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What is This?
Repurposing an Old Game for an International World

Gert Jan Hofstede¹,² and Elizabeth J. Tipton Murff³

Abstract
The game SO LONG SUCKER was designed in the United States in 1964 with the aim of showing how potentially unethical behavior necessary for winning was inherent in the game’s incentive structure. Sessions with East Asian participants, however, led to very different game dynamics in which collaborative rather than antagonistic behaviors occurred. This confirms that the course of a simulation game run is determined by more than its rules and roles. The participants’ personalities, skills, personal histories, and preexisting relationships also play a role. Furthermore, the unwritten rules of social behavior that the participants have been socialized into, their culture, is of crucial importance. This article uses experiences with a mix of U.S. and Taiwanese participants to discuss the interaction of written and unwritten rules in determining game dynamics. The suitability for international classroom use of this game, and others, as a vehicle for drawing lessons about culture is argued.

Keywords
antagonistic behaviors, collaborative behaviors, cross-cultural differences, cross-cultural learning, implicit cultural rules, incentives, prosocial behavior, self-serving behavior, SO LONG SUCKER, trust, unwritten rules

Game theory has been shown to be an excellent way to introduce discussions of trust, cooperation, and ethical behavior in the classroom (Campbell, 2004). Actually playing a game works even better, because it allows the participants to connect their intellect

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with emotions and with experience (Caluwé, Hofstede, & Peters, 2008). SO LONG SUCKER was designed with this in mind. Shubik (2002), one of the designers, puts it thus:

One of the profound problems that we were aware of even in the earliest development of game theory: the clash between individual, nonsocial, rational optimizing behavior and personality and passion when playing in nonconstant sum games. (p. 140)

SO LONG SUCKER, a simple, well-tested simulation game played with a few poker chips, was developed with the aim of showing how incentives for selfish behavior that are inherent in game rules will induce players to behave in selfish ways. Students often feel that their opponents behave unethically during play as coalitions form and then break (Shubik, 1987). On reflection and discussion, the students usually realize that their behavior was predictable from what they knew about the game prior to its start and that situations such as this occur in the business world.

Rather than the expected lesson on behaviors forced by the rules of a negotiation situation, a lesson in cultural differences occurred during the summer quarter of 2006 in the applied game theory course in the MBA program at Eastern Washington University. This class was composed of students from the United States and from Taiwan in equal parts. These two distinct cultural groups had amazingly different game processes. Details of this experience may be found in Murff (2008).

This article will attempt to make sense of this experience using New Institutional Economics as a frame of reference as well as cross-cultural social psychology. An earlier version of this article provided the background for an interactive session at International Simulation and Gaming Association (ISAGA) 2009, which will be briefly discussed.

Different behaviors in the same game by culturally different players have been observed before in games that allow for social interaction, such as for the ULTIMATUM GAME in the 15-country study by Henrich et al. (2005). Cultural explanations for different outcomes of the TRUST & TRACING GAME have also been put forward (G. J. Hofstede, 2008; Meijer, Hofstede, Omta, & Beers, 2008). A nice piece of evidence for perceived differences in goals in different cultures is also presented by Klabbers (2009) in a reflection on competition and games across cultures:

Polish and Hungarian mathematicians had criticized Morgenstern during a meeting in Moscow in 1968. They gave him mathematical evidence showing that in their cultures, the main goals were optimization of security and collaborations between coalitions, not the optimization of competition. (p. 449)

Competition between individuals, or teams, is the dominant metaphor for gaming in the United States, but how general is it across the world? In this article, we shall limit ourselves to experiences with SO LONG SUCKER, mainly between U.S. and Taiwanese student players.
New Institutional Economics and Unwritten Rules

Simulation games consist of artificial social worlds with their own local roles, rules, and incentives. They are simulated institutions in the sense of New Institutional Economics (Ménard & Shirley, 2005). Ménard and Shirley distinguish three categories of institutions: (a) written rules and agreements such as contracts, (b) constitutions and laws, and (c) unwritten norms and beliefs. Of these, simulation games can be likened to the middle category: They set the law for the course of each game run. Within that framework, some simulation games allow for creating Category 1 rules whereas others do not. All simulation game runs, however, are affected by Category 3 unwritten rules. These embody what is deemed acceptable behavior by the players. Although people are very much aware of their group affiliations, as well as some of the typical practices of these groups, they are not normally aware of the basic values that give meaning to those practices; they know what is right but not why. They are unconsciously competent in the rules of their culture.

