Teaching with a Mallet: Conveying an Understanding of Systemic Perspectives on International Relations Intuitively—Croquet as Experiential Learning

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Structural Realist theory on the operation of the international system has often been likened to theory one might find in physics to describe the motions of the balls in a game of billiards. While this metaphor is usually used in jest, or as critique of Realist theory, the use of such games can effectively convey our understanding of international systemic dynamics from a number of theoretical perspectives. Games involve more than physics-like laws of interaction between similar entities or actors. They also involve social aspects of interaction; they assume the contextual laws involving the premise of the game, accepted and unaccepted behavior, and the dispositions of the actors controlling the balls to their competitive environment.

This paper gives an account of the use of croquet as an instructional exercise in an Introduction to International Relations class. Croquet’s ability to convey to students a variety of theoretical perspectives is discussed, as are the “lessons” the students took from the exercise, as described in their post-game reflections.

Keywords: experiential learning, International Relations, Realism, theoretical perspectives

As a relatively new teacher, I have found it a challenge to teach theoretical perspectives on International Relations to students who know comparatively little about the world, and who are fairly new to abstract ways of theorizing about it. In searching for ways to bridge the theory-practice gap for students by allowing them to experience some of the building blocks of International Relations theory, one solution in particular appealed to me. Systemic approaches to International Relations theory have often been criticized as simplifying the world by treating actors (states) as “billiard balls,” governed by “laws of physics” but not particularly possessed of their own agency. Why not turn this critique around and teach International Relations theory via a billiards-like game? The game of croquet offers just such an opportunity, and it offers much more in its complexity than the simple critique of systemic IR theory as “billiards” would imply. The structure (rules) of the game and its emergent (social) dynamics are an enjoyable way to

This paper draws from my experience in teaching Introduction to International Relations at Quinnipiac University in Hamden, CT.

get students to think theoretically about system dynamics. This paper describes the way theoretical approaches to the study of International Relations (Realist, Liberal, and Postmodern) can be taught by using croquet as an exercise in experiential learning.

**Experiential Learning**

My use of croquet to simulate the systemic dynamics inherent in International Relations is based on a growing body of literature on the uses and benefits of experiential learning. For my purposes, this literature boils down to two basic premises: (1) we all learn differently, and our classes are made up of students of all learning styles and predispositions; and (2) we can all learn more effectively if a variety of approaches is used in presenting and confronting the subject matter—knowledge is gained from grappling and grasping concepts and reality from a variety of different perspectives.

From the first premise follows the observation that, as teachers, we often teach to our strengths and our own learning styles, neglecting to provide a variety of approaches to our students. Based on this observation, Neil Fleming, David Kolb, and others have developed ways to discern individuals’ learning preferences, in the interest of improving teaching and learning. The second premise consolidates a body of knowledge most fully developed by David Kolb (1984), which postulates a learning cycle integrating experiential learning with reflective learning. Kolb claims that effective teaching must teach to the entire learning cycle, thus building on the strengths of all students and holistically developing and consolidating knowledge. Both these premises validate the use of active forms of teaching in the classroom. In fact, Richard Fox and Shirley Ronkowski (1997) found that, while political science classes often emphasize abstract and reflective learning, political science students have competencies much more broadly distributed. Fox and Ronkowski also found that lower-level political science students demonstrate a much broader range of learning preferences than upper-level students, and that female students disproportionately display a preference for personal involvement in their learning—requiring teaching styles that are not emphasized in traditional political science instruction.

To these two basic premises, I would add one more: getting a class of students outside doing something seemingly unrelated to political science can be an excellent way to engage them as thinkers. I have found that students often mention the croquet game and how it related to International Relations as among their more vivid memories of our class.

