

Luke Starkey

Starting my 20th year teaching

- Chesterton High School, Chesterton, IN
- AP / Dual Credit Micro, AP / Dual Credit Macro, On-level Econ (2 more years)
- Bachelor's from IU
- Master's from University of Delaware (MAEEEE)



A pixel art illustration of a pioneer wagon train. In the foreground, a large covered wagon is being pulled by two oxen across a river. Several people are visible inside the wagon. In the background, other wagons are further along the trail, and a herd of bison grazes in a grassy field. Snow-capped mountains are visible under a blue sky with scattered clouds.

Hunting, Fording, and Dysentery

Economics in The Oregon Trail

A pixel art illustration of a pioneer wagon train crossing a river. In the foreground, a large covered wagon is being pulled by two oxen. A man in a hat and vest sits on the oxen, and a woman in a purple dress and white bonnet sits in the wagon. A child is also visible. In the background, several other wagons are crossing the river, and a herd of bison is grazing on the grassy plain. Snow-capped mountains are visible in the distance under a blue sky with white clouds.

Alternative Title

No Pain, No Strain...Just Sit Back and Let it Drain

Dysentery and Surviving the Oregon Trail

Lesson Overview



Students will play the Oregon Trail while completing guided worksheets that focus on economic concepts. Throughout the game, students will apply economic decision making and use concepts such as scarcity, opportunity cost, trade-offs, incentives, risk, and resource allocation.

The lesson also encourages students to connect modern gaming experiences with a classic game that many older generations played. This lesson will help students explore how video games, new and old, and serve as both entertainment and as educational tools.

Objectives

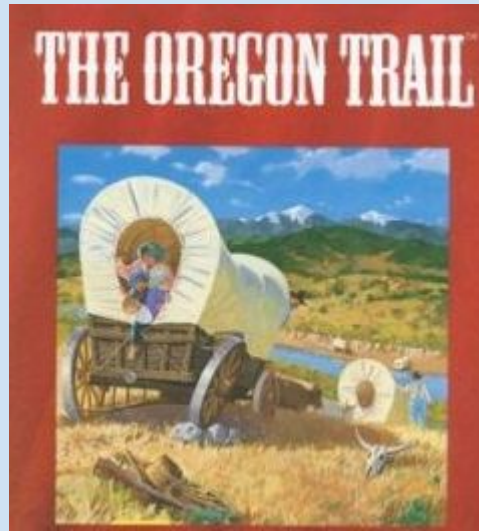


Students will be able to...

1. Analyze how scarcity affects decision making during westward expansion.
2. Evaluate trade offs and opportunity costs when choosing supplies, routes, and resources in the game.
3. Apply economic concepts such as supply and demand, scarcity, and resource allocation to real-world situations faced by travelers.
4. Examine how limited resources influence survival risk-taking and planning.
5. Manage food, money, and supplies.
6. Interpret how unexpected events in the game demonstrate economic uncertainty.
7. Discuss how video games can serve as educational tools that teach economics, history, and problem-solving skills.
8. Explore how different generations experience and relate to video games.

Materials Needed

- Computer or tablet
- Access to The Oregon Trail video game
- “Economic Decisions and the Oregon Trail” worksheets
- Writing utensil
- Projector / display



Vocabulary

- Scarcity
- Opportunity cost
- Trade-off
- Marginal thinking
- Resource allocation
- Incentives
- Risk
- Supply
- Demand
- Sunk costs
- Factors of production



Procedure

Bell Ringer / Lesson Introduction

Ask students:

- What video games do you play that require strategy and economic thinking?
- Can video games teach real-world skills?

Optional questions:

- Ask students if they have heard of or played The Oregon Trail.
- Explain that many parents, teachers, and grandparents played this game growing up.