Figure 1, adapted from Nobel Prize–winning institutional economist Williamson (2000) provides an overview of much the same division, but in reverse order and introducing the element of time scales of change. Level 4 in Figure 1 is about everyday economic life. Level 3 corresponds with Ménard and Shirley’s (2005) first category of institutions, Level 2 with their second, and Level 1 with their third. What Figure 1 adds is a hierarchy of causation downward with Level 1 at the top, a weaker hierarchy of pressure for change from the bottom upward, and a perspective on time scales. This asserts that the informal institutions of Level 1 with their unwritten, embedded rules are very long-lived. The time scale of change for them is in the order of hundreds to thousands of years. This is corroborated by the literature on national culture (G. Hofstede, 2001; Kirkman, Lowe, & Gibson, 2006).

If, alongside norms and customs, one adds “implicit cultural values” to the set of Level 1 phenomena in Figure 1, it can serve as a hypothesis-generating device about simulation gaming in different cultural environments. Its implications are that one cannot change unwritten rules of the game, even though they affect what happens at all the other levels. This holds true even for simulated cultural rules such as the “Synthetic Cultures” created by Gert Jan Hofstede and Paul Pedersen (G. J. Hofstede & Pedersen, 1999; G. J. Hofstede, Pedersen, & Hofstede, 2002): Experience shows that such role-scripting rules cannot replace the players’ real cultural values. Likewise, in a simulation game that experiments with entirely novel rules of the game at Level 2, Level 1 unwritten rules will still operate and influence the course of events during the game in ways that may not have been foreseen by the game designers or administrators if they operate according to different unwritten rules than do the participants. Simulation games are usually played in the cultural environment in which they were created. These unwritten rules then understandably tend to be taken for granted. Simulation games in books or sold as playable games do not usually come with instructions for use, or caveats about risks, in different cultures.

The framework of Figure 1 allows considering individual-level economic rationality as a special case of Level 1 implicit cultural values, in casu individualistic, masculine
values (G. Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). These values and the opportunistic strategies directed at maximizing own gain that they make meaningful, were in the back of the minds of the game designers of SO LONG SUCKER. This is shown by the reasoning of the game’s creator about selfish incentives leading to selfish behaviors (Shubik, 1987). Implicit values that emphasize the group over the individual, or the long term beyond the game run over the context-free game run itself, lead to different expectations of what constitutes rational behavior. Urlacher (2008) comments on the effect of extending the time scope within a series of game runs: “The mechanism typically cited for the tit-for-tat strategy’s success is that rational agents are willing to risk
a short-term loss for a potentially larger payoff that would occur if a cooperative pattern could be established” (p. 455). The implicit time scope for defining rationality could be even wider. If it was lifelong, rationality would also encompass avoiding offending behavior in view of the subsequent relationship with other players.

Cross-Cultural Social Psychology

The ways in which unwritten rules differ across societies are a well-studied phenomenon today, although still controversial to some. This will no doubt always remain so because of the implicit nature of culture and the strong links with basic human drives and with taboo subjects. However, the empirical evidence in favor of a powerful role for cross-cultural differences in virtually all of social psychology is enormous and growing (Smith, Bond, & Kagitcibasi, 2006).