**VARK, Its Assumptions and Development**

In 1987, Neil Fleming developed the VARK inventory in order to ascertain individuals’ learning preferences through the completion of a short questionnaire. He builds his inventory on the proposal that there are four modal learning preferences: Visual, Aural, Read/write, and Kinesthetic. These preferences govern both the presentation and assimilation of information by individuals (ALS2). Use of the inventory itself has been instrumental in gathering data on learning preferences in the classroom. The most reliable data indicate that classrooms are generally very diverse. While increased specialization in content or disciplinary focus may tend to select a more homogenous student population, general results seem to indicate that no one modal preference consistently dominates in a college classroom, and anywhere from 50 percent to 90 percent of the students in the class may express a multimodal preference (ALS1). Incidentally, 50

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2 Fleming’s VARK Inventory is available online at http://www.active-learning-site.com/inventory1.html.
percent of college professors also indicate a multimodal preference, although most usually choose Read/write as one of their specific learning preferences. For the purposes of this paper, I will briefly summarize the four modal preferences used in Fleming’s inventory (ALS1):

• The Visual mode captures the preference for information presented in symbolic or graphic form including “the depiction of information in charts, graphs, flow charts, and all the symbolic arrows, circles, hierarchies and other devices that instructors use to represent what could have been presented in words”; 
• The Aural mode captures the preference for information that is “spoken or heard.” “Students with this modality report that they learn best from lectures, tutorials, and talking to other students”; 
• The Read/write mode refers to a preference for information presented as words; 
• The Kinesthetic mode refers to a preference for learning through bodily action or movement. It is the “perceptual preference related to the use of experience and practice (simulated or real) . . . The key is that the individual is connected to reality, either through experience, example, practice or simulation.”

By using croquet as an experiential tool for comprehending systemic theories of International Relations, this kinesthetic mode of learning can be incorporated into a teaching module that also includes materials oriented toward students with Visual, Aural, or Read/write modal preferences.

Kolb’s Learning Cycle

David Kolb draws on the work of Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget in proposing a cyclical, developmental nature to learning. For Kolb, learning most effectively proceeds from Concrete Experience through a stage of Reflective Observation to a point of Abstract Conceptualization, and finally to Active Experimentation, or an application of the knowledge. Individuals differ in their own strengths and preferences for learning, however. Learners can differ in how they take in information (prehension), and the way they digest it (transformation). For Kolb, each of these dimensions of learning encompasses a range of abilities: for prehension, learners can range from those who do better with concrete experience to those who prefer conceptual or symbolic access to reality; for transformation, individuals tend to rely on either internal reflection or active experimentation. Thus, Kolb postulates a fourfold typology of learners, based on the combination of learning preferences along these two dimensions. These learning types give students comparative strengths in certain phases of Kolb’s learning cycle. Thus, in order to teach effectively—in a way that both teaches completely and includes all students in the creation and interpretation of knowledge—instruction must consciously orient itself to building knowledge through many successive repetitions of the complete learning cycle.

In this context, a game of croquet can act both as the initial active experience on which to build reflective and abstract experience (and a later active application of knowledge), and as the active experimentation phase where previous knowledge can be tested. In my class, I introduce the croquet exercise relatively late in the semester, after many of the concepts and problems we deal with in International Relations have been introduced (and after the snow has melted and the weather is nicer). The three fundamental perspectives on International Relations that I introduce to my students are presented in the classes immediately prior to the croquet game. After the game, each student is encouraged to
reflect on several questions, which are then discussed as a class. Following that, students are asked to begin building their own models of how to describe and explain behavior in the croquet game. Finally, students are asked to actively apply their insights in a paper discussing the overlap between International Relations and croquet, using one of the three fundamental perspectives.

