

An Islamic World Trade Simulation

Central to world history is the importance of international trade. Not only is mercantile activity important in helping people have access to goods that can improve their lives, merchants frequently cross borders between civilizations, countries, and religions, tying them together in mutually beneficial relationships. Since a lot of world history is about conflict between such groupings, the inclusion of merchants can show how human beings can still cooperate for the greater good despite violence and war. This is especially important when dealing with the Islamic world, in which popular images of Islam have the faith spreading solely by the sword, without adequately taking into account the fact that Muhammad himself was a merchant and that Islam often traveled peacefully with merchant networks. To help students better understand such historical phenomena, I created an ‘Islamic world trade’ simulation, in which students play merchants seeking to earn profits by traveling throughout various locations in Africa and the Middle East, as well as Islamic-world adjacent Constantinople.¹

Before explaining how to run this game in a class, it is necessary to say a bit about the conditions that led to its creation and to the character of the students it was designed for. Our university allowed for in-class instruction in the Fall 2020 semester after the cancellation of class with the outbreak of the Covid Pandemic in the Spring of that year. While classes were capped at their usual number, which was typically the capacity of a room, meetings could only take place at half capacity. That meant that only half the class could attend any one day. I decided to deal with that situation by converting my courses into online hybrids, with students watching online lectures and completing assignments based upon them that were to be completed before the class met. Then half the class would come for a meeting on one day and the other half would come for a meeting on a different day, with me running the same class activities, discussion, and review on each day. I found that the new format allowed me to do more activities, since I only had 15 to 20 students in a room at one time instead of 30 to 40. I therefore began to develop games and simulations that could take advantage of these smaller numbers, particularly in the world history sequence, which consists of two classes with the year 1600 being the dividing line between them. Most of my students were incoming freshmen, a large number of whom did not have a particular interest in

history, which were mixed in with our history/secondary school certification majors, who were required to take the course as part of their major. I therefore had to find a balance between giving people who wanted history a lot of it (and hopefully demonstrate effective teaching), while helping less interested students engage with the material. In addition, this was occurring when many students were suffering mental health issues owing to the pandemic and its economic and social impact; making class more fun and engaging could hopefully help on that account.

