

Mahj Life Instructor Guild | Gamification

Gamification is the application of game design elements to systems, services, or activities in order to motivate and engage participants. In other words, it's a *game within the game*—designed to optimize learning by maximizing involvement, curiosity, and retention.

Gamification adds energy, purpose, and play to your teaching toolkit. By turning core skills into interactive challenges, you help students stay focused, build confidence, and retain what they learn. Whether it's a timing drill, hand selection challenge, or decision-making game, these activities make learning stick—and make the table come alive.

The ideal time for a gamified activity is **after a meal break**, when energy needs a boost. These exercises also work well at the **start of a subsequent lesson** to review learning objectives from the previous session.

If you already include drills or exercises in your lessons, ask yourself: **“Will it gamify?”**

How to Gamify an Activity

1. **Choose a skill to target** (e.g., strengthening recollection, improving decision-making, mitigating risk).
2. **Deconstruct a familiar game** (e.g., Mah Jongg, chess, checkers, or a sport like sprinting) into its components.
3. **Study what makes it work**, what creates challenge, urgency, or engagement?
4. **Apply one or more components** to a learning activity that supports that skill.
5. **Give it a catchy name** to make it memorable and fun.
6. **Test, assess, and refine** the activity until it delivers the outcome you want.
7. **Design a reward system**—use points, levels, badges, missions, or leaderboards to motivate progress.

Have a Skill Builder to Share?

This growing collection is a collaborative effort by Mahj Life instructors who believe learning should be meaningful *and* fun. If you've created a skill builder that helps players grow in confidence, strategy, or speed—we'd love to see it!

Email your activity to care@mahjlife.com for consideration in future editions of this guide. Be sure to include:

- Name
- Description
- Purpose
- Setup
- Goal
- How It Works

Let's keep growing the game—together.



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Daron Barness

Claude's Game

Description:

In this seat-switching challenge, players start the game as usual—then suddenly swap seats mid-Charleston and continue with the hand that someone else began. It's a lively way to deepen understanding of tile interpretation, hand potential, and adaptive strategy.

Purpose:

To strengthen players' ability to analyze incomplete hands, recognize patterns in other players' decisions, and adapt quickly to unfamiliar situations.

Setup:

- Play begins as a normal game: tiles are set up, dealt, and the Charleston begins (Right–Across–Left).
- After the first Charleston pass, the instructor **pauses the game** and instructs all players to move **one seat to the right**.
- Players pick up where the previous player left off and complete the Charleston and full game from that seat.

Goal:

Build flexibility, observation skills, and adaptability by continuing a hand someone else started.

How It Works:

- Begin the game normally and pause after the first pass of the Charleston.
- Instruct players to move one seat to the right and resume play using the hand and discards left by that player.
- Play continues through the rest of the Charleston and full game.
- Debrief with reflection questions like:
 - What hand were you trying originally?
 - Could you tell what your new seat's player was aiming for?
 - Did you remember what you passed earlier?
 - Did your knowledge of others' hands help your defense?

Variations:

- Switch seats **across** or **to the left** instead of right.
- Pause at different points in the Charleston (e.g., before the final right or courtesy pass).
- Don't tell players ahead of time when or how they'll switch—keep it spontaneous!



Discussion

- What Section/Hands were you trying in original position?
- Can you recall what tiles you had *passed* for the First Charleston?
- What tiles did you *receive* in your original seat?
- How did it feel to pick up where another player left off?
- Could you easily figure out the Section or Hand choices in the second seat you occupied?
- During the game, were you able to use defensive play knowing opponent's possible Section or Hand(s) that *YOU* had originally begun?

Forced Section

Players draw a random section from the NMJL card and must commit to building a hand within that category for the entire game. It's a focused challenge that limits options to stretch decision-making and pattern recognition.

Purpose:

To build flexibility, deepen familiarity with different sections of the card, and encourage strategic thinking within tighter constraints.