**International Relations Theory**

In my approach to teaching International Relations theories, I use a constructivist approach, in that I try to convey to students the mutual dependence, or “interrelatedness” of the actors we study in International Relations and the international environment itself. Thus, my semester always begins with a presentation of the different actors in International Relations and an argument for why the state is the primary unit of analysis in most approaches to International Relations. At the same time, however, I try to focus on the different contexts for the study of international politics. In focusing on observed behavior in the international realm ranging from outright conflict to varying degrees of cooperation, I present the study of International Relations as an effort to understand and explain this range of behavior. For this, I present Waltz’s (1959) schema of three levels of analysis as a context for study: the individual, the state, and the international environment. Thus, I attempt to define a study of International Relations as one focused principally around understanding the behavior of states as they interact with one another. At the same time, I seek to convey the various sources of state behavior in individual human nature, characteristics of the various different states themselves, and the social environment in which they interact. As Alexander Wendt notes:

> Constructivist sensibilities encourage us to look at how actors are socially constructed, but they do not tell us which actors to study or where they are constructed. Before we can be a constructivist about anything, we have to choose “units” and “levels” of analysis, or “agents” and the “structures” in which they are embedded.” (Wendt, 1999:7)

This lays out the possibilities of teaching International Relations as a much more complex and dynamic endeavor than simply conveying the “laws of physics” that might describe a game of billiards. To the contrary, the complex ideas involved and the ways that they build on one another can become bewildering to students in an introductory course.

**“Four Sociologies” of International Relations**

Wendt poses a “map” of International Relations theories that relies on four “sociologies” that act as cardinal points for describing (or positioning) different theoretical approaches. This map presents a useful way to relate the various different components discussed above in the context of the three different theoretical approaches I present to my students: Realism, Liberalism, and Postmodernism.

Wendt organizes his “sociologies” along two different dimensions, which provide the axes for his map: the materialism-idealism dimension and the individualism-holism dimension. Any theory of International Relations makes commitments that situate it in a general position with relation to all four of these
sociologies. First, a theory is situated by its level of commitment to the importance of ideas as causal factors. Thus, one can be either more or less likely to focus on material causes of international behavior. Wendt (1999) describes five common material factors upon which many approaches to the understanding of International Relations rely: human nature, natural resources, geography, “forces of production,” and “forces of destruction” (23). At the other end of the spectrum, “Idealists believe the most fundamental fact about society is the nature and structure of social consciousness [such as is] shared among actors in the form of norms, rules, or institutions” (24). The contrast of material factors with ideal factors helps to highlight the various approaches used to understand the origins of behavior leading to conflict or cooperation in the international system.

Wendt’s second dimension rests on the degree to which individual (unit) action or social environment/structure is seen as having prior status causally or ontologically:

[While] individualism holds that social scientific explanations should be reducible to the properties or interactions of independently existing individuals, holism holds that the effects of social structures cannot be reduced to independently existing agents and their interactions, and that these effects include the construction of agents in both causal and constitutive senses. (Wendt, 1999:26)

These two dimensions together provide a way of mapping theoretical approaches. The three theoretical perspectives I ask my students to understand and test are Realism, Liberalism, and Postmodernism.

Realism, Liberalism, and Postmodernism

Realism rests on a commitment to material factors such as human nature and military and economic power to explain the orientation and behavior of individual nation-states. This commitment is demonstrated particularly in the works of the dominant Realist thinkers of the twentieth century: Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz. At the same time, however, Realist theory can range from a focus more at the individual (state) level in Classical versions (Morgenthau) to a greater focus on the systemic level in its “structural” Realist form (Waltz). Wendt’s observation, however, is a good one: in its game-theoretic forms, even Structural Realism continues to rely on individually rational behavior as the ultimate determinant of international behavior. Waltz’s use of Rousseau’s “Stag Hunt” analogy to exemplify the importance of social situation to individual behavior still assumes certain individual characteristics and predisposition as the basis for the social situation and the behavior that results.

For the purposes of an Introduction to International Relations, I focus on the type of dynamics that Realism leads us to assume is at the base of international politics. For example, because the international system is anarchy, individual states must rely on their own resources to promote and protect their interests. This perspective leads one to conclude that the international environment, like a Hobbesian state of nature, leads to international politics that are largely conflict prone—any cooperation that emerges is the result of instrumentally rational behavior on the part of state actors. Stability in the international system is explained as deriving from a stalemate, or balance of power, among actors who are all fixed on “winning the game” for themselves in an inherently competitive environment.

