

# Where's the Diplomacy in Diplomacy? Using a Classic Board Game in “Introduction to International Relations”

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**ABSTRACT** One of the challenges of teaching American undergraduates in an “Introduction to International Relations” course is finding a way to make topics and themes seem relevant to students. This article recounts the author’s experiences using the board game “Diplomacy” in his course. The game places students in the role of decision makers in the international arena and simulates the international politics of pre-World War I Europe. In addition to being a powerful simulation of the difficulties of international relations, the game teaches students about one of the most debated wars in the history of the discipline.

One of the best ways to encourage student learning is through the use of simulations. There is widespread agreement in the literature (Dorn 1989; Endersby and Shaw 2009; Loggins 2009) on the pedagogy of political science that by fostering the engagement of students’ imagination, simulations encourage them to “think outside of the box.” They also gain a more thorough appreciation of the people whom they are studying. Perhaps most significant, however, simulations provide a way to engage students in academic literatures and research, giving them a reason to care in the process.

This task is all the more difficult on rural campuses when international relations is being taught. Many students fresh out of high school have never traveled beyond their own state, let alone the country. To this audience, the world of international relations can feel distant and abstract. Despite all the discussion about globalization, the emergence of a cosmopolitan student body remains an aspiration for many colleges and universities. Indeed, even where such a student body exists, for many students, their first experience of concern for international affairs is at college—and certainly not before they enroll in an introductory class. Given these constraints, then, is there a simulation that can engage students in the study of international relations?

This article outlines my use of one such simulation—the classic board game called “Diplomacy”—to engage students in this manner. I use Diplomacy every time I teach the introductory course, and student feedback is always positive. When I first began teaching the class, I used the physical board game; however, I recently found and have used successfully a web-based version. This article outlines the game, how it is played, and how to establish a game on the website; it also evaluates what students learn from the exercise.

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When we play the game in class, I schedule it for the first two weeks of the semester, before the course begins in earnest. This allows students to encounter lessons from international relations *de novo* and without any knowledge about how events actually transpired. Although the game might be better situated later in the course (e.g., when discussing the outbreak of World War I), I am reluctant because it draws students into the topic of international relations; in any other position than the beginning of the course, the game would suffer from diminishing returns. I typically devote the entire first two weeks to playing the game, although varied times may work as well. Now that the issue of timing has been addressed, how is the game actually played?

## DIPLOMACY

Diplomacy is a board game that was designed by an American graduate student, Allan B. Calhamer, and first produced for the mass market in 1959 (Sharp 1978, 1). In later notes on the development of the game, Calhamer wrote that he was influenced by European history and discussions about what would best secure the postwar peace in 1945. He cited an article that “reviewed the history of the Congress of Vienna and the subsequent period to 1914, arguing that a world containing several ‘great powers,’ all roughly equal in strength, would offer the best guarantee of peace because whenever one of them acted aggressively, the remainder could unite against them.”<sup>1</sup> To design his game, Calhamer combined strategic insights from the games of chess and Hearts as well as the military tactics of Napoleon Bonaparte.

Now manufactured as a board game by Avalon Hill, Diplomacy simulates the development of World War I. The game begins in spring 1901, when war was beginning to look imminent. Seven countries are in the game: Great Britain, France, Italy, Germany, Austro-Hungary, Turkey, and Russia. Each country initially has three supply centers, except Russia, which has four. The object of the game is for one power to occupy 18 (of the total 34) supply centers. There are 76 named areas (or provinces) on the map,

15 of which are neutral. Of those 15 provinces, 12 are neutral supply centers that can be conquered at any time by moving into them. To gain the most supply centers, however, countries must fight. Figure 1 shows the Diplomacy board at setup.<sup>3</sup>

inland and sea provinces is restricted to the respective units. All units have equal military values of 1; therefore, combat is resolved by the country that has the largest number of forces. Because all countries have relatively similar military forces, cooperation

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The game is divided into spring and autumn seasons for each year. Every season, the countries are allowed to move all of their military units. A regular turn consists of two components: conducting diplomacy and placing orders. When conducting diplomacy, the country representatives interact with their counterparts from other countries and determine a plan of coordinated action. Nothing stated by players binds them to any action, and players may deceive or be honest with one another in these sessions. The only commitment that players must abide by is contained within the orders that they submit—that is, the actual moves that a country’s military units make in a given turn. Country teams can review the actual moves of other countries by reviewing the “order history” tab located in the gray box on the user interface.