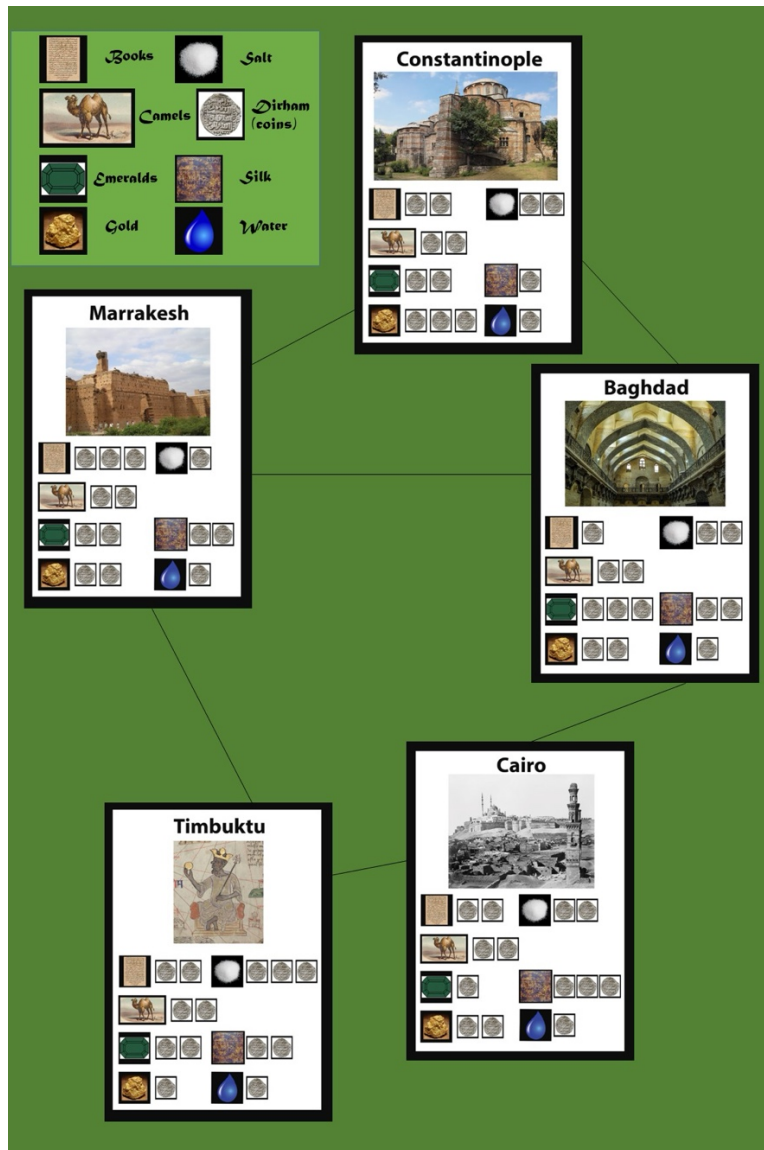


Image 1: Islamic World Trade Simulation Boards and Legend. Author's digital image, used with permission.

The typical classroom at my university has desks that seat four students. Usually there is a central aisle in a class with one or two desks on each side. I therefore typically treat a desk as one group, but rearrange people so that groups typically have three to

four students. Once I have the groups created, I hand out materials for the simulation and explain the rules. I find that I should explain the rules as I hand out each relevant material. First, I give each group a game board that I created using public domain materials and that I am happy to share, along with all other materials for the game, upon request. The boards I use are printed on 12x18 cardstock paper, but a regular sheet of paper scaled down could also be used. The game board consists of several elements. There are five cities (Baghdad, Cairo, Constantinople, Marrakesh, and Timbuktu) connected by lines, which represent trade routes (not all cities are connected, for instance, it is not possible to go directly from Cairo to Constantinople—merchants must go through Baghdad first). Each city also has various icons that represent books, camels, gems, gold, salt, silk, and water. There are coins (*dirhem*) by each icon, the number of coins indicating how much an item can be bought or sold for (for the sake of simplicity, this number is the same, though of course, instructors are free to make revisions). At the upper left is a key with each icon and the word it represents next to it so students can see what each one means (for instance, the word ‘gold’ appears next to the icon for gold, represented by a golden nugget). I next hand out a plastic tray with dividers that includes counters with icons printed on them (they are the same cardstock used for the board, but other objects could be substituted). I tell students to remove five *dirhem*, which is their starting money. I also give a dice tray that has a deck of event cards, a camel card, a coin from Africa or the Middle East to act as a marker to show where the merchants are, and a single six-sided dice (the kind used in the Monopoly board game).



Image 2: Timbuktu Game Board. Author’s digital image, used with permission.

After explaining to students how the board works using a PowerPoint presentation, I advance to the next slide and ask students to roll their dice to determine their starting location by consulting a chart on that slide. Once that is done, I explain how the camel cards work. The card has a picture of a camel and six numbered slots, each of which is the size of an icon counter. When students purchase goods, they must place each individual good counter on the camel (these cannot be stacked—three books would take three spaces, not one). While *dirhem* does not take up a slot, camels must carry water, with each requiring one water per turn (I explain to students that events can cause a loss of water, so students might want to think about bringing two). I provide a space on the game card for students to name their camel (this can also be done on the back). I found this to be very popular and aided engagement. Ideally, students should figure out that they should buy as many camels as possible and then buy goods where they are cheap and sell where they are expensive. While students are discussing it is good to walk around the class to make sure everyone understands the rules. I found that students were often shy to ask questions about game mechanics or were having too much fun with their fellow group members and missed explanations.

