultural or political) turn-by-turn, situation controlled by teacher.
4. Return the Problem Scenario Card to you (whether they choose to address or ignore the problem) after presenting to class.
5. Repeat step 1. for the next turn.