Playing Video Games in the Classroom: Simulating an Experiential Learning Cycle to Teach International Affairs

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Author Biography

Jeffrey Berejikian is a Josiah Meigs Distinguished Teaching Professor at the University of Georgia. He offers a variety of courses in foreign policy and international affairs across a broad range of formats including large introductory courses, special topics, FYOS, and graduate-level seminars. His classes examine the role of cognitive decision making in foreign policy behavior, which is also his primary research interest.

The Instructional Challenge

There are two inherent obstacles to effective teaching in the discipline of International Affairs. The first is familiar to many programs. As students enter the major, few have had any real exposure to the subject matter. In international affairs, issues like nuclear deterrence, globalization, or diplomacy seem remote and students initially struggle to see a connection between their studies and their future work. The second is more specific to our discipline. Undergraduate students typically cannot practice actual foreign policy decision making while they are in residence on campus, and not all students have the financial resources to pursue highly competitive—often unpaid—internships during the summer.

The challenge here is to replicate a traditional experiential learning environment through simulation in a way that encourages students to practice and hone the skills required of them as they begin careers as a foreign policy professional.[2]

Solution

One way to address this challenge is to develop foreign policy simulations using off-the-shelf video games. The purpose here is to create a "simulated experiential learning cycle" in the classroom on topics, like foreign policy, that do not otherwise lend themselves easily to active learning. In this class, students create, implement, and evaluate various foreign policy strategies.

We currently use a version of Civilization IV. The game is "open-ended" in that there is no single objective for players. Student-teams manage assigned countries with varied political, cultural, economic, and geographic characteristics. They pursue their government's national interests through a variety of strategies that result in both cooperation and conflict.

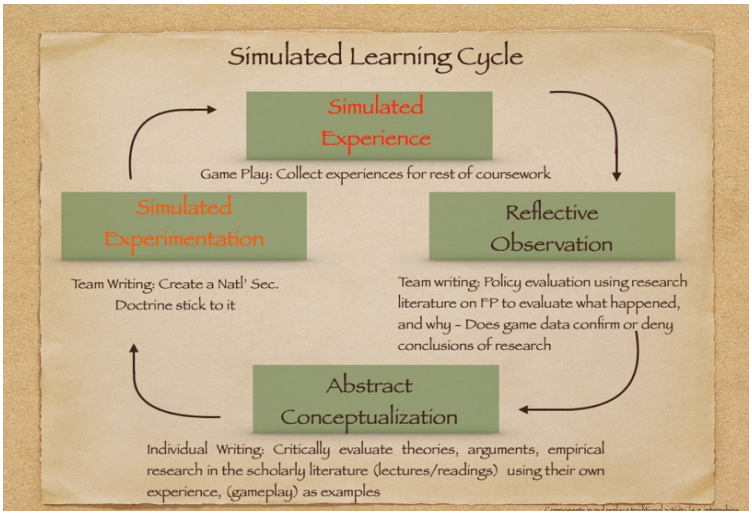

Figure 7: The adapted "simulated" experiential learning cycle and associated classroom activities.

[2] For a summary of the experiential learning cycle, see Kolb, David A. *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. FT Press, 2014.

The primary benefit of computer games is that they motivate aspects of real foreign policy decision making that are difficult to reproduce in a traditional classroom. Students compete to accomplish their goals simultaneously, under acute time pressures, while confronting significant complexity. Because commercial games are designed to be engaging, they provide an immersive experience that is otherwise difficult to manufacture.

Course Structure

The course meets in a single three-hour session each week, divided into three blocks. In the first block, we discuss the readings and their potential significance to the simulation. The second block involves gameplay in which student teams play their country roles. The third block is a debrief. We summarize what happened in the game and critically evaluate how the readings did (or did not) relate to decisions in the simulation. This format forces students to continually integrate the academic course material into their role-playing.

Keys to Success

In a well-designed simulation, students spend most of their time engaging in diplomacy and negotiation outside of the game itself. This encourages students to experiment (and often fail) with the strategies and concepts presented to them in class. The game sets the environment, crates challenges, and is the mechanism by which they implement decisions and observe their consequences. While the details would be different, the basic design concepts below would apply to any semester-long immersive simulation:

Develop a Modular Syllabus

It is critical to align reading material with the real-time student experiences in the simulation. Some semesters are characterized by conflict, others by cooperation. Often the focus shifts across issues within a simulation as it evolves. Developing a modular syllabus ensures that the academic material remains relevant to the content of gameplay. Modularity requires instructors to adapt on the fly, removing readings and replacing them with relevant material. This also ensures that students are reading about the challenges they are experiencing in the game, and so the experiential learning cycle remains intact.

Integrate Game Experiences into Every Assignment

A traditional exam in a foreign policy class might ask students to apply course concepts to the behavior of a country that they have never visited. By contrast, in this class, students use the simulation to evaluate the integrity of course concepts against *their actual behavior*. Compared to the decisions of a government that they may have read about in a textbook, students are much more intimately familiar with the motivations of their own choices and so they have more "data" to confront the concepts offered in class.

Teach beyond the Syllabus

Every student team is experiencing a different "reality" in the game with a unique set of challenges and potential solutions. While there is a set of shared concepts that all students must master, each team also needs a unique set of skills to solve the problems specific to their country. Much of the vital teaching, therefore, involves topics that never show up on the exam. However, if every assignment (below) is connected to the simulation, then students can integrate this material into other aspects of their coursework. To some degree, this also means students will emerge from the class with different skills and experiences. That is fine.

Detach Game Outcomes from Course Grades

The first question students often ask is, "What happens if I lose? Will I fail the class?" Therefore, students must understand that the game outcome has no bearing whatsoever on their grades. This is now the first thing I communicate on the first day of class. It is essential not just for students who might not have experience with video games and are therefore understandably anxious. It also tempers the expectations of

overly-enthusiastic "experienced gamers" who might focus too much on game mechanics and neglect the actual purpose of the class.

Assignments

Assignments should be writing-intensive and designed to mirror activities that students would undertake outside the classroom. In addition, each exercise must encourage students to deploy course concepts to understand their simulation experience. While the range of possible assignments is varied, the following serves as a core around which additional work can be organized:

National Security Doctrine (NSD): After studying real-world examples to model, student teams design NSDs tailored to the unique mix of characteristics—i.e., political institutions, economic organization, culture, and national power—for their assigned country. A key component in this assignment is that students must attempt (and often fail) to design a foreign policy strategy without being able to anticipate the specific future challenges they will confront in the game - a valued and critical skill.

Evidence-Based Policy Analysis: At key junctures in the semester, student teams evaluate the success of their NSDs. This assignment serves two functions. First, it confronts students with a difficult, real-world task: derive objective measures to assess the success of policy goals that often defy simple quantification (e.g., "support democratic values" or "increase global influence"). Second, students must explain policy successes and failures in terms of the academic concepts they receive in class. This encourages them to deploy their academic training as a guidepost for evaluating their own decisions and experiences.

Traditional Testing: Individually, students must demonstrate mastery of core concepts. Examinations ask students to use their decisions in the game as "data" to test and critique core concepts.

Elite Interviewing: At the end of the simulation, students receive training in conducting structured interviews - an important data collection skill in itself. They then interview each other to understand the decisions and motivations of other countries in the game. Appreciating a foreign policy issue from your rival's perspective is a critical skill in effective diplomacy. During interviews, students are often shocked to find that their counterparts perceived shared challenges from a radically different point of view.

Beyond all of this, when students are given responsibility for dictating how a simulation unfolds, their level of engagement increases, their learning improves, and everybody has more fun.