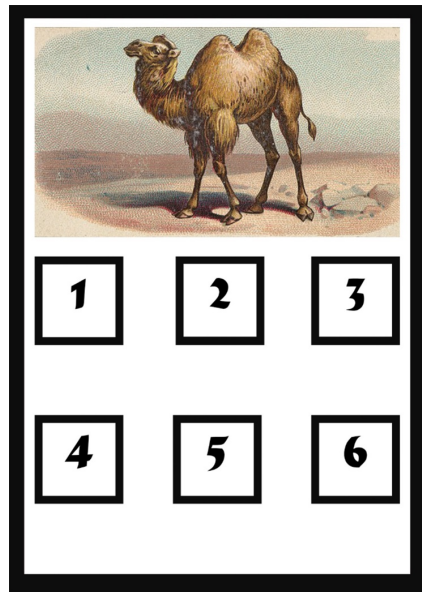


Image 3: Camel Card. Author's digital image, used with permission.

I then ask the groups to discuss what they want to buy and where they want to go. After I have gone to each group to make sure they are all set and understand the rules, I tell them to put their marker (the coin) between the city they started from and the city they are going towards. At this point, I show them a multiple-choice question on the PowerPoint presentation based on the study guide they should have completed before class and ask them to discuss it together as a group. I then give them the answer, with each group that was correct giving themselves an extra *dirhem* coin as a prize. This

means that multiple groups are able to earn the extra coin, which I think is important in terms of student engagement, as it means that answering a question has a direct impact on the game. Students are on the honor system as to whether or not they actually answered the question correctly.

There are two more things that should be done before students actually reach the next city. The first is to draw an event card. Events can be beneficial, such as finding a camel or other resource, or negative, such as being attacked by bandits or having a camel wander off and then having to decide whether to try and find it (event cards should not be put back in the deck in order to maximize the possibility of students experiencing different events). While this part of a turn could be skipped, I found that students really enjoyed the element of chance. In addition, merchant activities were not without danger, and the cards simulate that important element. The second is a ‘water check.’ Students must remove a water for each camel they have (they only begin with one camel but can buy more starting on the second turn). If they cannot do so, a camel dies for each missing water and the goods that camel is carrying are lost unless they can be moved onto an empty slot on a surviving camel. I should note that it is possible for a group to lose their only camel on the first turn. If that happens, I loan them five *dirhem*, explaining that traditionally in Islam interest is not charged on loans and that at the end of the game they need to pay the five *dirhem* back. In addition, this gives me the opportunity to explain that because it was so easy for merchants to be ruined in this way, it was not uncommon for them to help each other out – a merchant might be lucky this time, but they might suffer the next, so best to give some aid today because tomorrow you might need it.

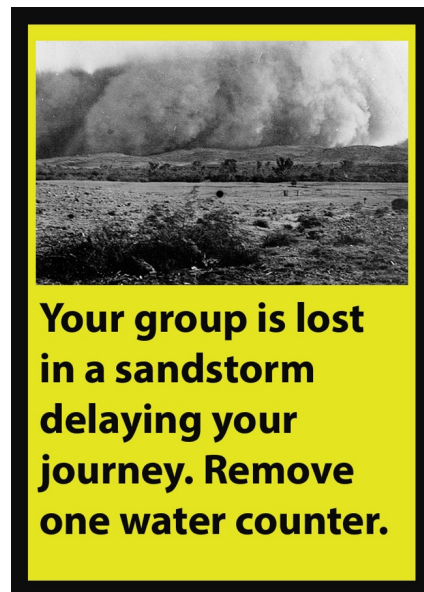


Image 4: Sandstorm Event Card. Author’s digital image, used with permission.

