

ROLE PLAYING WITH SYNTHETIC CULTURES: THE EVASIVE RULES OF THE GAME

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ABSTRACT

This article sums up ten years of experience with over 1400 participants of simulation games using synthetic cultures. Synthetic cultures are scripts for role players. They are derived from the five dimensions of culture in Hofstede's model. Playing the synthetic cultures leads to dynamics that mimic real cultural orientations. Yet real culture and other game-external factors are more important for determining game processes than are the synthetic cultures. The article discusses how the real world influences the game world. It mentions some common trends and misinterpretations that occur when playing. It concludes that synthetic cultures are a useful training instrument.

CONTEXT & RELEVANCE

Management excellence is the holy grail of today's 'first world'. Top managers are culture heroes, enjoying immense salaries and mixes of admiration and envy. Special schools have been founded to teach management skills to young, aspiring high-school graduates, and expensive mid-career management training courses abound.

But what is it that is taught in these schools? In fact most textbooks are of US or UK origin, and carry implicit values from those societies. This is at odds with the fact that organized life, both in companies and in government, is increasingly trans-national, and different societies have widely differing organizational practices. Managers must adapt to the mindsets of the managed in order to be adequate. Those who operate outside their own country often learn this from painful experience. The business world is littered with failed mergers. Therefore, there is an urgent need for tools to teach cross-cultural skills to management students.

This contribution is about one class of such tools: simulation role-plays that use so-called synthetic cultures as a way of making different national cultures playable. The article assembles findings from several tens of sessions with synthetic culture games that I developed and at which I acted as a game leader. After ten years, it is now time to draw a big picture.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Pedersen & Ivey (1993) invented the role scripting device of synthetic cultures. They used four of them as a device for teaching counselling skills. Hofstede & Pedersen (1999) added six more, and introduced their use for simulation gaming. In *Exploring Culture*, Hofstede, Pedersen & Hofstede (2002) present synthetic cultures to a wide audience. Synthetic cultures are simplified value systems that participants to a role-playing exercise can use to creep into the skin of somebody from a culture that differs from their own. In this way, cross-cultural contacts at work or in other settings can be simulated. The synthetic cultures are based on Hofstede's work on dimensions of national culture (Hofstede & Hofstede 2005). This work defines culture as 'that which distinguishes one group of people from another', more specifically, the extent to which the unspoken rules of the social game differ across groups. Hofstede distinguishes five basic social issues. They relate to identity, hierarchy, gender roles, the unknown, and the future. Each of these gives rise to a continuum, of which the extremes are described in each of the ten synthetic cultures.

A synthetic culture consists of a number of social rules. For instance, the script for the COLLEC culture, in which the group rather than the individual is the unit of social identity, includes the following seven golden rules:

- 1 Members of one's in-group (organisation, extended family) are very close, whereas other, out-group people are very distant.
- 2 Harmony should always be maintained and direct confrontations avoided.
- 3 Relationships are more important than the task at hand. Much time is spent on greeting and farewell rituals.
- 4 Laws, right and opinions differ by group.
- 5 Trespassing leads to shame and loss of face for the entire in-group.
- 6 The relationship between employer and employee is perceived in moral terms, like a family link.
- 7 Spoken communication uses imprecise style. Discreet non-verbal clues, such as tone and pauses, are crucial. The speaker adapts to the listener.

It is not hard to imagine how a team that enacts this set of rules could be misunderstood by a typical Western-style delegation during negotiations. European countries hold comparatively individualistic values that are opposed to this set: they value honesty and directness, do not necessarily mix private and working life, and hold that rules should be the same for everyone. This can make them blunt, cold and uncivilized in the eyes of people with collectivist mindsets. Thus when two delegations with different synthetic cultures meet in a simulation game, misunderstandings, irritation, and feelings of estrangement can occur that mimic those that happen in real cross-cultural settings. But because synthetic cultures represent single value dimensions instead of the multifaceted cultures of real countries, it is comparatively easy to debrief the simulation game. Synthetic cultures are both scripts and analytical tools.