Different variants on Liberalism rely more on idealist factors in guiding individual nation-state behavior (which is still seen as more of a causal influence than social structure). Thus, traditional Liberalism focuses on the characteristics of nation-states that have their origins in ideas: democracy, human rights, and equality. The long-standing Liberal argument that democracies don’t go to war
with one another privileges the individual level in that it privileges characteristics of the nation-state in understanding international behavior, but also gives more attention to the “nature and structure of social consciousness” (Wendt, 1999:24). Likewise, the Neoliberal focus on characteristics of the international system such as structures of rules, norms, and institutions, while it gives some degree of importance to systemic characteristics, also focuses on the ideal end of the spectrum. Like Structural Realism, however, Neoliberalism should also be seen as predominantly individualist in its commitments, in that the explanation for international behavior ultimately rests with assumptions about how states will act within a given social environment. While the social environment constrains or shapes state behavior, it doesn’t in any real sense create states as actors (or constitute them, in Wendt’s terms). For the purposes of an Introduction to International Relations, I focus on the fact that Liberal perspectives try to explain why cooperation takes place in the international system. Liberals believe that cooperation can be the “natural” form of behavior in International Relations, given a certain configuration of ideas at the domestic or international level.

Finally, introducing variants on the “Postmodern” approach allows me to raise questions as to whether the categories in which we think of things like International Relations make a difference in the way we think about international behavior. One traditional Postmodern perspective, offered by some feminist theorists of International Relations, raises the question as to whether state identities themselves are shaped by structures of gender hierarchy in Western thinking. In other words, does a social structure of beliefs and ideas constitute the very identity and characteristics of the nation-state as an actor in an anarchic system? Does the construction of sovereignty as the defining characteristic of International Relations rely heavily on masculine concepts of conflict and the distinction between self and other, for example, with profound effects for how we understand and act politically? These are difficult ideas to convey to an Introduction class, but they can be easier to discuss after an experience like a croquet game.

**Croquet as Simulation**

*The Game of Croquet*

Croquet is a lawn game, played outdoors between individuals or teams of individuals who each “play” a ball in a defined space with a mutual goal. The objective of a game of croquet for each player or team is to drive that player/team’s ball through a sequence of hoops, toward the final goal—the stake at the end of the court. Croquet, like most games, is a competitive exercise. Individuals or teams take turns playing their balls on the court; the success of each turn in maneuvering through hoops dictates the length of the turn—the more successful the turn, the more distance is covered by the individual/team’s ball. Each individual or team is attempting to propel its ball through all the hoops and to the finish stake first. Certain further behavior of interaction between players is allowed, even encouraged, as a competitive aspect of the game. Thus, the game is defined by the following characteristics:

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4 In my International Relations class, I use a modified version of what the U.S. Croquet Association terms “Backyard Croquet.” Specifically, I have my classes play “One-Ball Croquet,” which has each ball played independently—in this case by a team of players. As opposed to the game that is played between teams controlling two or more balls, the USCA claims that in one-ball croquet (or “Cutthroat Croquet”) “an individual’s skill and intelligence do not always produce a predictable or just result.” I believe this feature adds to croquet’s ability to simulate systemic action in the international system, in that it reflects the more individualistic basis of most International Relations theory. The greater unpredictability of results may also enhance the simulation. For more information on the game of croquet, see the USCA’s website at http://www.croquetamerica.com.
1. **Turn-taking**: The game proceeds regularly through the taking of turns. Each ball has a unique color; the order of play is determined by the order that stripes of these colors appear on the stakes at the beginning and end of the court.

2. **The hoops**: Each ball must be driven through the hoops in an order established at the beginning of the game, and in the proper direction of play. Each player/team takes one stroke (hits the ball once) each turn. If the ball passes through a hoop, the player may take an additional stroke. Thus, a single “turn” may take on a certain momentum (when successful), or a player’s momentum can be slowed down by others as they take their turns.