Dimensions of Culture

Culture can be defined as the unwritten rules of the social game (G. Hofstede et al., 2010). This fits perfectly into Ménard and Shirley’s (2005) Category 3 and into Williamson’s (2000) Level 1. It includes learned attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, assumptions, and values shared by a group of people (Spencer-Oatey, 2000). The culture in which we are raised has a profound effect on our thinking and behavior. In the 1970s, Hofstede began his examination of national culture by studying the workplace values of IBM employees in a variety of countries. That study yielded four dimensions of culture. They can be interpreted as four basic issues that a society has to come to terms with. Later studies have identified two more, so that to date the following six dimensions make up the model (Franke, Hofstede, & Bond, 1991; G. Hofstede, 2001; G. Hofstede et al., 2010):

- **Power distance**—In a culture with a high score such as the Philippines (94), ordinary members of society accept and expect power inequalities among people. In a culture with a low score such as New Zealand (22), people expect relative equality among all members in any group. Taiwan (58) has a larger power distance than the United States (40).
- **Uncertainty avoidance**—In a culture with a high score such as Japan (92), more structured traditional situations are preferred and that which is different is perceived as a threat. In a culture with a low score such as Singapore (8), unstructured situations are well tolerated and that which is different is perceived as a curiosity. Taiwan (69) has a higher uncertainty avoidance than the United States (46).
- **Individualism**—In a culture with a high score such as Australia (90), people will prefer to act as individuals, focus on individual achievements, and form loose relationships with limited commitment for the long term. Teamwork is voluntary and temporary. In a culture with a low score such as South Korea (18), people prefer to act as members of a permanent group, focus on collective
achievements, and form strong long-term relationships with strong obligations. The United States (91) has a much higher level of individualism than Taiwan (17).

- **Masculinity**—In a culture with a high score such as Japan (95), assertive competitive performance-based societies form, and adversarial relationships are considered normal. In a culture with a low score such as Sweden (5), modest nurturing service-oriented welfare societies form, and where interests differ, consensus seeking is considered normal. The United States (62) has a higher level of masculinity than Taiwan (45).

- **Long-term orientation**—In a culture with a high score such as Hong Kong (96), pragmatism and striving for long-term aims prevail as well as the idea that one should work and study to improve oneself. In a culture with a low score such as Canada (23), moral reasoning and expectations of quick results predominate. Taiwan (87) has a much longer term orientation than the United States (29).

- **Indulgence**—In an indulgent culture, people have a sense of freedom, and they like to enjoy life and to socialize. The opposite is a restrained culture, in which duty weighs heavily and little sense of personal freedom exists. This dimension was found by Michael Minkov (2007). The U.S. scores average on Indulgence but higher than Asian countries and most Western countries. Data on Taiwan are missing but Indulgence scores are probably quite low, as they are China, South Korea, and Japan.

### Taiwanese Versus U.S. Americans

Based on this introduction, we would expect to see marked differences in the behaviors of Taiwanese and American participants in a game that involves the successive deliberate expulsion of the weakest members of a group. The most marked cultural differences between the two countries are the individualistic, short-term oriented culture of the Americans versus the collectivistic, long-term oriented nature of the Taiwanese. American culture is also more masculine and more indulgent than Taiwanese culture.

This combination of dimensions shows that Americans are usually keen on self-marketing, for instance by creating situations to show one-upmanship. Winning is good, and losing is unacceptable. Adopting different roles in different social circles is daily practice for them. In SO LONG SUCKER, they can usually be expected to be competitive, unabashedly egocentric, and accepting of that behavior from one another. They also typically make a clear distinction between the game and the rest of their lives, in which they may be quite cooperative. Actually, the better friends in real life they are, the more they are likely to enjoy the play fight of the game.

Taiwanese, embedded as molecules in a complex societal crystal, usually have little leeway for inappropriate behaviors in a game—that is, in a real-world game. The game is not typically seen as a departure from their usual condition in life, and they often tend to still feel bound by the usual rules of appropriate behavior. These rules include dutifulness, diligence, avoidance of open confrontations, and maintenance of the social
circle. They usually avoid letting one another down as long as they are part of the same in-group. If subgroups exist, they may generally be loyal together against outsiders.