To distinguish them from the names of real culture dimensions, the synthetic cultures shall be called by their official names in this article. These names are self-evident: COLLEC / INDIV for collectivism versus individualism, HIPOW / LOPOW for large versus small power distance, FEMI / MASCU for femininity versus masculinity, UNCTOL / UNCAVO for uncertainty tolerance versus avoidance, SHOTOR / LOTOR for short-time versus long-time orientation.

EMPIRICAL BASIS

From the moment that synthetic cultures were used for simulation gaming, I acted as a facilitator to numerous sessions with various simulation games that used them. These sessions have involved participants from many countries on all continents, and from many professional backgrounds. Almost all these participants belonged to the intellectual elite of their country. The stated aim of all the games was to make participants experience cross-cultural conflict as a way of generating awareness of the nature and of the pervasiveness of such conflicts.

The games and venues include conferences, MBA courses, university courses, and in-house industry settings. Most of them had a multinational audience. The games are

- The Windmills of our Minds (WU '95, ICIS '95, UvT '96). About a communication architecture for support and maintenance information about a new product-market combination in a multinational. See Hofstede (2000).
- A Trade Mission (ISAGA '97, Lusofona '98, Polaroid '00, SIETAR NI '03, '04). Negotiating deals at an international trade conference. See Hofstede, Pedersen & Hofstede (2002, chapter 9).
- A Daughter in Danger (TUD/UM/WU '98, TUD '99). About a possible business takeover. Adapted and slightly simplified as The Takeover Trio. See Bots & Hofstede (2004).
- Afternoon Tea Game (LSE '00, '01, '02, '03, '04, WU '04). A real-food event for groups of over 100 participants.
- The Strawberry Chain (ICCM '98, '00, '02). Another real-food large group event. See www.informatics.wur.nl under 'Food for Thought'.
- Ice Cream Game, WICC '03. Another real food event. Not published.
- An Ideal Job Candidate (UvA '99, HvA '05). To be found in Dutch on www.informatics.wur.nl as 'De Ideale Werknemer'.

- Foreign Assignments (IBO '02, '03, '04). Small scenes featuring expatriates in meetings. Not published.
- Follow-the-Sun Global Technology Team (SIETAR 2000). Collaborative design task simulating distributed software development. This game was led by Erran Carmel. See Hofstede, Pedersen & Hofstede (2002, chapter 10).

The numbers of participants per session ranged from 15 to 150. In all, experiences are summarised from 27 sessions with 1450 participants from over 50 countries in all continents. Variants of these games have been created by other moderators and are being played around the world.

Game process

The games included two levels of scripting:

- Synthetic culture scripting. Participants were divided into groups, and each group was assigned a synthetic culture.
- Role scripting. Participants played particular roles within their team, e.g. boss, applicant, delegation leader, and so on.

During the games, getting acculturated to synthetic culture while in role was the first step. The second and most intense phase was a cross-cultural meeting with a stated aim that made the meeting conflict-prone, e.g. to design an artefact or to agree on an information architecture, on commercial deals, or on job requirements. Some participants acted as observers during these meetings.

Most of the games were debriefed according to a similar overall framework. First, in the same setting as the two-team cross-cultural meeting, the following took place:

- Let all participants blow off steam
- Let the observers present their findings and let the others comment.

Then a plenary session was held with the following elements:

- If a win / lose element was present, which was the case in almost all games, then prizes were awarded
- Observers briefly reported on what happened in their meeting, to give other teams a glance of the differences between meetings
- A discussion was held on the relevance of the game for practice.