Procedure

Review

Briefly review the vocab

Optional:

Review

- Display The Oregon Trail on a projector or smartboard so that students can see how the game is played
- Start the game by going to the general store
 - Use this as the example of scarcity, resource allocation, trade-offs, and opportunity costs
 - How many oxen, how much food, etc. all comes at a price (not just monetary price)

Procedure

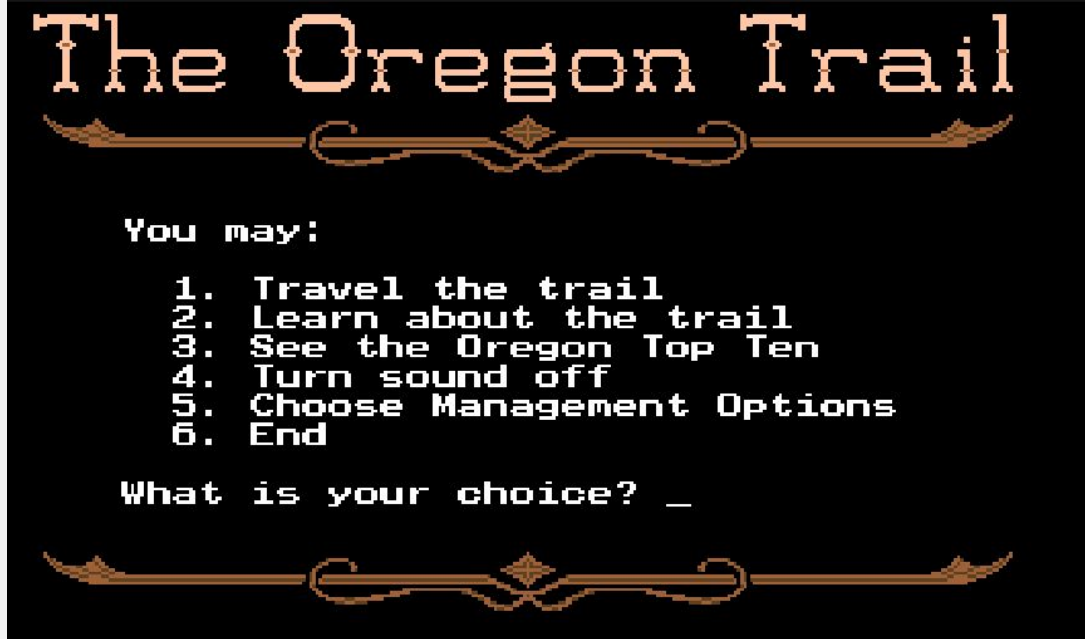
Part 1: Planning the Journey

Students complete:

- Occupation choice
- Names of the travelers
- Departure date
- Supply purchases
- Travel strategy questions

Guiding questions:

- Why did you spend more on food?
- What are you giving up by buying more oxen?
- What risks do you think you might encounter?



Part 1: Planning your trip...

Before setting out on the trail, you will have to make some decisions.

Answer the following questions before you leave Independence!

1. What is your starting occupation? Why did you pick this occupation?

2. What are the names of the people travelling with you?
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____
 - d. _____
 - e. _____

3. What month did you leave? Why did you pick that month?

4. How did you spend your starting money?
 - Oxen: \$_____
 - Food: \$_____
 - Clothing: \$_____
 - Ammo: \$_____
 - Spare
Parts: \$_____
 - Total: \$_____

5. Did you prioritize some goods over others? How did you make your decision?

Procedure

Part 2: Starting out on the trail...

Tell students that once they are travelling, if they hit 'enter' they will be taken to a menu with different options.

- Check supplies
- Look at map
- Change pace
- Change food rations
- Stop to rest
- Attempt to trade
- Talk to people
- Buy supplies (when at a fort)

Guiding questions:

- Did you change your pace?
- Did you change your food rations?
- What are the costs of changing your pace, rations, or stopping to rest?
- What is a problem with trying to trade?