Setup:

- Write each section from the NMJL card (e.g., 2468, Winds & Dragons, Consecutive Run) on individual cards—create three copies of each section.
- Place the cards in a container (e.g., basket, bag, or box).
- Each player draws one card and must select and play a hand from that section only.
- Play the game as usual, adhering to Charleston and regular game flow.

Goal:

To strengthen confidence and strategy when limited to one section, helping players discover new patterns and options outside their usual preferences.

How It Works:

- At the start of the game, each player draws a section card and is “locked in” to that section.
- All passes, hand selection, and gameplay must align with the chosen section.
- Encourage players to reflect on:
 - Was passing harder or easier with this limitation?
 - Did this focus help or hinder hand development?
 - Were you more mindful with tile selection?



- Did you consider the closed hands in your section?

Variations:

- Add the **Quints** section for advanced players.
- Add a card that allows players to choose **any closed hand**.
- Include **Singles and Pairs** for a greater challenge.

Discussion

- How did it feel to be directed to play from only one section?
- Was it easier/more difficult to Pass during the Charleston?
- Could you focus on mindful Passing since you had to concentrate on tiles toward only one section?
- Was choosing a Hand/Hands easier?
- Did you think about the Closed Hands in your category?
- How did you feel forcing tiles to a section & does this work?

Joker-Less

In this stripped-down challenge, jokers are removed from play entirely. Players must build and win hands the old-fashioned way—without wild tiles. It's a confidence-building experience that sharpens focus and expands hand selection.

Purpose:

To show that jokers are helpful but not essential, encouraging players to explore hands that rely on natural tiles and build deeper strategic resilience.

Setup:

- Play begins as usual: tiles are dealt, East receives 14 tiles.
- If a joker is in the initial hand, it must be immediately discarded and replaced from the wall.
- During gameplay, anytime a joker is drawn, it must be discarded and replaced from the wall.
- No player may call or use a discarded joker.

Goal:

To help players build and complete hands without jokers, reinforcing tile management, hand flexibility, and defensive play.

How It Works:

- All players participate in a regular game but **must discard any jokers** they receive—at the start or during the game.
- Jokers are effectively out of play for everyone.



- Encourage discussion afterward with prompts like:
 - How did you adjust your hand selection without jokers?
 - Did you explore Singles and Pairs or other lesser-used sections?
 - How did this affect your defensive strategy?

Optional Add-On:

- Remove jokers from the tile set **before** wall building for an added twist.
- Award small prizes to players who win Joker-Less games.

Discussion

- How difficult was game play without jokers?
- Was section and hand choice changed without jokers?
- Did you employ any different defensive strategies with removal of jokers?
- Did you choose a section or hand differently knowing the game had no jokers?
- Did you try the Singles and Pairs section more readily?
- What defensive strategies did you utilize in the end game knowing you did not have jokers as safe tiles to discard?



Michele Frizzell

Mastering the Charleston

This solo drill simulates the Charleston using a mock hand and incoming passes. It helps players evaluate their hand's potential, recognize patterns, and make smarter passing decisions based on risk level and hand strength.

Purpose:

To help players measure hand strength, understand discard value, and adjust strategy based on their position—underdog, contender, or frontrunner.

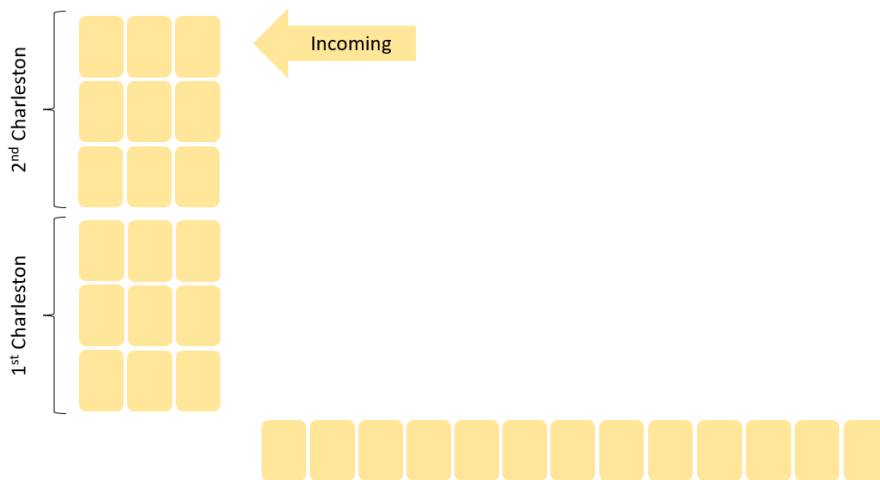
Goal:

To gain confidence in assessing hand quality and making decisions that improve tile efficiency and reduce discards.

How to create a mock-Charleston:

Take 14 random tiles.

Preview ~36 tiles and remove jokers then create a mock-Charleston by lining up six rows of three tiles each on the left side of the rack. This is the incoming column.



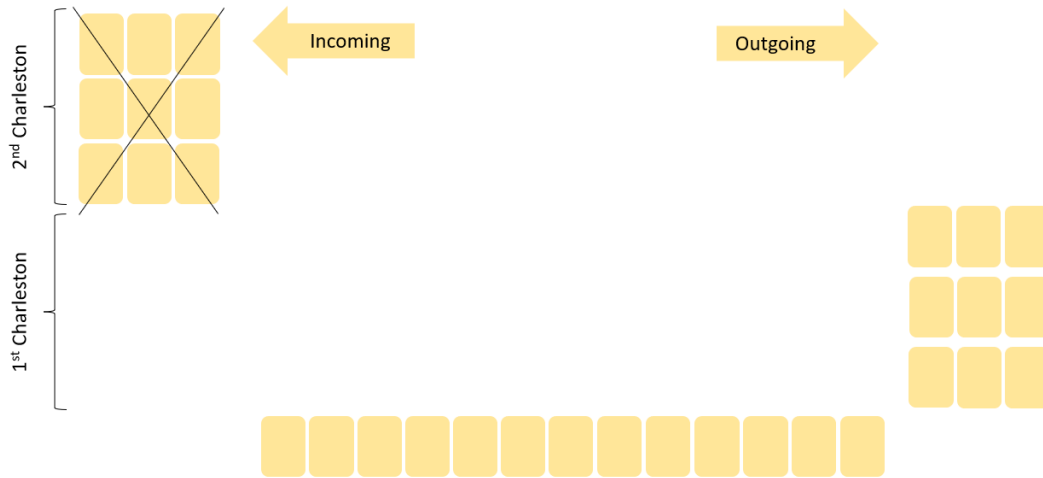
Select three tiles from the hand for the first right outgoing pass and place them on the right side of the rack upside down. This is the outgoing column.

Take the bottom row of tiles from the incoming column as the first right incoming pass.

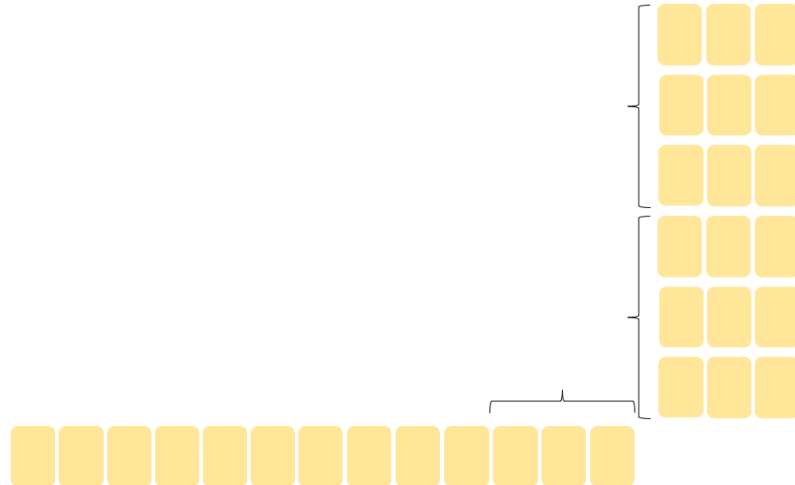
Repeat through the Charleston.

