

Archaeologists discover ancient Mayan board game—here's what it can teach modern educators

May 17 2023, by Sara Rye and Carla Sousa



The ball game marker discovered in Chichén Itzá. Credit: INAH

Games have been played for thousands of years [in cultures across the world](#).

There's the chequerboard [game Senet](#), played in Egypt around BCE 3100. The African cup board game [Mancala](#) has been played since BCE 1400. [Chess originated in India](#) over 1,500 years ago. And the strategic game [Go](#) began in China 2,500 years ago.

The [Mayan civilization](#)—which flourished in central America from BCE 2000 to 1500 AD—had several [popular games](#). These games were thought to have the supernatural power to predict war. They include a cross-shaped board game called [Patolli](#) and a ball game called [Pok-a-Tok](#).

Recently, a [stone scoreboard](#) was found by archaeologists in Chichén Itzá, Mexico's Yucatán peninsula. The Mayan people appeared to have used it to play a ritualistic game with a heavy ball.

This game held significant cultural and religious importance for the Mayan civilization. More than a simple recreational activity, it reflected the deep-rooted beliefs and values of the Mayan people. For Mayans, games provided a platform for the expression of physical abilities, the establishment of social order and the connection between the mortal and the divine.

The game discovered in Chichén Itzá symbolizes the delicate balance between light and darkness, embodying a cosmic struggle. Like other Mayan games, it was believed to influence the fate of harvests, the climate, communities and individuals.

In Mayan culture, winning a game like this was seen as a sign of [divine favor](#). They believed that victorious people or teams had been chosen by the gods. Those who consistently lost were sometimes [offered as](#)

[sacrifices to the deities](#). Mayan games were not solely intended for entertainment, but served as [ways to connect with the divine](#).

By participating in these games, Mayan people experienced a sense of communal identity and belonging. The rituals and beliefs associated with the games fostered a collective understanding and reinforced the connections between the physical, spiritual and social realms.

What educators can learn from ancient games

The concept of the "magic circle", introduced by Dutch historian [Johan Huizinga](#), suggests that during games, players enter a temporary world with its own rules and boundaries.

This is exemplified in this Mayan find, which involves rules, suspension of normalcy and shared experiences.

The magic circle represents a ritual space that both transforms and builds a sense of community. Understanding of this concept can be used to promote inclusion and collaboration in modern day education. Playful experiences within game spaces can facilitate learning and create a sense of belonging, enabling students to grow and learn collectively.

Ancient rituals and games possess characteristics like [repetition](#), [structure and the use of symbolic objects](#) that aid students in understanding the world. They also [offer psychological and social benefits](#), fostering social bonds, reducing anxiety and improving cognitive flexibility and problem-solving skills.

Incorporating ancient and modern games in education promotes soft skills, critical thinking and inclusivity. In fostering communication, giving students agency, and crossing cultural divides, analogue games help students to understand one another better in the classroom.

Applying the lessons

The [TEGA project](#), which we led, created a toolkit to support the development and customization of inclusive analogue games for learning, with an emphasis on accessibility.

[Analogue games](#), like [tabletop or board games](#), offer a tangible experience that helps teach [abstract concepts](#) which typically lack clear physical representations. Through interaction with game elements such as cards, dice and pieces, student players can grasp [abstract ideas](#) like probability and strategy more effectively than through digital games or other media.

By considering accessibility needs through their motor, sensory and cognitive dimensions, games can be designed to accommodate a wider range of students. So by incorporating [board games](#) into higher education, teachers can create a learning environments that works for all students.

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Provided by The Conversation

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