

“Strategy just isn’t like that”. A case study on the use of a cooperative game to experience the strategy roller coaster

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Abstract

This is a case study of teaching strategy based around a geo-political “fantasy” simulation to give students a taste of both theory and practise.

It was designed as the public image of consultants offering little useful help has a basis in truth. Many do not have a firm grasp of the realities of “doing strategy”. They fail to understand that problems of implementation are not individual failings but inherent to the academic teaching of strategy based on economic models. They either teach a rational approach to decision making or produce populist texts based on emotions and apparent first-hand knowledge without evidence. Both approaches suffer from a reality gap either by abandoning practice or academic rigour.

The intention is to introduce students to the emotional roller coaster that is the strategy journey. Strategy is about relationships and conflicts, emotional interactions in a world of bounded rationality, and negotiating within and between participants.

Keywords: *Strategic Planning; simulation; educational games; emotion; teams; communications; skills; negotiation.*

1. Introduction

There has long been a public image of a know-nothing consultant who enters public sector institutions and offers little useful help and lacks understanding of the culture of non-profits. In doing so they cause more problems than they cure as they try and introduce marketization, or some other concepts adapted from models and concepts developed for profit-oriented organisations. Although a crude stereotype this has a basis in truth. Many consultants and strategy educators do not have a firm grasp of the realities of “doing strategy”, they have learnt only through applying models to case studies and trying to copy from the greats.

The possibility that the problems of implementation are not individual failings but inherent to the academic teaching of strategy, including political strategy, is seldom addressed. They teach a rational approach to decision making based on carefully designed models crafted by intensive research based around industrial economic models and then express surprise when people do not respond. Others abandon any pretence at academic rigor and produce populist texts based on emotions and apparent first-hand knowledge without evidence, often these sell well at airports but last only as long in the memory as the single serving meal provided on the airline (Mintzerg, H. Ahlstrand, B. W., Lampel, J, 2008). Both approaches suffer from a reality gap as there is a need to maintain academic rigour while introducing students to the emotional roller coaster that is the strategy journey, while these approaches only, at most, do one or the other.

I struggled for many years to answer the following questions in a manner that provided for a good student experience:

1. How, in the classroom, do you best capture the strategy journey in complex and changing environments?
2. How do you teach emergent strategies rather than just prescriptive?
3. How do you replicate the complex, messy nature of the strategy world?

As we looked into these questions it became clear that many of these missing elements of strategy are also key skills many employers are looking for, and that employers often criticize universities for not producing these in students, and that this is not a coincidence.

I decided to answer these by making a dramatic change in approach by introducing a dynamic strategic geo-political simulation with elements of both competition and co-operation, set in a fictional world where great powers struggle to forge alliances across a steam punk continent emerging from years of domination and oppression to new statehoods. This is a case study report on this simulation or game.