METHODOLOGY

Predictable patterns of behaviour have occurred across games and types of audience. Given the wide variety of external factors that can influence the course of a simulation game, and the limited uniformity of samples, no other method was adopted. More formalized collection of data was carried out for a number of sessions (see e.g. Hofstede et al. 1999, Hofstede 2000). This yields some interesting results. But in order to come up with empirically valid observations about all the contingencies that will be touched upon in this paper, large samples and great methodical rigour would be needed, such as have not been available. Moreover, the act of collecting data through questionnaires could change the relationship between game leader and participants, which could affect the process and outcome of the session. Typically, formal data collection about an event tends to conceptually isolate it from its historical and contextual surroundings; see, for instance, the conceptual research model in Hofstede (2000) that includes as its main variables group, task, technology, design process and design outcome. Hofstede, Walczuch et al (1999) even have a more elaborate research model in which they created operational variables such as cultural values and team history through questionnaire items. My experience makes me suspect that such a conceptualization, however elaborate and despite its merits, may endanger the relevance of the findings, because it fails to capture enough of the historical and contextual surroundings that are essential for what happens during the game. Quite apart from this, even if the perfect conceptualization and data collection modes could be found, the number of variables to take into account is so large that a data set would be needed of perhaps a thousand comparable game sessions at the least. Nobody could realistically be expected to collect such a bulk of data. After all one

cannot make participants play repeated game sessions just for the sake of observing them and still expect these sessions to be played with full conviction.

In conclusion, this paper can be seen as exploratory, interpretative, but strong on bird's eye perspective.

The main research questions are

- 1 Did playing the game contribute to the stated aim of increasing cross-cultural awareness?
- 2 What factors affected the course and outcome of the games? Notably, what real-world factors that were not scripted or controlled for, did so?

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Do the games increase cross-cultural awareness? Participants are typically quick to state that the game experience has been an eye opener, or that it has increased their understanding of cross-cultural conflict. They especially comment on how good it is to really experience a culture from inside. But there has not been any follow-up research to assess whether they actually changed their behaviour after having played the game. Such a follow-up would be very worthwhile, but it is difficult to realize. So for now, we shall just have to take the participants' word for it. It may help to take the second research question, and then return to the first one. The factors that affect the course and outcome of the game might, after all, equally affect what participants learn from it.

The second research question is about factors, notably non-controlled ones, that affect the game. Here is a list of possible ones.

Participants' intrinsic qualities

Personality

Personality is used here in the sense of the 'Big Five' personality traits of Openness to experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism (McCrae & Costa, 2003). No formal personality assessment has been carried out at any of the sessions. It was obvious that participants differed widely in enthusiasm, in anxiety, and in acting performance. They take their personality with them into the game.

Human nature

Human nature means the basic social drives that make humans tick: the drives for sex, affiliation, novelty, and dominance. All of these are very relevant to simulated negotiations, although the first one is obviously taboo. None has been implied in any formal data collection.

Culture

Culture means the rules of the social game, as defined by Hofstede & Hofstede (2005). It includes the five issues introduced earlier in this paper. All participants are acculturated in various groups: they have a place and family of origin, as well as a varying number of additional group memberships that imply rules for social behaviour, e.g. a professional culture. To distinguish them from synthetic cultures, we shall talk about participants' real culture.

Effect of personalities, human nature and cultures

The most generic finding, one that game facilitators will easily recognize, has to do with the emotional dynamics of playing a social game. Most participants experienced some tension at the start of the game. As a rule this was a festive tension, but some were plainly anxious. Playing the game was enjoyable to most, and cathartic for some, so that the most obvious outcome of the games for most participants was to have had a lot of fun. Having been successful in the game context was a salient part of the experience to participants. It was also conspicuous that most teams clung together after the formal end of the game.

This overarching result can be interpreted as a restatement of the fact that we humans are intensely social animals, who will use any organized activity as an arena for satisfying their basic drives. Affiliation and dominance are the two drives that are obviously at stake here. The anxiousness of participants can be explained by the possibility to trade in affiliation and in

dominance, together with the possibly too-novel way in which this had to be done. In fact it is precisely the fact that a game session, though ‘only a game’, is a real social arena that makes this form of training so memorable to participants.

The mix of cultures in a game modifies this overarching finding. Real cultures of participants turn out to be the most important determinant of the dynamics of games. Dutch participants, for instance, never really work themselves into an emotional state. If they engage in emotion-related behaviour, e.g. standing up from the table as if to leave, they show nonverbally that this is just because of the game. American participants are much louder and much more mobile. They will do anything for which they believe they cannot be punished and which will make them win the game. For instance, in one session an American bought a major part of the supply of game food with real money. On the other hand, Americans are very keen to avoid practices that can lead to punishment. This difference mirrors the difference of both cultures on the cultural dimension of masculinity versus femininity, or in other words achievement orientation versus co-operation orientation.