3. **Hitting other balls**: A player may drive his/her ball into a competitor’s ball. This is called a *roquet*. A roquet automatically gives the player 2 extra strokes. The player can use these strokes to advance her/his own ball toward the next objective, or the player can use the first of the two additional strokes to drive the opponent's ball off the field, or away from the opponent’s next objective (this is called a *croquet* shot).

4. Hitting a ball through a hoop (in the correct sequence) erases any bonus shots left from a roquet; the player, of course, then has one extra shot to take for successfully passing through the hoop.

These rules create the basis on which a very political type of game can emerge. No two games of croquet are exactly alike. They depend on the players involved—their philosophy of game as well as their abilities. The character of each game also is shaped by the level of success that emerges: a close game develops quite different dynamics than one in which a single player or team dominates or leads. All these characteristics of the game provide a useful allegory for many of the dynamics we teach in International Relations.

**Correspondence to the World of International Relations**

The game of croquet can be presented as an analogy to International Relations. Each ball represents a nation-state. If a single player plays each ball, the game’s characteristics resemble theories of International Relations that rely on the assumption of a unitary state actor. Should a team of individuals play each ball, the decision-making process within each team as to who plays the ball, and to what purpose, becomes available for observation. In this way, the game’s characteristics can be seen as representative of theories that focus as well on the process of decision making within the nation-state actor.

The structure of the game, designed around maneuvering a ball (country) through several hoops, in a particular order, toward a final objective (the stake), can be seen as representative of a country pursuing a goal through a series of challenges. The turn-taking aspect of this play can resemble the contextual factors that might slow or influence a country in realizing its objectives. For example: should a team be particularly proficient at maneuvering through the hoops (challenges), the momentum built can resemble the momentum of a successful foreign policy. Similarly, the effect of turn-taking on slowing down an individual team’s momentum represents the way that international politics and the interests of other “players” in the game often influence the successful enactment of a foreign policy strategy.

Similarly, the dynamics of play that can emerge, given the explicitly interactive aspects of the game, can also represent dynamics of interaction in International Relations. A roquet, and the decision of whether or not to croquet, could be considered an allegory for a clash of interests internationally, and the setbacks or opportunities this can bring about. On the one hand, should a player decide to collide with another ball (explicitly interacting with another player), the decision
of whether to take two turns to advance more quickly and successfully toward the
goal, or to “punish” the other player creates a dynamic that interjects a real level
of politics into the game. The former decision could be considered a more
“cooperative” strategy, based on using interaction with others to advance the
goal. Such decisions can become reciprocal, with each player, in turn, using
others to gain extra shots. Alternatively, a decision to croquet can only be seen as
essentially “competitive” in nature.

Finally, the game of croquet, like most games, is also predicated on the
assumption that only one team wins. Thus, it establishes a zero-sum outcome
parameter that may or may not be representative of the world of International
Relations. Nevertheless, it does create an opportunity to later discuss whether
the game’s parameters are truly representative of the world of International
Relations (as some theoretical perspectives might have it), or fundamentally
flawed. The game can be useful on two levels, then. Observing the nature of play
can bring insights into how the structure of a game can interact with the incen-
tives and natures of individual players to create particular patterns of behavior.
On the other hand, the structure of the game itself can be examined as represen-
tative of the structure of international politics. In terms of the concepts and
models discussed above, the following can be observed in a game of croquet:

1. **Material factors:** Human nature and natural (athletic) ability both are impor-
tant contributors to the nature of play in a game of croquet. Some players
will be better than others; similarly, some players will be more prone to
competitive behavior, while others will be more interested in advancing
through cooperative strategies.

