Linkage - Simulating History to Understand International Politics

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DARYL MORINI, APR 2 2012

– Kimberley Weir and Michael Baranowski, 'Simulating History to Understand International Politics' *Simulation Gaming*, August 2011, Vol. 42, No. 4: 441-461.

As if International Relations were not already a conspicuously nerdy discipline, Kimberly Weir and Michael Baranowski think that we should simulate history using video games as a pedagogical tool in teaching international politics.

This article is a timely and welcome addition to the blossoming literature on the intersection of IR and pop culture, from zombies, to aliens and teenage wizards. What is the use of video games in teaching IR? Weir and Baranowski begin from the finding that students retain only 10% of what they read, compared to 90% of what they say while they are doing something. This confirms the basic insight that students learn more through practice, solidifying theoretical knowledge, rather than through readings alone – let alone listening to monotonous, two-hour long academic soliloquies.

Weir and Baranowski discuss the advantages of teaching undergraduate International Relations coursework with the help of the cult strategy game ***Civilization***. The authors discuss the merits of using this video game as a teaching tool with reference to its simulation of the evolution of the international system, nation-states and civilisations, but also to individual-level decision-making, the process of international negotiation, the task of managing national resources and power, and the use of force in international relations. How should IR lecturers integrate gaming into their course structure? The authors suggest:

"If time permits, allow for a few hours of instructor-guided play at the start of the semester, and assign additional play outside of class throughout the semester. Doing so will give students an idea of how the game works, and it may better enable them to make connections between play, assigned readings, and concepts covered in class."

Undergraduate IR students may one day thank Weir and Baranowski for making the discipline more practice-centric – and more fun – while expunging the guilt of young researchers with a penchant for IR-infused video games. Niall Ferguson would be proud. However, this article does raise a serious methodological point of contention: Does Call of Duty count?

In the timeless debate between supporters of strategy games and first-person shooters (FPS), academic proponents of using video games to teach history and IR have clearly sided with the strategy genre. This pedagogical, even ontological, preference risks alienating legions of FPS gamers who consider their craft an intellectually-legitimate activity. Perhaps future research should seek to establish any correlation between hours spent on IR-inspired video games and students' overall academic results.

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