Participants from Latin societies typically are reluctant to engage in this kind of game, unless a recognized leader participates. This has to do with their cultural values. Compared to Nordic and Anglo countries, Latin cultures are collectivist, hierarchical and uncertainty avoiding. This combination means that they have learned rigid rules for how to behave as a member of a group with a certain place in society. Because of this, they tend to feel that playing a role in a fictitious game could be at odds with their dignity.

Participants from Germanic countries, with small power distance but strong uncertainty avoidance, do not object to playing a game, but they expect the rules to be very clearly spelled out and they may become anxious if rules are implicit. If some participants seem to break rules, or if rules are unclear, they tend to complain to the game leader.

What this brief *tour d’horizon* teaches is that participants recreate their own unwritten social rules when playing these negotiation games.

But the set of personalities in a game is also quite influent. If an informal leader starts playing his role with conviction, other participant tend to enjoy this so much that they lose their inhibitions and the whole exercise becomes more meaningful as a result.

These games offer a fairly wide range of roles to choose from. When left free in their choice, extraverted persons, or those with strong drive for dominance, or those who are informal leaders among participants if these already know one another, often choose a synthetic culture of large power distance, and / or one of the leader roles. When playing they will carry out actions that increase their status, e.g. buying or selling large amounts, or taking the floor for prolonged periods of time.

Participants’ personal histories

Personal experience

I have never noticed that participant were unwilling to engage in a game because of prior experiences; nevertheless this could certainly occur. Taking part in a simulation games requires a lot of energy; it is not something to do each day. An overkill of simulation games in a curriculum could be counterproductive.

Interpersonal history

If a participant has a personal relationship to the game leader, this affects their performance a great deal. A participant may try to take advantage of this relationship while playing the game, e.g. to impress other participants by showing off their affiliation with a person in authority. This could also happen unintentionally.

Mutual relationships between participants are carried along into the game. Once, a team leader used his role as CEO in the game to pursue an ongoing quarrel with somebody from another team. The other person and her team became quite frustrated about this ‘unfair’ carry-over of the real world into the game world.

Game context

Set-up

Elements from the game setting give off a strong symbolic message. Playing on Saturday evening in a chic hotel can connote 'this is a prestigious event', while playing in a drab lecture hall on Tuesday morning could connote 'this means little to us'. Messages of this kind have a strong influence upon participants' commitment.

Backing from authorities

If people in authority participate, other participants are valorised, and their commitment to the game increases. Once a game took place for conference attendants a select group among whom had just left for an invited meeting. This fact made the game attendants feel second-rate, and that changed everything, especially for status-conscious, ambitious participants.

Rewards

It is customary in some societies to reward game participants with money. In others, symbolic group awards are issued. In yet others, no formal win / lose element is present. Rewarding practice tends to follow the culture of the game organizers. Once people are playing, they will play for the sake of the game itself; but rewards may be a good way to lend status to the act of participating and to recruit players.

Role of synthetic cultures

If all these contextual factors are so important, one might ask whether the synthetic culture scripts have any effect at all. Yes, they do. Typically, here is how teams from the synthetic cultures tend to operate.

COLLEC

Most participants in the set of game sessions were from rather individualistic cultures. To many of them, the COLLEC script is associated with 'being nice'. They tend to do this in an active way, rather than through being very sensitive to contextual clues in communication by their counterparts. Anglo participants frequently act out a sensitivity-group-like atmosphere that rather attempts to be culturally feminine than collectivist.

INDIV

This script makes for noisy, talkative, hilarious meetings. It comes easily to most participants, who tend to be from the elites of countries as well as used to international settings, and thus used to speaking their minds. INDIV teams tend to be opportunistic.

HIPOW

Participants from small-power distance real cultures who act lowly roles in these teams often comment about being frustrated at having to wait until given the opportunity to say something. Team leaders sometimes take a bossy, culturally masculine interpretation, forgetting respect for the status of others and confusing status-derived power with muscle display.