2. **Ideal factors:** Croquet allows for the emergence of norms or patterns of play
that rely on shared values, beliefs, or strategies of play. Similarly, it allows
for an examination of different types of behavior among competitors that
could be described as socialized or conditioned in some way—through
notions of class, gender, or religious worldview—based on ideas of propri-
ety or morality taught outside the game itself. While the parameters (rules)
of the game are quite explicit, they also allow for a wide variety of play
strategies. It is possible that some strategies of play might reflect a degree
of cooperation between players. Whether this cooperation is based on the
dynamics of the game (structure) or individual values and beliefs is a ques-
tion that can be examined as examples emerge.

3. **Individual factors:** The game allows one to look at the role of individual
players or teams of players in setting the “tone” of the game. With individ-
ual players, questions about fundamental human nature and ability, and
their influence on determining the play and result of the game, can be
raised. If each ball is played by a team of individuals, each team and its
decision-making process can be observed as an allegory for examining the
importance of domestic factors in influencing international behavior.

4. **Holistic (structural) factors:** Questions can be raised in the context of a game
of croquet as to what extent the rules and structure of the game create the
forms of behavior that emerge. For example, does the fact that only one
player can win necessarily create a particular kind of player; does the final
outcome and the zero-sum nature of the game pre-determine actor inter-
ests to the point that they also constitute an actor’s identity?

Given these parameters, Realist, Liberal, and Postmodern approaches to the
study of International Relations can also be applied to the study of a game of
croquet. A Realist approach would focus on the competitive aspects of the game:
its zero-sum nature as well as the role of human nature (a will to win) and player
ability and skill in determining both the politics of play and the outcome. A
Liberal approach would focus on the emergence of cooperative behavior within the context of the game: where and when do cooperative strategies take place, and to what end? Finally, the Poststructuralist perspective would focus outside the game of croquet itself. It could look at the way the game is set up: how does this pre-determine or privilege certain kinds of behavior; does it constitute players in any fundamentally essential way; does the analogy itself demonstrate the way that a system of shared beliefs about the world can create certain patterns of behavior? Alternatively, it could focus on what individual players and the class as a group brought to the game of croquet, introducing these factors into the explanation of the course of play, and drawing parallels to the ways we approach interaction in the international system.

The Structure of the Simulation

There are usually between 25 and 30 students in my Introduction to International Relations class, so the exercise is set up to play two games of croquet simultaneously. Each game is constituted somewhat differently. One game is set up with four balls (nation-states), the other with six balls (nation-states). Each ball in each game is played by a team of students, and each team is asked to name its ball, or nation-state. Each team is asked to decide as a group what strategy it wants to take vis-à-vis the other teams (balls) on the field. It is assumed that the strategy will change and evolve as the game develops and circumstances dictate; nevertheless, all actions taken as a part of one turn are to be consistent with the “strategy” of the team, determined by consensus during play.

For the six-ball set, the game is constructed so that there will be six teams of two people each. Each team is asked to automatically alternate play of the ball (from turn to turn) between the two members of the team—one player will hit the ball for the duration of one turn, then hand the mallet off to the other player for the next turn, and so on. For the four-ball set, the game is made up of four teams of four players each. In this game, each team is given the ability to decide who on the team will take any individual turn of play; however, the decision on who is to play the turn will have to be unanimous. Players who are not mandated with playing the ball are responsible for determining the strategy of play. All players are told they are responsible for observing the patterns of play that emerge in their game, and the strategies of play that emerge on their teams.

Finally, in making up the teams, I randomly pair players in the six-ball game, but take care to construct certain kinds of teams in the four-ball game. In the spring of 2000—the class on which this paper is based—out of four teams in the four-ball game, I made up one team of women, two teams of men, and one mixed-sex team. One men’s team was “stacked” with some of the more aggressively and stereotypically male students in the class—the students who tended to dominate conversation or otherwise assert their presence in the group as a whole. The women’s team was made up of equally involved women, although the more assertive women in the class were placed on the mixed-sex team. In the spring of 2000 example, the six-ball game finished their first game quickly, and was instructed to begin a second game.