**Game Rules**

SO LONG SUCKER, a simple bargaining game lasting about 20 minutes, demonstrates problems in cooperation that occur when unstable coalitions are inherent in a system (Shubik, 1987). The goal is to be the last undefeated player. The rules are as follows (Shapley, Nash, Hausner, & Shubik, 1964):

1. Each of the four players chooses one of four colors (typically blue, green, red, and yellow) and begins the game with seven chips of that color.
2. All chips must be visible at all times.
3. The first player to move is chosen randomly.
4. A move is made by placing a chip of any color on the playing area or on any chip already in the playing area.
5. A capture occurs when a chip is placed directly on top of a chip of the same color. The player designated by that color must kill any one chip from the pile and then take the rest.
6. A killed chip is taken out of play permanently.
7. A chip not of the holding player’s color is designated as a prisoner and may be killed unconditionally transferred to another player at any time. Chips of the holding player’s color may not be transferred.
8. A player is finally defeated only when he is given the move but has no chips in his pile to play and every player holding prisoners has refused to transfer chips. Chips of the defeated player’s color remain in play as prisoners.
9. If a pile is captured by the chips of the defeated player, the entire pile is killed.
10. The order of play is as follows:
   a. If a player is defeated, the move returns to the player who gave the defeated player the move.
   b. If a capture occurs with a nondefeated player’s chips, the player whose color was captured moves next.
   c. If a capture occurs with a defeated player’s chips, the capturing player gets the move.
   d. Otherwise, the next player to move is decided by the last player to move. He can give the move to any player whose color is not in the pile just played on (including himself). If all players’ colors are in the pile, the move goes to the player whose most-recently-played chip is the furthest down in the pile.
11. Coalitions are permitted and may take any form, but failure to live up to an agreement goes unpunished.
12. Open discussion and agreements among players at the table is permissible at all times during play. Secret or prior agreements are not allowed.
Next is applying the rules of SO LONG SUCKER (Figure 2). Assume all players are still in the game:

- Suppose a white chip is placed on Pile A by any player. That player then may give the next move to either the blue or red player.
- Suppose a blue chip is placed on Pile B by any player. The blue player takes that pile, kills one chip and then moves next.
- Suppose a white chip is placed on Pile C by any player. The white player takes that pile, kills one chip (most likely red) and then moves next. Any red chips he keeps are now prisoners.
- Suppose any color but green is placed on Pile D by any player. The red player must move next. If green is placed, the green player takes the pile, kills one chip, keeps the rest as prisoners and then moves next.

These rules enable dynamics of opportunistic alliance formation and double-crossing. In the words of the game’s codesigner, Martin Shubik (2002):

> In designing SO LONG SUCKER, we explicitly set ourselves the task of constructing a game where a necessary condition for winning was to form a coalition, but this was not sufficient. At some point, one had to double-cross one’s partner. (p. 139)

Taking revenge on double-crossers was also explicitly possible:

> The nature of the game is such that someone whose chances of winning have been destroyed by a defection might still have enough residual power to damage the defector, even though this behavior is of no operational value in avoiding eventual defeat. (Shubik, 2002, p. 140)

**Experiences at ISAGA 2009**

At the conference ISAGA 2009, the authors facilitated a session with SO LONG SUCKER, did a culture-aware debrief, and discussed the implications for cross-cultural training. Approximately 20 participants from many parts of the world played the 8 games (four tables, two rounds with changed groups of about five participants). The atmosphere was relaxed but rather than merciless competition, a “conference culture” of civility reigned among the participants, most of whom hardly knew one another. On top of that, many participants spent a lot of their time getting to understand the game. As a result of these factors, SO LONG SUCKER did not quite live up to its name. In many games, mercy was had on participants who had run out of chips. The very diverse mix of participants makes it hazardous to draw conclusions on cultural behavioral aspects, because with a sample size of one or a few individuals, personality and other factors may well have been more salient than culture-mediated behaviors. However, we did witness one
participant who, when faced with death, refused a chip from one of the other players because the gift made him seem a beggar and offended his honor. Sure enough, this was a Frenchman refusing a gift from another Frenchman, and his action fits in the French culture of honor (d'Iribarne, 1989)—so much for economic rationality. A thorough debriefing of each game would no doubt allow for analyzing its dynamics and uncovering many more instances where emotions, driven by contextual, personal, and cultural factors, prompted game behavior. For instance, the effect of context and personality could be suspected in the notion the authors got that some participants seemed to be managing their public ISAGA persona through their humoristic game actions rather than taking the game seriously—and who could blame them?

