

Crossing Borders: Creating Games to Simulate Cultural Interaction for Anthropology Classrooms

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Abstract

Simulation games have recently skyrocketed in popularity as a teaching tool, with applications ranging from business schools to sociology, and even military training. Many have already been designed to model interactions with a foreign culture, and all the issues and complications that can arise in such a situation. However, games such as BaFa' BaFa' can only focus in on one of Hofstede's cultural dimensions. Their simplicity creates caricatures of cultures which merely teach basic communication skills. No currently existing board game partners with technology to replicate complex, realistic situations. My project attempts to rectify the situation and takes simulation a step further, by creating a simulation game that allows the student to interact with individual, distinct members of a fictional culture through gameplay. Together with traditional learning methods, games such as this can be a key tool for students to experience and realize their own internal biases before bringing them out into the world outside the classroom. This game, as opposed to other cultural simulation games that already exist, intends for the player to grow and learn about the fictional culture contained within, rather than experience discord.

Game	Pros	Cons
BaFa' BaFa'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Easy to learn Many players Good for younger school children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Each synthetic culture is unrealistically simple Conflict is relatively easy and doesn't require struggle to resolve
After Nafta	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduces complex concepts Provides a realistic experience of conducting difficult business 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficult to learn Requires long term dedication from a few players Focuses on simplistic, self-interested solutions
Dog Eat Dog	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emotionally powerful Infinitely replayable Realistic simulation of colonialism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Requires total player commitment to role for game success Can be emotionally stressful to relationships
Bargna	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elicits realistic player response Helps players learn to resolve conflict 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Models conflict through rule disputes rather than more subtle cultural shifts Cannot be replayed, or played if you know the game

Table 1: Examples of the pros and cons associated with existing simulation board games that focus on the interaction between different cultures. My game strives to fill the niche left by all of these games and create something that provides a service none of them did: a realistic, fictional culture where the player's goal is to learn and adapt rather than to work through conflict.

Introduction

Anthropology, the study of humans, relies heavily on being able to interact with humans. Anthropological research often involves ethnographic work and cultural immersion. Understanding a culture completely alien from one's own is not just difficult, it can also be frightening, and daunting to a student. There are also the ethical concerns of untrained students bringing misconceptions from their insulated classroom settings into the real world. This lack of reflexivity in undergraduate and graduate work keeps students from recognizing their own internal biases before beginning their research. Although the concepts of ethnography are taught in the classroom, it is difficult for a student of anthropology or other ethnographically based studies to be able to get hands-on experience practicing these techniques outside of academia. As a result, a student's first time conducting research may also be their first time truly using the tools of the anthropological trade. There is no test tube culture to practice on that can be brought into a lab under supervision as other sciences have.

Board games are an often overlooked but widely praised educational tool. They are currently used in higher level medical training (Bochennek, 2007) and extensively utilized in business schools (Lean, 2006). Video games that layer in real world concepts or societal issues have shown an increase in player awareness and activism because gaming is an active and engaging medium (The NMC Horizon Report, 2012). Gaming forces the player to focus, and places them as a character inside the issue itself. Most importantly, a kind of gaming called "simulation gaming" has become increasingly well known as an educational tool. Simulation gaming is, as the name implies, a way to simulate real life situations in a game environment. This method has spawned games that model inter-cultural tensions for business or political science students looking to go abroad. These games use "synthetic cultures" to allow the students a safe space in which to mess up and make offensive mistakes before actually traveling to the country. They also aim to teach the player in the broader sense what and what not to do when having important business meetings with members of another culture (Hofstede, 1999). The potential of this system for use in teaching anthropology is enormous. There are however a number of drawbacks associated with the current range of simulation games (Table 1).

This study follows the principles of already existing simulation games to create a new one, that simulates being an anthropologist doing field work in a small village. A fictional culture was devised from the synthetic culture guidelines laid out by Hofstede (1984) (Figure 1) as well as the incorporation of research about several Bantu-Speaking groups in Southern Africa. Bantu speakers were selected due to the plethora of longitudinal research conducted on them. The non-static nature of culture is visible through the changing research, and helped me to shape a dynamic and realistic fictional culture based upon them. The goal is to create a storyline that the player follows, making decisions and notes about their observations of the culture. At the end, the players discuss why they came to their conclusions, and, if errors were made, discuss how they could avoid similar jumps in logic in the future.

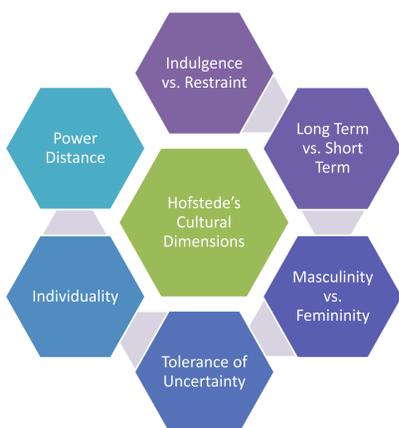


Fig 1: Hofstede's six dimensions of culture. These are commonly used in simulation games to approximate fictional cultures which trend heavily upon one of these axes. BaFa' BaFa', for example, contrasts a high individuality society with a low individuality society to create inherent conflict. Other games, such as Dog Eat Dog, put players in differing roles within the same society to show the strains of power difference and class struggle.