LOPOW

LOPOW is generally easy to play, because it fits well with the atmosphere in academic and upper corporate settings, particularly during social happenings when status differences are downplayed.

FEMI

This is a tough script for participants from masculine countries, and rarely chosen by them; who wants to be a wimp? This is a clear case of carry-over from the real world into the game.

MASCU

Many participants like to choose this script, from whatever real culture. It is especially popular with women from feminine real cultures. They enjoy playing it, bossing everyone around with permission from their synthetic culture script. They are quick to take initiatives in meetings, including ending them as soon as they have reached their objective.

UNCTOL

This script is easy to play for most participants, because they tend to interpret it as ‘agreeing with anything’. It makes for meetings that are pragmatic and relaxed.

UNCAVO

This is an enjoyable script for most, because becoming emotional and disagreeing are allowed. Uncertainty avoiding teams frequently do not reach any agreement during meetings with other teams, unless those are very flexible. If they do reach agreement, it tends to be ‘heartfelt’.

SHOTOR

Most people enjoy acting this script. It allows them to be hospitable, or outraged, as much as they please, and to focus on doing the right thing by themselves and by their host team. It does not require them to think ahead too much.

LOTOR

This script tends to make teams reflective and serious. Everything they say or do carries weight in view of its possible consequences.

DISCUSSION

What affects the course of the game?

It turns out that game-internal factors do have strong influence on how the game runs. Teams that enact a particular synthetic culture have recognizable atmospheres and behavioural tendencies.

The ways in which synthetic culture scripts are enacted suggests that some synthetic cultures allow players to display behaviours that they normally keep checked, e.g. dominating, disagreeing, or caring. Other scripts inhibit behaviours, e.g. HIPOW forces the non-leaders so be subservient. Some synthetic cultures are more enjoyable than others, because they allow players to satisfy social needs. Affiliation behaviours are much enacted in teams that play COLLEC, FEMI or SHOTOR. Dominant behaviours are much enacted in teams that play MASCU and HIPOW – although in the latter, only the leader can act dominant. UNCAVO teams like to disagree. This can feel like an act of dominance. In terms of personality, it connotes low agreeableness.

This idea receives support from the findings of Hofstede & McCrae (2004), who found among other things that across the populations of 33 nations, cultural uncertainty avoidance is negatively associated with average agreeableness, power distance is negatively correlated with average extraversion and individualism is positively correlated with extraversion. These correlations suggest that real culture dimensions also act as inhibitors or boosters of personality traits, although they do not reveal by what processes.

But across all sessions, game-external factors from the domain of participants’ intrinsic qualities, their personal histories and the game context have been much more influential in determining the games’ course than are the scripts. In my experience, nationality is the strongest predictor for how participants will behave.

These game-external factors also interact; for instance when participants are allowed to select a team, or a role within a team, they select a position in the game by which they expect to gratify their needs for dominance and affiliation in a way that fits their personality. They do so while keeping within the unwritten boundaries given by their culture in combination with the set of other participants who are present.

Do synthetic cultures work?

It is now possible to return to research question one. We can conclude that the synthetic cultures do work as an eye opener for real cross-cultural conflict, and that their effect as a scripting device bears a resemblance to the real cultural dimension that they emulate. The act of trying to play by different rules is a good way of getting to know what one’s own unspoken rules really are.

On the other hand, synthetic cultures are not a realistic enactment of real-world cultures. They are quite useful as a training tool, but they are not the real thing. Real cultures retain a strong hold on participants in everything they do during the game – preparing, choosing teams and roles, playing and debriefing. Typically, the game condition creates an atmosphere of excitement that tends to make people fall back on tested strategies of behaviour.

CONCLUSION

By and large the observations from ten years of playing synthetic culture games with people from all around the world show that participants cannot shake off their cultural backgrounds, even during an exercise in which they attempt to do just that. But they can become better aware of them. Simulation games that use synthetic cultures have proved a useful scripting tool for learning about cross-cultural communication.

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