Directions to the Students

Before beginning the exercise, all students are briefed as to the rules of the game and the structure of their individual games. Then they are formed into teams. In playing the game, they are asked to be self-observant about what they are doing and why. Specifically, they are reminded that there are two schools of thought about the basic underlying principles of International Relations. First, nation-state action is believed to be motivated by a competitive struggle for
power and influence, leading to a “survival” of the strongest or most powerful
nation-states. Alternatively, nation-state action is seen as governed by commonly
observed rules and norms that engender cooperative behavior among nation-
states. Students are reminded that both schools of thought see state behavior as
motivated by a concern for promoting and protecting national interest.

Keeping these factors in mind, each student is asked to think seriously about
the following questions while they play the game:

1. How do the rules of the game structure the way the game is conducted
(played)?
2. Are *unwritten* rules of play emerging concerning the behavior of any of the
   players toward the other players or a subset of other players? If so, what
   are they and how do they affect play in the game?
3. Under what conditions is cooperation between teams emerging, if at all?
4. Under what conditions (if any) is conflict or extreme rivalry emerging?
5. Which (conflict or cooperation) better describes the overall play of the game?
6. In playing such a game, can one make certain observations (and draw
   conclusions) about *human nature*?

Following the game, several more questions are added for their consideration:

7. If you had the opportunity to play a second game, did you observe any
differences in the patterns of behavior, when compared to the first play of
the game?
8. Do you think that the number of players in the game made any difference
to how the play in the game emerged? (Compare, if you can, general
observations about the four- and six-ball games.)
9. Did you notice if the number of players on each team mattered in any way
in the play of the game? What might this signify?
10. What patterns of behavior emerged around *strategizing* for the game? Given
the rules stipulated for play in your game, how was the strategy agreed to?
Who was designated to take the shots? How was such a decision made?
11. Did strategy on your team *evolve* during the course of the game? Did it
   differ with respect to one opponent compared to another? What might
   you conclude from these observations?
12. Did you notice any difference in behavior between all-male and all-female
   teams (and the mixed-sex teams)? What might you conclude from your
   observations in this respect?
13. If you were able to make observations or draw conclusions about human
   nature, what were they? Can you envision the application of such an
   understanding to the international realm? How?
14. Is it fair to construct International Relations as a similar sort of game,
   made up of self-interested actors, all competitively pursuing a mutually
   exclusive goal—one where there can be only one winner?

The class meeting following the play of the game is taken up in sharing and
discussing our responses to these questions. The purpose of the discussion is to
examine the theoretical building blocks of International Relations theory in the
context of the game of croquet: material and ideal factors, and individual and
holistic perspectives. Following such discussion, the two dominant perspectives
on International Relations (Realism and Liberalism) can be discussed again.
Additionally, the very parameters of the game and who we all are in entering the
game can be examined. From this discussion, concepts consistent with more
Postmodern perspectives of International Relations can be broached. At this stage,
the purpose is to engage students in theory- (or model-) building, preparing them
for their own application of one of the three perspectives (Realism, Liberalism, Postmodernism) to the experience. Following the exercise and debriefing, students are asked to write a paper, using the exercise as a source of knowledge, applying one of the three perspectives to the study of International Relations.

Lessons Learned

In the spring of 2000, as the games began, I had two general questions about the possible effects the structure of the game might have. First, I wondered if the number of balls in the game would matter; would a game with more, equally matched players develop different dynamics than one with fewer players? Secondly, I wondered what effects the internal dynamics of the team would have on the play of the game. I had rigged the games so that the four-ball game would have the potential to demonstrate more internal team dynamics than the six-ball game; the four-ball game had teams with more members, and more flexibility in determining how the play would proceed. While the exercise was not set up to test each of these factors systematically, I did hope to see different dynamics emerge in each game.