The game has two military units—armies and navies—both of which may occupy coastal provinces. However, movement into

is inevitable and the only path to achieving superiority. A unit can support an attack into a space adjacent to its own or support another unit if an attack is foreseen and its own space borders the defending unit’s territory. Support can be withdrawn if the supporting unit comes under assault from another unit. There is a special rule regarding navies: they can carry land units across the sea from a bordering territory to a bordering coastal territory.

The number of units a country may support depends on the number of supply centers they have at the end of any autumn turn. If a country has more centers than pieces, then it gains units; if the opposite is true, then they lose some units. When a country has occupied 18 supply centers, it has reached hegemonic status and the game ends; this usually takes a long time to achieve. In the past, I have decided who wins based on which country has the most supply centers by an arbitrary date.

This section is an overview of the rules for the board game Diplomacy. A more detailed set of rules, as well as instructional videos, is available at <http://www.playdiplomacy.com/help.php>. This discussion clarifies that the main source of power in the game comes from the ability of players to negotiate favorable alliances and settlements with their colleagues. The next section describes how to create a game on the website.

#### CREATING A GAME ON THE WEBSITE

It is not difficult to set up a game on the website. First, instructors should set up their own account. Although it is not required to use the website, I recommend paying the \$20 fee for an annual membership; this is both a courtesy to the website owners and a way to play more than one game. Instructors are advised to join a game and learn the rules before they use it in their classes. When an account has been created, instructors should first make note of the account number and then create a game and give it a name that is specific to their university. A screenshot of the game-creation interface is shown in figure 2.

Instructors should select “schools” before creating the game to ensure that it does not participate in leagues that