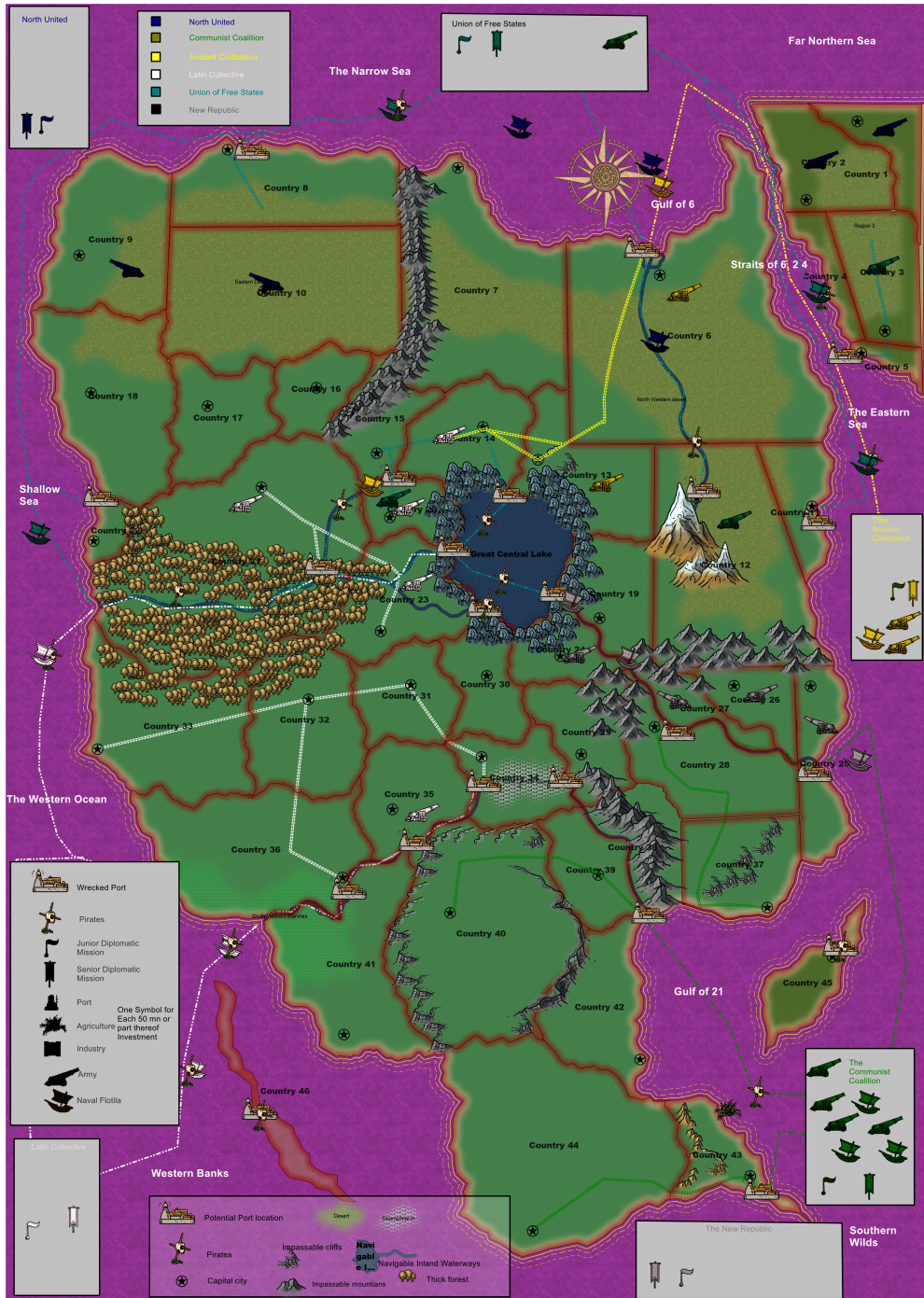


Figure 1 The Big Continent: The World of The Game.

2. Simulations

The use of simulations is not in itself a new idea, though the intensity and the academic interaction is greater in this than in any others of my experience, which have tended to be either short or more intensely related to employability skills and not theory, this game develops both and is thus a learning innovation.

2.1. Assessing Learning

Capturing and assessing the learning was a challenge as the importance of the experiential learning had to be driven in via assessment or many students would not engage (Hand, L., Sanderson, P., O’Neill, M., 1996) and therefore 20% of the marks are allocated by a peer review and negotiation under strict conditions to stop agreements to merely share marks and with a backstop of a lower grade should the students fail to reach agreement, 20% by the ability to act strategically in a group and 60% individual reflective diaries kept during the game.

2.2. Groupthink

The natural tendency to groupthink in strategy is difficult to overcome, and the anxiety levels of this module are often high exacerbating this,

The students are a highly diverse group, normally all continents except Australia (and Antarctica) are represented, and the involvement develops both academic skills. such as critique and synthesis, and employability skills including difficult to develop ones such as Resilience, Cultural Awareness and Adaptability.

3. Interest

The module has proved very successful with students, with very positive feedback but also very good outcomes with a number using the game in interviews and applications and reporting employer interest.

Example student feedback includes:

- “the simulation game triggered extreme enthusiasm”
- “the simulation game helped us to realize how to Do not only Explain things”
- “the game was run over one whole term, which helped to try new approaches and acknowledge the messy, emergent character of strategy”
- “The module was very interactive providing opportunities for learning that a normal lecture and seminar would not do”

- “I definitely enjoyed participating in 'the game' - Also, I believe that by having practical sessions, it allowed me to understand what it is like to be a *stratigikós stochastic*.”

A recent further innovation is the development of an advisory group for this module that consists of former students, 5 of whom returned to the university recently to talk to the present students as guest lecturers and also to give a careers talk in the evening attended by over 200 students, which is more than three times bigger than the department previous record attendance. The advisory group has a none binding role in designing the module and the assessment and has proved useful in improving both and is a major contributor to positive student outcomes. outcomes.

4. Method

In the department of Politics at the University of York, on the MPA/MA module Strategic Planning, a simulation based around a scenario where teams representing international great powers have to deal with dividing up a continent of recently independent nations to make allies and drive development and/or exploitation was developed and introduced.

Teams are provided with details of their initial resources and over a period of 9 weeks they make a series of moves and develop and implement a strategy. Unusually for such a “game” this one allows for extensive cooperation as well as intense competition, and the individual roles within teams also are a source of cooperation and competition.

Each week of the game students are introduced to new strategic models and they are guided in their groups to apply them to the game. They learn to recognize the strengths of the models but also the weaknesses of them in a dynamic environment influenced by the behaviour of others.

Over the period of the game there are several events that affect the players and the game board, randomly assigned, and the students need to react to these while building up their assets. They negotiate both with the game masters and with other players, and they receive a final group mark after which they must negotiate with their fellow team members to receive a share (equal awards are forbidden by the rules). This way the students are introduced to a real impact of their game playing.

5. Covid Adaptions

Covid caused the game to be moved onto the VLE creating unique challenges but the virtual tools that were developed to allow diverse and dispersed students to work together have proved so successful they have now been implemented into the game, much of the work is

extremely varied and helped to improve student engagement to a huge extent both during covid and after.

6. Conclusion

Many students struggle at first, the intensity is high and they feel the pressure, time can be an issue but eventually it settles down and feedback suggests students enjoy the module and find it useful.

Success measures include:

- High Average grade;
- High “Real Learning”;
- Good understanding of theory and reality;
- Creation of community of learning that continues after graduation;
- Students start to care.

However, a problem has been the development of the whole gamut of emotions, with examples of:

- Tears;
- Fights;
- Walkouts.

During the game, but in the long run the feeling is the experience has been worthwhile for all involved.

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