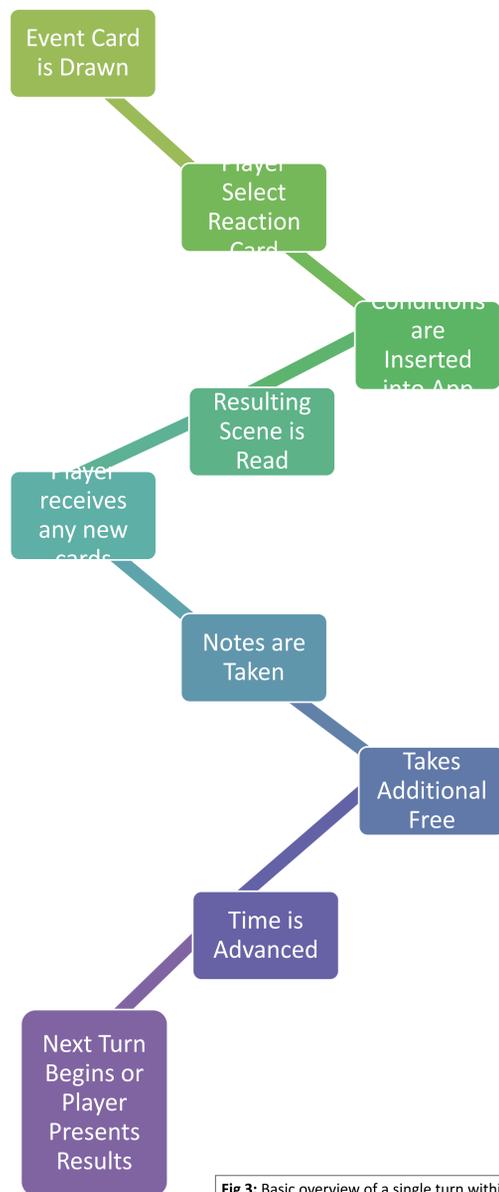


Fig 3: Basic overview of a single turn within the game. A player will go through one in game year of research before presenting her results. Each turn represents an important event occurring in the Antabi village where the player is working, and gives the player the chance to ask questions about it in order to gain a better picture of the Antabi culture of divorce.

Methods

Research began by utilizing basic game design techniques (Figure 2) and looking into the qualities of synthetic cultures, both as they have been laid out by Hofstede (Figure 1) and as they have been used in previous cultural simulation games. Hofstede defines a culture on six dimensions. Most simulation games that involve cultural disputes create their synthetic cultures along one particular axis, such as Bafa' Bafa' which mainly models the difference in an Individualist culture versus a Collectivist one. This project's goal, however, was to create a synthetic culture that was more realistic, such as an anthropology student might encounter out in the field. The Bantu-Speaking regions of Southern Africa were chosen because they have been extensively studied and they all have enough features in common between them, that different pieces of each can be taken to create an entirely fictional but realistic seeming culture. This synthetic culture draws mainly on the ethnographic data for family structure and marriage selection practices. Additionally, some artistic license was used to ensure cultural anonymity.

The game itself (Figure 3) centers around the player, a new anthropologist, off to do her research on the "Antabi" people. She is trying to write a paper on the culture of divorce present in the group. This focus on family structure gives the players many chances to make missteps, for example what to do when faced with words she associates with her own culture like "divorce" or "cousin", which do not mean the same to the Antabi. Much of the design was dedicated towards creating mechanics which would give the player as much agency as possible. The game strives to incorporate many of the actions the player would want to take in order to talk with and learn about the Antabi throughout the time she spends with them.

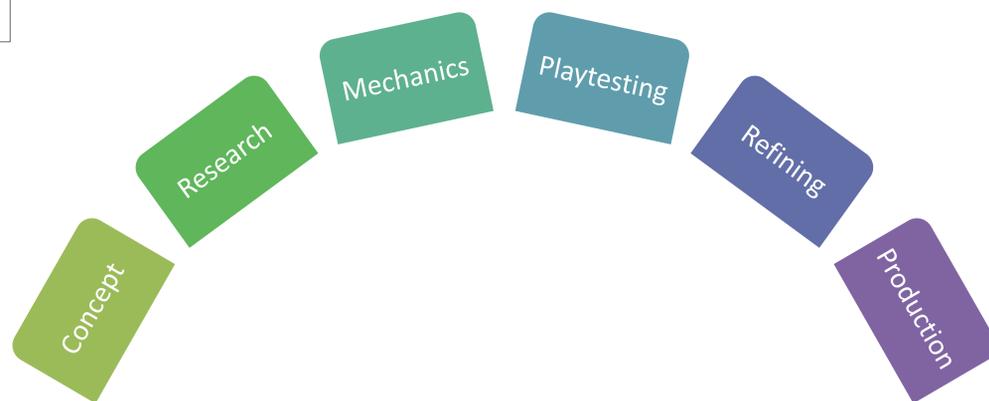


Fig. 2: Overview of the basic steps followed in game design. Many times they are repeated, or done out of order, but all are required before reaching the final product of a published game.

Discussion & Conclusion

The journey to create multiple individuals from a fictional culture was more daunting than anticipated at the onset of this research. I decided to impose a time limit upon the game to lock the player into experiencing a set amount of "events" before they have to draw their conclusions. Events spanned from a local festival to a simple day of farming, and at each event I wanted to allow the player to speak with the nearby members of the Antabi people. This would require a lot of text on the back of cards, especially if the player had the freedom to ask multiple different questions to the same individual at different times.

The dilemma of giving players as much choice as possible versus the physical limitations associated with game components eventually drove me towards including a technological supplement. Many new games have been using iOS applications to increase randomness and replayability. By storing a script in an app, the player can type in the circumstances of how far she is in the game, select what action she wants to take with what character, and receive the narrative description of the response. This solution would keep game components simple, and allow me to add as much complexity to the Antabi culture and player choice as time and design space allow me.

Given the amount of time necessary to create this app, the game is not ready to be used in a classroom setting, but the ideas and goals behind using board games as teaching tools are important to embrace. Simulation games have a chance to give students experiences they could never get to have until they are professionals in the field. This game, and others like it, could give students a way to realize their mistakes without consequences

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