Figure 1  
Map of Diplomacy Board Game at Setup<sup>3</sup>

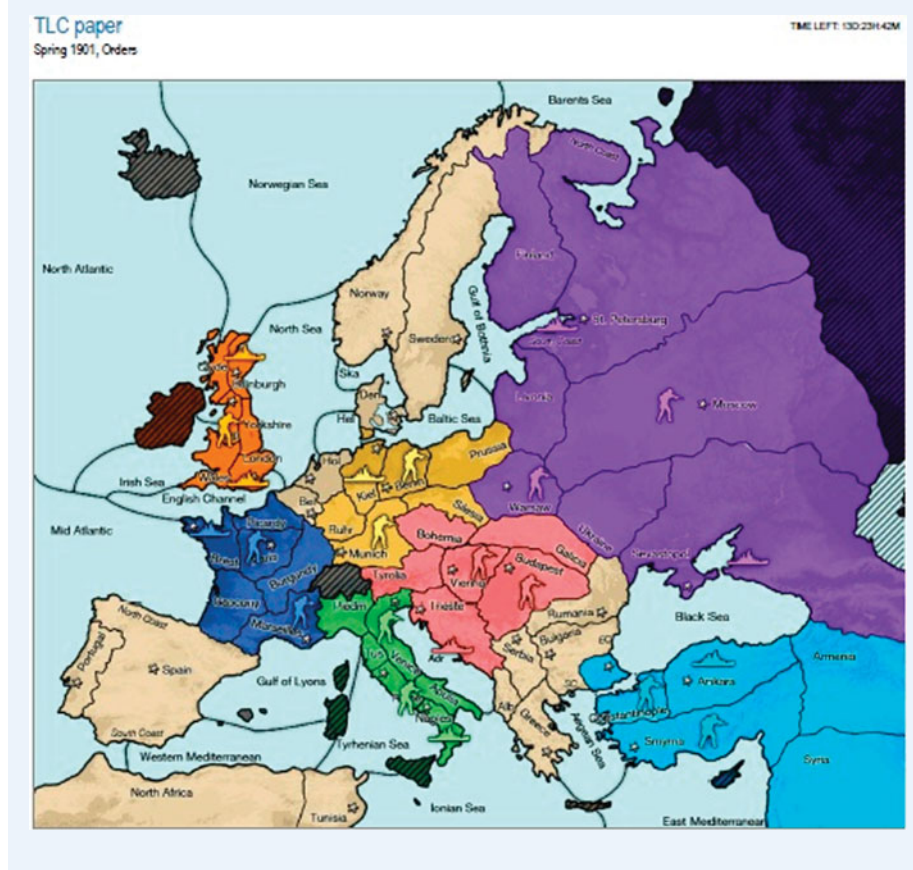
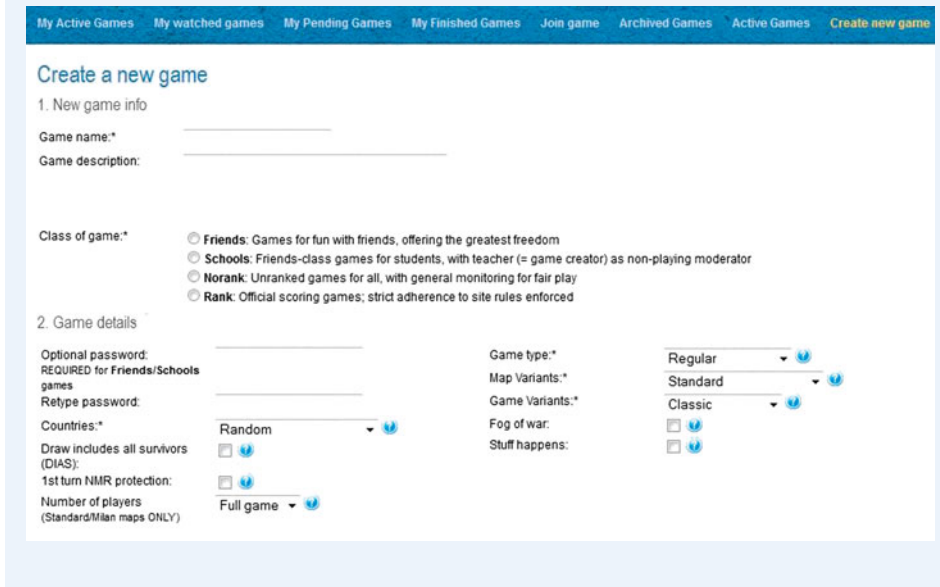


Figure 2  
Creating a New Game



countries will be assigned randomly.<sup>5</sup> The game then begins, and each turn is processed when students submit (and finalize) orders.

### STUDENT LEARNING

Using the board game Diplomacy in class provides several benefits for instructors, which are described in this section. First, however, I offer a way to motivate students to take the game seriously right from the beginning. It would be unfair to describe students as “apathetic” to many of the concerns of the academy, but it sometimes can be difficult to engage them in the course material. Although I have had few problems in involving students in this game, a small part of their grade (i.e., 10%) includes writing a five-page reflection paper. In the paper, students must apply concepts in international relations and describe difficulties in

other players have set up on the website. This also allows instructors to act as a moderator for the game. The next step is to contact the website administrator, Rick Leeds, at [playdip.com.notice@gmail.com](mailto:playdip.com.notice@gmail.com). He informed me that the process for establishing subaccounts and the instructions for a main “schools” account has been streamlined. Instructors are advised not to create regular accounts for student groups because they could be implicated

making collective decisions within a group. To encourage participation, the winning team receives full credit without writing the paper. Second- and third-place teams receive full credit for a 1-page paper, fourth place for a 2.5-page paper, and so on.<sup>6</sup> This gives students an incentive (beyond enjoyment) to care about their country’s fortunes in the game and to take the project seriously.