The contribution of reporting this session is to show that although the session was very illustrative to those who were present, larger numbers of repetitions are needed in order to see patterns across games. Such patterns are needed for conveying a clear message to an audience without first-hand experience of the game.

**U.S.-Taiwan Game Runs at Eastern Washington University**

In the applied game theory MBA course taught at Eastern Washington University, SO LONG SUCKER has been successfully used to demonstrate how game rules influence players’ actions. The rules of the game are given as homework 1 week in advance for the students to analyze. Repeated in-class play using different four-player groupings for each game allow the students to learn the rules. Immediate feedback in terms of how quickly players are eliminated supplies the opportunity to learn from others’ successes and failures. The debriefing session immediately following the game play encourages students to think about how the game structure itself provoked seemingly hostile or unethical behaviors in players known from prior experience in the class to not behave thusly. From this, the students then apply the concepts to situations seen in the business world, such as labor-management negotiations.

The expected outcome did not occur in the summer of 2006 when the class was composed of students from the United States and Taiwan in equal parts. (Prior classes
were multicultural, but without any non-American group forming a large proportion.) These two distinct cultural groups were observed by the instructor (Murff, 2008) to have very distinct behavioral and emotional reactions, both during play and during the debriefing. The following remarks are taken from notes made by the instructor during the session when she noticed that this class was behaving differently from prior classes (Figure 3).

**Play**

When American students predominated, play was observed as expected to be aggressive and quick with only minimal negotiation. Players worked together and discussed moves only long enough to eliminate other players. Much of their talk during play was not actually relevant to the game. They readily formed coalitions with those who had double-crossed them in prior games. (In the summer of 2007, when this game was used in tournament form, four male American friends orchestrated their wins and losses to ensure that the rest of the class was eliminated before the final round that was brutal and swift; they were not playing the game but rather the meta-game.) Brief discussion with the instructor revealed that these students saw the exercise as “only a game.”

When Taiwanese students predominated, play was observed to be hesitant and lengthy with extensive negotiation. This was what initially caught the instructor’s attention. Players worked together and discussed moves to keep each other in the game. They only discussed the game and did not stray into other topics during play. They tried to take care of each other by providing suggestions to everyone, not just those with whom
they were allied. They persisted in attempting to find a team solution even when it was quite clear that such was not possible for this game: STAY HERE SUCKER was the name of the game, despite the incentives inherent in the game rules. When a player was double-crossed by his coalition as was necessary near the end of the game, he was hesitant to form an alliance with those players in later games (in the summer of 2008, a female Taiwanese student who had lived in the United States for many years broke this pattern and played very aggressively; further investigation revealed that she found the game very disconcerting and yet ignored this to be the overall winner). Brief discussion with the instructor revealed that these students felt that the exercise was an endeavor to be taken very seriously.

With evenly balanced groups, behavior changed as the game was repeated. In early games, the Taiwanese students formed long-term coalitions with each other at the start, eliminated unallied American students, and then slowly eliminated volunteers while trying to find a nonexistent cooperative solution. In later games, the American students learned from the behavior of the Taiwanese students; they were observed to become much more assertive in quickly forming coalitions with either American or Taiwanese classmates before aggressively eliminating opponents not in the coalition and then those within the coalition. The Taiwanese students were not observed to adjust their behavior as they always persisted in seeking a team solution.

**Debriefing**

The effects of culture were even more apparent in the debriefing session with the instructor immediately following the game. As the students discussed their experiences, it was noted that

- The Taiwanese students had done more extensive analyses in preparation for the game play than the American students.
- The Taiwanese students indicated that they expected that the American students would play the game in a different manner whereas the American students did not have this expectation.
- The American students, although initially not as well prepared, learned more rapidly from their mistakes during actual play.
- The American students indicated that they were frustrated that the Taiwanese students would not play more quickly.
- The Taiwanese students were quite uncomfortable with this particular game, irrespective of wins and losses. The American students found this surprising as the game caused them no discomfort at all.