Students then made it to the city they were traveling to and were allowed to buy and sell goods based on the prices shown on the city card (I should note that if they had leftover water they could use it on their next trip). In addition, I reminded them that if they wanted to buy camels, to let me know so I could give them more camel cards. I set an arbitrary limit that no group could have more than four camels solely so I would not run out of cards. Students then made a choice about where to go next, answered a question, drew an event card, made a water check, and then bought and sold goods again. This continued until I thought there was only enough time for one more turn, at which point I informed the students that they were now embarking on their final journey for the game. In order to determine the winner, I then asked them to convert everything they had except for camels into *dirhem*. Surprisingly, I had pushback from some students who wanted to sell the camels, but I countered that having served them faithfully for so long, the camels deserved a nice retirement. We then found who had the most *dirhem* and they received a prize, which in my classes, are snacks from a plastic treasure chest (I tease them that I provide the finest of foods available at Publix for buy-one-take-one).

Once the game is over, a reflection is necessary in order to make sure that the learning objectives are achieved. This can be done through a discussion or simply by relating what happened in the game. Groups can be asked about how successful they were and why they achieved that level of success. Once the reflection time is over, it is important to ask students to put things back the way they were when they received them. That will make your life much easier.

I am happy to share the files and receive suggestions for improvement. Instructors should of course feel free to make it their own and to encourage students for their own ideas. For instance, one student suggested having it cost more water to go to more distant cities instead of simply one water per one camel per turn. Likewise, in a focus group, students responded that they would have liked to have had individual character cards representing their merchants. While these could just add flavor, they could also have special abilities. For instance, a merchant who was a native of a particular city might be able to gain a discount there, while another merchant might be an expert when it comes to gems and could roll a dice when gems were bought and sold to see if they can obtain a higher price.

Though set up can be time consuming and running a game for the first time can be intimidating, based on my experience in the classroom, I believe this is an effective and engaging simulation that fulfills its learning objectives. This is borne out by student responses to a survey I gave asking how much they agreed with various statements, a 1 meaning strongly disagree and a 7 indicating strong agreement, which gave the following results:

The simulation was engaging: 6.875

The simulation was educational: 6.54

The simulation was a good use of class time: 6.75

The simulation was helped review material: 6.58
Total: 6.68

Students therefore found this simulation to be both enjoyable and educational. In fact, among all the simulations that I ran for my HIST 121 course, this one was rated as the most engaging and had the highest ranking for a good use of class time. Several students also reported that it was their favorite simulation because they liked being able to figure out the problem of how to make the most money. In that sense, this simulation gave the students the most agency as they determined what to buy and where to go. I therefore hope that this simulation will be helpful in other classrooms.

Sources for further study on games and simulations in the classroom:

Farber, Matthew. *Gamify your Classroom: A Field Guide to Game-Based Learning*. New York: Peter Lang, 2014.

Makri, Vlachopoulos and Agoritsa. “The Effect of Games and Simulations on Higher Education: A Systematic Literature Review.” *International Journal of Education Technology in Higher Education*, 14, no. 22 (2017): 1–33.

Kapp, Karl M., Lucas Blair, and Rich Mesch. *The Gamification of Learning and Instruction Fieldbook: Ideas into Practice*. San Francisco: Wiley, 2014.

Zimmerman, Eric. *The Rules we Break*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2022.

Franklin Rausch is a Professor of History at Lander University in Greenwood, South Carolina. He teaches courses on World History, East Asian history, religious history, public history, and the history of comics and anime. In addition to volunteering as a living historian at Ninety Six, an American Revolutionary War National Park Site, he is doing work on games and simulations in the classroom. His research focuses on Catholicism in Korea, particularly martyrdom, violence, and memory. One of his recent publications is “Crossroads: The Meetings of Korea and the World through Pilgrimage Routes,” in *Cultural Exchanges between Korea and the West*, edited by Jong-Chol An and Ariane Perrin, 101–123 (Venice: Edizioni Ca’ Foscari, 2023). He is happy to share files for the Islamic World Trade Simulation upon request and can be reached at frausch@lander.edu.

Notes

I would like to thank the students of HIST 121 who helped playtest the simulation and the hard work of Stacey Hart and Audrey Poltorak at the print shop for help with all the cards, counters, and camels.

¹ This simulation was inspired in part by, it Matters Games: *Caravan*. Daedalic Entertainment, 2016. Steam, GoG, Retail (PC, Mac, Linux).