When stopping the Charleston, ignore the remaining tiles in the incoming column. Do the optional across pass using the outgoing tiles.





During the optional cross pass, mix the outgoing tiles to complete the optional cross pass.



Measuring results:

If you have more than four discards, you are likely an underdog. Full game application: It's best to take a low-risk approach while you continue hand development. If you are an underdog, take heart because you can come up from behind.

If you have four discards, you're likely a contender. Full game application: It's best to take a moderate-risk approach as you expedite hand development.

If you have less than four discards, you're likely a frontrunner! Full game application: Regardless of risk, expedite hand development.



Charleston Modeling

This mock Charleston drill helps players practice reading patterns and identifying strong starting hands using random tile draws. With jokers removed, students rely on tile structure and instinct to guide their decisions.

Purpose:

To improve recognition of hand potential, practice quick evaluations, and build confidence during the Charleston phase.

Setup:

- Have players draw **13 random tiles** to simulate their dealt hand.
- Remove all **jokers** from the pool of tiles used for mock passes.
- Prepare **six incoming passes** (three tiles each) to simulate the Charleston.
- Players build a mock Charleston, just as they would in-game, but with an emphasis on analyzing hand strength and passing strategy.

Goal:

To help players make faster, more informed decisions during the Charleston by identifying patterns, multiples, and likely directions for hand development.

How It Works:

- Set up a full mock Charleston using incoming and outgoing passes.
- Encourage players to articulate what section or hand they're leaning toward—and why.
- Ask them to identify their strongest tile features (e.g., pairs, runs, suits).
- Optional: Award small prizes to players who demonstrate strong decision-making or identify the most hand possibilities.

Variation:

Use this activity at the beginning of a class to warm up tile-reading skills or revisit strategy concepts introduced in a previous session.

Charleston Chain Reaction

This two-part drill challenges players to track their decisions, test alternate strategies, and compare outcomes. Players take photos of each pass, then recreate the scenario to see how a different path might have changed the result.

Purpose:

To build strategic awareness, pattern recognition, and decision-making confidence by comparing Plan A vs. Plan B outcomes.

Setup:

- Have players draw **13 random tiles** to form a mock hand.
- Prepare six rows of three tiles to simulate **incoming passes** (no jokers).
- Use a smartphone or tablet to take a photo of:



- The original hand
- Each incoming pass
- Final hand after Charleston
- After completing the mock Charleston, note:
 - The category and hand chosen
 - Number of discards
 - Other viable options considered

Goal:

To evaluate and reflect on decision-making by comparing different Charleston strategies using the same tile set.

How It Works:

1. **Round One – Plan A**
 - Complete the Charleston using your preferred passing strategy.
 - Record your final hand, chosen category, and number of discards.
2. **Round Two – Plan B**
 - Recreate your original hand and all passes using the photos.
 - This time, follow a different path (e.g., different category or passing choices).
 - Record the final outcome again.
3. Compare both rounds:
 - Which plan gave you fewer discards?
 - Which one felt more promising?
 - Did your instincts lead you to the stronger hand?

Optional Variation:

Use this as a group activity—compare and discuss different outcomes using the same starting tiles.

Charleston Force

In this drill, players are assigned a specific section from the NMJL card and must build a hand within that section using random tiles and a full mock Charleston. It reinforces the adaptability and flexibility needed to make any category work—even under constraint.

Purpose:

To strengthen players’ trust in the flexibility of American Mah Jongg by challenging them to work within a specific section regardless of their initial draw.