Although the Taiwanese students were more respectful of the instructor during the debriefing and had to be prompted, all the students were far more inclined to participate and discuss the application of the game than would normally be expected in the lecture-based classroom.
Cultural Responses to the Game

The Taiwanese and U.S. students from Murff’s (2008) sessions differed in many ways in their behaviors during and after the game. Here is an enumeration of these differences in which we shall attempt to make links with (G. Hofstede et al., 2010) six dimensions of culture.

Power Distance, or . . . ?

During the game, no signs were apparent of any participants cowering to others; this could be expected because they were all students in the same MBA program with equal formal status. During debriefing by the instructor, the American students were more relaxed, quicker to ask questions, and quicker to respond to questions about how the game made them feel than the Taiwanese students. This could be related to a more respectful attitude toward the instructor on the part of the Taiwanese associated with larger power distance. It can more readily be explained by the difference in individualism; Americans are taught from a tender age to express their opinion. The Taiwanese students also indicated that, as preparation and play were course assignments, they took both very seriously, whereas the American students took a more casual attitude. This could be related to power distance (wishing to please the teacher), to long-term association (wanting to develop oneself), and to indulgence/restrained (the Taiwanese, being more restrained, would tend to stress the duty side of the assignment whereas the more indulgent Americans would stress the fun side).

Uncertainty Avoidance, or . . .

The Taiwanese students found the game more disquieting than the American students, especially when dissenting opinions about the rules occurred. Stress could be associated with uncertainty avoidance, but in this case it was probably more because of collectivism than uncertainty avoidance. In addition, and probably most important, contextual factors contributed: The Taiwanese were not familiar with this kind of situation. They were not used to playing games as an element of studying and they probably hardly considered this play at all.

Individualism

The impact of individualism was clearly seen during the game play. American students played to win as individuals. They quickly adapted to the techniques of the Taiwanese students during repeated games, teaming up opportunistically, whereas the Taiwanese failed to adapt to the techniques of the American students. This points to individualism on the part of the Americans; they saw the game as an opportunity to win that was unattached to constraints from social life outside the game, a free-for-all. The collectivistic Taiwanese expected behavior by their opponents to remain consistent with societal
standards from game to game whereas the individualistic American students expected behavioral change and improvisation during play.

In addition, we noticed differences in atmosphere. The American students discussed a variety of topics that each found interesting. The Taiwanese students stuck to the immediate issues facing the entire group. The Taiwanese students more rapidly formed more stable coalitions than the American students. The Taiwanese students also stated during the debriefing that they found the need for alliances to be obvious as a result of the importance that their culture places on relationships. The American students only found the need after repeated game play, when they adopted the more stable coalitions used by the Taiwanese students.

**Masculinity**

During game play, the American students were more competitive and goal-oriented than the Taiwanese students, who were more nurturing of other players. Play went rapidly in the terminal phases of American-dominated games whereas Taiwanese-dominated games ended only by slow attrition. The American students were frustrated when it became apparent that the Taiwanese students were going to persist in their slow supportive play. Furthermore, the American students were more assertive in their responses to the debriefing questions. Although masculinity, associated with lack of sympathy for losers, could be part of the explanation, this mainly points to differences in extraversion, associated with individualism (G. Hofstede & McCrae, 2004), between the groups.

**Long-Term Orientation**

The long-term attitude of the Taiwanese students was reflected in how they remained serious and diligent during play. The short-term oriented Americans were more concerned with gratifying immediate social urges such as winning and chatting and showing off. They took greater risks for smaller payoffs during play, even when these choices were clearly counterproductive. The Taiwanese students persisted in trying to avoid the risk of offending others throughout all game play. Furthermore, the Americans were much more willing to take the risk of trusting someone who had double-crossed them in prior games than the Taiwanese students.