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in cheating incidents.<sup>4</sup> However, by using the “schools” function, the administrator can register a number of accounts with generic names (e.g., “POL5151Group1,” “POL5151Group2,” and so forth) to the same email address.

After the accounts are created, the instructor must provide a separate password for each account. In previous classes, I created passwords using names of historical figures (e.g., “Salisbury,” “Nicholas II,” and “Kaiser Wilhelm II”); this provided a future opportunity for extra credit if students researched the source of the name. Website administrators require that the passwords be changed after every game to prevent students from joining actual games using these account numbers after completing the course. If students want to play on their own (which I strongly encourage), they must register for their own (free) accounts.

After students have their accounts and passwords, they need to sign into the playdiplomacy system, enter the game number, and join the game. To prevent other people who want to join games from trying to sign up, the game should be given a specific password that the instructor distributes to the students. When seven teams have registered, a request to “confirm participation” in the game will be sent to them. (Note: There is an option for fewer players.) After everyone has confirmed participation,

The main benefit of the Diplomacy game is to increase student interest in international relations. Admittedly, this benefit could result from simply taking an introductory course; however, by providing a hands-on interactive experience, the game demonstrates immediately to students how interesting international relations can be. Although there is no control group for comparison (i.e., I have never taught the class without playing Diplomacy, which is a testament to my personal belief in it), nonmajors in the course seem to become involved with the class material more quickly than nonmajors in my other introductory class. This has been manifested in students expressing opinions about developments in the news as well as participating in subsequent class discussions of the material. Students even have asked to start “Diplomacy Clubs” on campus to continue playing the game. Therefore, in terms of producing student interest, the game of Diplomacy pays dividends on the initial investment. Other ways in which the game improves student learning include the concepts of cooperation and historical content.

Conceptually, the game provides a basis on which to discuss the evolution of modern international institutions. In addition to being a good way to explain the Prisoner’s Dilemma to a class, the game illustrates how international institutions allow the future

“to cast a shadow back upon the present and thereby affect the current strategic situation” (Axelrod 1984, 12). In several cases, students develop strategies of nonaggression or cooperation without explicitly negotiating a strategy with neighboring powers. In other cases, diplomatic discussion is a formalization of preexisting nonaggression strategies. Later in the semester, the instructor can use examples from Diplomacy to illustrate strengths and weaknesses in different systems of collective security or to inform the students that Calhamer (1978) always advocated keeping one’s word when playing the game.

For example, in my “Introduction to International Relations” course, we discuss the Concert of Europe (i.e., Calhamer’s muse when he designed the game) and why it failed to provide an enduring system for avoiding international conflict. Because of

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the ad hoc nature of Concert meetings, states could not be certain of iterated interaction; therefore, the shadow cast by the future was relatively short. By deconstructing the students’ reasoning in cases in which cooperation was achieved in the game of Diplomacy, the instructor can introduce the idea that the expectation of future interactions creates an incentive to cooperate. From there, it is a small analytical leap to the conclusion that the Concert of Europe was too weakly institutionalized to ensure future interactions between powers—and therefore unable to prevent war.

The point about the certainty of repeated interaction (rather than its supposed benefits) as the main stimulus of cooperation also can be used to discuss many institutions in the world today. In the case of the United Nations, for example, the game of Diplomacy can be used as an example of why the world needs such an organization and how it works to lengthen the shadow of the future. In the standard rules of the game, there is a peace-treaty clause: if all players agree to a peace treaty, then the game ends and everyone wins. For practical purposes, I ignore this rule, but it could be successfully integrated into the game.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the game provides a basis to explain the duration of some alliances in the world, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and it demonstrates why some states comply with rules that they do not deem to be in their short-term self-interest.