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Independence
March 1, 1848

Weather: cold
Health: good
Pace: steady
Rations: filling

You may:
1. Continue on trail
2. Check supplies
3. Look at map
4. Change pace
5. Change food rations
6. Stop to rest
7. Attempt to trade
8. Talk to people
9. Buy supplies

What is your choice? _
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Part 2: Starting out on the trail...

*If you hit 'enter' while traveling you will be taken to different options.
Press 'enter' now.*

You can check supplies and look at the map here. This allows you to make sure you have enough food, spare parts, etc. for the trip. The map will come in handy when you have to make decisions on which trail to take. Besides those options...

1. Did you know that you can change the pace that you travel?
What pace are you going to choose? Why?
2. Did you know that you can change the amount of food you and your party eat under 'change food rations'? How well are you eating? Why did you pick that amount?
3. Do you plan on stopping to rest at any point on your journey? Why would someone want to rest?
4. Do you plan on trading at any point on your journey? Why would someone trade instead of simply buying supplies? What's a potential problem with trading?
5. Do you plan on hunting during your journey? Why would someone hunt instead of buying food?

Procedure

Part 3: Gameplay & Travel Logs



Remind students to fill out the 2 different travel logs while playing the game:

- Travel log
 - This shows each landmark that you will encounter
 - Write down the choice that was made, the reason for the choice, and the outcome
- Decision log
 - These are for any decisions made not at a landmark (hunting, resting, trading, etc.)

Travel Logs

Fill in both logs as you travel the trail. The first table is for checkpoints that you can reach while travelling the trail. The second log is when you have to make decisions.

Each checkpoint you reach is on the table. Put down your choice at each. For the **river crossings**, how did you get across and why did you choose that? What was the outcome? For the **forts**, write whether you stopped to rest, bought supplies, talked to people, traded, etc.

Landmark	Choice	Why?	Outcome
Ex: River Crossing	Ford the River	Faster than ferry	Lost supplies
Kansas River			
Big Blue River			
Fort Kearney			
Chimney Rock			
Fort Laramie			
Independence Rock			
South Pass			
Green River			

Decision Log

Fill in the table as you make decisions about your trip. Anytime that you stop to rest, hunt, or trade, log it here.

[illegible]

Procedure

Part 4: Economic Decisions on the Trail

1. Have students complete the chart on the worksheet.
2. Students should answer the reflection questions and then calculate their score.



Procedure

Part 5: Class discussion (optional)

Questions:

- How realistic were the challenges faced during gameplay?
- Which decisions were the toughest?
- How did luck influence outcomes?
- How did risk taking influence outcomes?
- Why do you think this game is memorable for so many people?



Procedure



Optional Extension Activities

Option 1: Have students interview an adult about playing the game. Compare experiences.

Option 2: Compare different strategies and determine which is best.

Option 3: Research real pioneers on the Oregon Trail and compare their real-life challenges to the game.

Option 4: Compare the Oregon Trail to modern survival games.

Assessment

Formative:

- Completed travel logs
- Completed decision logs
- Participation in discussions

Summative

- Economic concepts chart
- Reflection responses
- Final score analysis

Points for arriving in Oregon		
5	people in good health	7500
1	wagon	150
20	oxen	240
9	spare wagon parts	54
255	sets of clothing	1530
32760	bullets	1965
1980	pounds of food	237
	\$360.00 cash	216
		Total: 11892
For going as a farmer, your points are tripled.		
Press SPACE BAR to continue		

Exit Ticket

1. What economic concept showed up most often during the journey?
2. What was your most important decision?
3. How does this game show scarcity?
4. Would you want to travel the real Oregon Trail?
5. What current video game shows economic concepts and what are they?



Thanks for coming!

Email: Istarkey@duneland.k12.in.us

Twitter: @coach__starkey

TikTok: starkeyville_usa

Other Workshops that I present:

Don't Be a Statistic: A Guide to Fighting Teacher Burnout

Using Economics and Psychology in the Classroom