Setup:

- Prepare cards with NMJL section names (e.g., 2468, Consecutive Runs, Winds & Dragons).
- Randomly assign each player a section card.
- Have players draw **13 random tiles** for their mock hand.
- Prepare **incoming passes** (six rows of three tiles) to simulate a full Charleston.
- Remove jokers for a more realistic challenge.



Goal:

To increase comfort with unfamiliar or less-preferred sections and prove that strong hands can be built from any category with thoughtful decision-making.

How It Works:

- Players complete a full mock Charleston while staying within their assigned section.
- They must choose a hand from that category and make all passing decisions accordingly.
- Encourage reflection:
 - Was it harder or easier to pass with this constraint?
 - Did you find multiple hand options?
 - Did this change how you normally evaluate tiles?

Optional Add-On:

- Award small prizes to players who complete the drill with a clear hand in their section.
- Repeat the drill using a different section each time to build range.

Charleston Sprints

In this fast-paced challenge, players race against the clock to complete a mock Charleston. With time limits set by skill level, this activity builds confidence and encourages efficient decision-making.

Purpose:

To help players develop speed and accuracy during the Charleston phase, preparing them for real-time pressure in games and tournaments.

Setup:

- Each player selects **13 random tiles** to form a mock hand.
- Prepare **incoming pass tiles** (six sets of three) to simulate the Charleston.
- Remove jokers to increase difficulty and accuracy in assessment.
- Use a timer (or stopwatch) to track each player's total time from start to finish.

Goal:

To reduce hesitation and sharpen Charleston decision-making with consistent timed practice.

How It Works:

- Players perform a full mock Charleston from start to finish, including all six passes.
- Time each player from the first pass to the end of the final pass.
- Compare the results to the skill benchmarks:
 - **Novice:** Under 4 minutes
 - **Intermediate:** Under 3 minutes
 - **Advanced:** Under 2 minutes

Optional: Repeat the sprint and challenge players to beat their personal best.

Variation:

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Add a short debrief after the sprint:

- Did time pressure affect your passing choices?
- Did you skip tiles you normally wouldn't?
- Would you have chosen the same hand without a timer?

Optional Reward:

Give small prizes or recognition to those who meet or exceed their level's benchmark time.

Comprehensive

Pacemaker: Fast-Focus. Fearless Play.

Pacemaker is a lighthearted training tool that helps players build speed without pressure. Each student starts with a few tokens to “buy time” during tough decisions—but with every game, those tokens decrease. It's a playful yet powerful way to sharpen focus, reduce delays, and prepare for the pace of experienced players, online timers, and competitive play.

Purpose:

This activity helps new players develop the ability to make timely decisions during play. Whether playing online with an 8–10 second timer or in tournaments with 50–55 minutes for four games, learning to play at pace is essential.

Setup:

- Each player receives **three tokens** (such as a bead, button, or game markers).
- Set a **decision time limit** for each turn (suggested: 20, 10, or 8 seconds depending on experience).
- Use a timer or app to track decision time; if no device is available, players count in their heads.

Goal: Strengthen fast, confident decision-making under time pressure.

How It Works:

Players may “spend” a token if they need a few extra seconds to think beyond the set time limit. Once their tokens are gone, they must make all decisions within the time limit.

The number of available tokens decreases each game:

Game 1: Start with 3 tokens

Game 2: Start with 2 tokens

Game 3: Start with 1 token

Game 4: No tokens—use the timer only!

Guidelines:



- Each player places 3 tokens on their rack (use buttons, beads, or game markers).
- Establish a time limit (suggested: 20, 10, or 8 seconds).
- A token may be spent by removing it from the rack *before the time limit* to buy extra time for that turn.
- Once spent, tokens are not replenished between games.
- The goal is not perfection but progress. Encourage players to reflect after each game on what slowed them down (e.g., scanning hands, recalling rules, indecision) and adjust.

Tokens are **not replenished** between games. Once a player is out of tokens, the timer is their guide.

Tip: Invite players to reflect after each game: How did it feel? What slowed you down? What improved?