**Indulgence**

American culture is rather indulgent: Socializing and having fun are stressed in life. The educational system has institutionalized occasions for combining learning with having a good time. Taiwan has a much more restrained culture that underplays fun and stresses duty. An educational setting would be considered a serious matter, not a setting to play games. This leads to different expectations and attitudes for the two groups that were clearly observable during game runs.
All in all, the differences in behavior were striking. This should come as no surprise for participants from two countries that differ so much on all dimensions of culture of the Hofstede model. Individualism/collectivism is the most obvious dimension that explains the findings. Long-/short-term orientation also seems important, and in fact a contribution of all six dimensions could be argued plausibly. Even so, attributing game behavior differences to cultural dimensions is necessarily speculative, and cannot be the whole story. These dimensions are no more than constructs that one can use to clarify cultural differences. In reality, cultures are wholes, consisting of learned values, most of them unconsciously acquired in youth. Next to this, behaviors are always influenced by factors other than culture as well. The experiences in the ISAGA session show that a “conference culture” combined with a small sample can obscure cultural differences. Cultural subgroups in a game that compares groups need to be sufficiently large that within-group variance can be assessed and the effects of individual personality mitigated.

In the Eastern Washington University experience, the different level of prior exposure to games in an educational setting, and the fact that the Americans were on home turf, could have explained a lot. To assess the importance of such contextual factors, further studies should work with a research design that caters for them, such as by mirrored sessions in Taiwan.

**Conclusion**

The experiences described here, where the game of SO LONG SUCKER turned out to be STAY HERE SUCKER, with a player population that had a different background from the original target group, make it very clear that the rationality employed by players from the United States and Taiwan was influenced by what one could alternatively call unwritten norms and beliefs (Ménard & Shirley, 2005), embeddedness (Williamson, 2000), or unwritten rules of the social game, alias their culture (G. Hofstede et al., 2010). This makes sense. These three theoretical frameworks explain explicit behavior by referring to preexisting, learned, implicit systems of meaning. Ménard and Williamson focus on institutions. Williamson indicates that institutions are themselves created and made meaningful based on “spontaneous” cultural rules. Hofstede concentrates on the level of culture and shows how practices are rooted in learned but usually nonreflective, unconscious values. In the game sessions described here, the participants could hardly have had more different cultural values and neither had they been exposed to the same institutional environment.

In a sense, a simulation game can be likened to the earth’s crust: Solid outer shell, but moving, hidden insides that have shaped that shell. On the surface one sees a shape that seems clear, with rules, roles, and incentives that can be unambiguously specified, but below the surface lie uncharted territory. To be aware that each game is created with unwritten cultural rules unconsciously active in the minds of the designers, and is played with possibly different cultural rules unconsciously active in the minds of the players, is to gain in explanatory capacity. Shubik (2005) concluded from his four decades of experiences with SO LONG SUCKER and many other games that
cheap, simple, poorly controlled games may be used in class to teach, to delve into highly formal theory, and to produce reasonably interesting results as well as to provoke basic questions from the students. (p. 179)

We can add that what Shubik (2005) calls “poorly controlled” can actually be an advantage, if it means allowing for rich social behaviors by the participants. If a simulation game that allows for rich social interaction is used outside the target group for which it was intended, the new game runs may show unexpected or at least different dynamics and outcomes. Analyzing these differences in behavior between various groups of participants can be very instructive because it affords an unusually sharp view of cultural rules that are normally not taken into consideration because they are “spontaneous” (Williamson, 2000) or “unwritten” (G. Hofstede et al., 2010). This offers possibilities for instructors who wish to add cross-cultural awareness to their teaching goals. If games can be repeated across sites, or even better if multi-cultural groups of participants are available, this can be explicitly used to uncover differences in hidden assumptions among different groups of people, and to debrief the effects of cultural differences (Level 1 of Williamson’s model in Figure 1) on interpretation of formal rules (Level 2), on the play of the game (Level 3), and on resource allocation (Level 4).

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References


**Bios**

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