Also, on a bilateral or trilateral level, students learn important lessons about the evolution of trust and can use their creativity to generate and monitor trust. In the past, students proposed ways to monitor alliances and the creation of demilitarized zones as a way to foster trust: If Russia, for example, reneges on past promises, then it is deemed untrustworthy. Therefore, not only does Austria get to prepare for an attack, but Russia also might gain a reputation as a bad alliance partner. A longer game duration might allow students to spend more time cultivating their states’ reputation with the goal of attracting future alliance partners. Conversely, having an artificial deadline of two weeks means that by the last class in which the game is being played, most alliances are falling apart and students are competing to betray one another for their own self-interest!

In terms of historical content, the game of Diplomacy provides a fairly detailed basis on which to describe the outbreak of World War I—certainly one of the most important events in the history of international relations. In addition to vastly improving students’ awareness of European geography (no small triumph), the game facilitates their ability to analyze competing explanations for the outbreak of war. The game illustrates, for example, why Britain desired naval supremacy on the eve of World War I, the importance of keeping Belgium neutral, the particular dangers faced by Germany in the two-front war, and why the Balkans so easily became a quagmire for the Great Powers. Conversely, a priori the game provides no account of the identity bonds—both racial and religious—that joined Russia and Serbia; therefore, this reasoning still needs more substance.

Finally, although there is no official standard rule in Diplomacy, interesting new developments could be pioneered to make the game more current. In particular, including a role for nuclear weapons would be interesting, as well as comparing the ease with which cooperation was achieved. To do so, the board-game version of Diplomacy (or possibly a different website) would have to be used because I do not know if the playdiplomacy website can accommodate this variation.<sup>7</sup> A game similar to Diplomacy, named Supremacy, involves nuclear negotiation among world powers and is slightly more complicated than the simple formula used in Diplomacy. In the game of Supremacy, international interaction takes place in a fictional future and the main objective is to avoid a “nuclear winter” in which everyone loses. A more detailed analysis of the game of Supremacy and how it could be used to improve students’ education, however, is a subject for another article.

To conclude, this article presents the game of Diplomacy as a tool that classroom instructors can use in their “Introduction to International Relations” courses but which also could be applied to other classes in the subfield. I describe the mechanics of the game, how to set up a game on the website, and ways in which the game contributes to student learning. The main benefit, however, is to increase student interest in the subfield of international relations—evidenced by the students’ interest in establishing a “Diplomacy Club” on campus to play games outside of class! It is truly gratifying when instructors can stimulate such interest from their students.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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#### NOTES

1. Calhamer (1974). I thank Rick Leeds of the Diplomacy website for his suggestion.
2. All information is taken from both the rulebook, available at <http://www.wizards.com/avalonhill/rules/diplomacy.pdf> (accessed December 19, 2012), and from Richard Sharp (1978).

3. In our past discussions, Nina Kollars and Amanda Rosen—who also have used the game of Diplomacy in the classroom—expressed interest in developing rules for nuclear weapons.
4. When I was setting this up the first time, I tried to register more than one account to the same email address. This resulted in angry emails advising me that I was in violation of the rules to which I had agreed when I registered my first account!
5. Instructors can assign countries to particular teams of students by setting the country assignment to "preferences." When students sign up, there is a list of three boxes to choose a preferred country. To ensure that students are assigned particular countries, they must enter the same country in all three boxes.
6. I thank my colleague Walter Huber for suggesting this to me.
7. Calhamer (1974) took from the card game Hearts the notion that if two players tie for first place, then all players share in the tie. This gives students from weaker powers an incentive to negotiate and try to achieve peace. Although I have not tried this idea, I think that students could be allowed to make a peace treaty after a given number of rounds, with the understanding that ALL would have to write a paper of a given length (e.g., four pages). This would sufficiently

deter cooperation to make it a valuable learning experience and neatly reflect the logic of the Prisoner's Dilemma.

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