Variation for Group Play:

Make it a friendly challenge: players who finish all four games without using a token earn a bonus point, sticker, or small reward.

Sans Charleston

In this minimalist challenge, players skip the Charleston entirely and play their dealt hand as-is. With no passes allowed, they must evaluate and build from the original 13 tiles—just like in some house rules or tournament formats.

Purpose:

To sharpen hand evaluation skills and help players identify natural patterns and trends without the benefit of the Charleston.

Setup:

- Play a regular game of American Mah Jongg.
- Deal tiles as usual (East receives 14).
- **Skip the Charleston**—no passing allowed.
- Proceed directly to gameplay.

Goal:

To increase confidence in making hand decisions based solely on the dealt tiles, and to improve adaptability when tile exchange is not an option.

How It Works:

- Players evaluate their dealt hand and commit to a section or hand without any passes.
- Encourage players to ask:
 - What patterns emerge without passing?
 - How did this impact your section and hand selection?
 - Were you more aware of efficiency and discard value?



- Optional: Discuss whether they would have changed their approach if a Charleston had been allowed.

Optional Variation:

Offer small rewards or recognition to players who successfully win a game without the benefit of a Charleston.

Sans Jokers

In this stripped-down variation, jokers are removed from the game entirely. Players must build hands using natural tiles only, making strategic choices without the safety net of wild tiles.

Purpose:

To build player confidence in hand development without relying on jokers and to demonstrate that winning is possible—even without wild tiles.

Setup:

- Before building the wall, remove all **jokers** from the tile set.
- Deal and play a regular game of American Mah Jongg—just without jokers.
- No replacements, no exceptions.

Goal:

To reinforce flexible hand selection, encourage use of less joker-dependent hands, and prove that a well-built natural hand can still win.

How It Works:

- Players draw, discard, and play as usual, but with no jokers in the game.
- Encourage strategic conversations before or after the game:
 - Which section did you choose without jokers—and why?
 - Did you consider Singles and Pairs more readily?
 - How did your defensive play shift without jokers as safe discards?

Optional Variation:

Offer this challenge as a friendly competition—award small prizes to winners or to those who get closest to Mah Jongg using only natural tiles.



Judy Pacanowski

Mah Jongg Force

Add an element of mystery and excitement to your game night with the *Secret Category Challenge*! Each player draws a hidden category that will secretly guide their play. The fun twist? No one knows what others are aiming for—until someone wins! This activity sharpens observation, focus, and adaptability while creating lively post-game discussions.

Purpose:

To encourage players to focus strategically on one category while concealing their intentions, thereby improving their ability to build and disguise hands under pressure.

Setup:

- Prepare slips of paper with the names of all hand categories on the NMJL card.
- Place slips in a bowl for each table.
- Each player draws one category at random.
- Players must keep their category a secret from everyone else.

Goal:

To declare mah jongg on a hand from the secretly assigned category—and be the only winner at your table to match it.

How It Works:

- Each player draws a category from the bowl and keeps it secret.
- Play one complete game as usual, using the drawn category as each player's hidden target.
- When someone declares mah jongg, they reveal their hand.
- After all tables have finished, the categories are revealed.
- Any player who wins with the category they drew earns a special prize.
- Players who didn't win or won outside their category get nothing this round—but everyone gains sharper strategy skills and a few good laughs!



Closing Thoughts on Gamification

Gamification isn't just about fun—it's about function. By turning key skills into playful challenges, instructors can unlock deeper engagement, increase retention, and make learning feel active and empowering. Whether you're reinforcing decision-making, timing, or flexibility, a well-crafted skill builder transforms routine drills into memorable experiences.

These activities aren't just games within the game—they're purposeful tools designed to help students build confidence, stay curious, and connect more deeply with both the mechanics and the joy of Mah Jongg.

Use them. Adapt them. Share your own. Together, we're raising the standard for how Mah Jongg is taught—and making every lesson feel like a win.