Initial Observations of the Conduct of the Games

The six-ball game got off to a slow start as the teams learned the skills necessary; the first round of turns did not result in much progress down the course. However, from the second round of turns on, the game developed a rather quick pace, as players focused almost exclusively on their own ball’s progress down the course. One team got out to an early lead, and this lead was maintained for most of the duration of the game. As the rest of the teams took their turns, the possibilities of using other balls to extend a turn (thus hastening progress) gradually emerged in the group as a whole. Initially, players used other balls to gain two additional strokes, without crouqueting the opponent’s ball. Thus, other balls were seen as instrumentally useful, but not initially as threats that needed to be impeded. Thus, through the majority of the game, the players—except the leader, who was well out in front—used other balls to advance their own play without developing either implicit or explicit strategies of cooperation for a common goal.

Toward the end of the game, an interesting development took place. Too late to make a real difference, the last-place team decided to “sacrifice” its own objectives of passing through the hoops, and used a turn to drive their ball to the end of the course with the intention of “knocking off” the leader to assist the most advanced challenger. This strategy did seem to come out of explicit communication and some sort of “pooling” of interest between the last-place team and the leading challenger.

The game was over fairly quickly and the group started a second game. The effects of some learning were observed, as all players in the second game developed a mutually aggressive posture toward the winner of the first game. There were some tentative attempts at setting up a long-term cooperative strategy before the time ran out, and play was halted.

5 From this point on, I will use examples taken from my spring of 2000 International Relations class. During the spring of 2001, the exercise was repeated, with some interesting results—some replicating the general lessons of the 2000 game, others adding to them. It is my expectation that every year’s games will present slightly different results, and correspondingly different opportunities for discussion.

6 This is one aspect in which 2001 play differed radically. In 2001, the six-ball game seemed to begin with a prevailing assumption that other teams were threats—players realized the value of more cooperative behavior much later in the game. The course of play was, correspondingly, much slower, and the six-ball game never reached a conclusion in 2001.
In the four-ball game, very different game dynamics emerged. One of the all-male teams took an early lead, with one of the team members “commandeering” the mallet and asserting his dominance over his teammates. The other three teams quickly began to talk amongst themselves and to each other about cooperative strategies that could be used to catch up to the leading team. The ringleader in this effort was the mixed-sex team, vociferously represented by a female player. Deliberations between the teams and within the teams could be quite lengthy, and more discussion (and argument) took place in this game than actual play.

Play in the game broke down one or two times, as teams argued over who had or had not “cheated” (or defected) on a mutual agreement. Most controversy seemed to center around the mixed-sex team, led by the assertive female player, which was the most aggressive challenger to the lead team. This mixed-sex team twice accused the second all-male team of cheating (or defecting) by *croqueting* them. I was asked to “referee” the situation, to uphold prior agreements; I refrained from acting in this role.

Play, in general, was much more contentious and “punitive” in the four-ball game than in the six-ball game; *croquets* were used more often, and with a vengeance, as opposing teams’ balls were sent off the course, down the hill, and across the nearby street. The players just barely finished the game, as the early leaders (who had been inhibited regularly by the other players) attained the finish stake at the end of the class period.

**Early Reflection**

In the class period following the game, most students discussed the four-ball game, the details of which even the players in the six-ball game had become aware. Several students commented on the “commando” strategy of the lead player on the victorious team. Not all his teammates were happy about his dominance of the team, but kept fairly quiet during the game, as they were winning.7

The second place team (the mixed-sex team), it was agreed, had been the most contentious. The majority of players in that game felt that the controversy driven by the more assertive woman on the team had created more difficulties in achieving a common objective than was worth the gain achieved through cooperation. Some players noted the “gendered” nature of the interaction. The women on the all-female team commented that they had really just “wanted to have fun” in playing the game, and that the competition had gotten in the way.

**Students’ More Considered Reflections**

The students were asked to write a six to eight page paper integrating what they had learned in the game of croquet with what we had covered in class about International Relations. They were asked to choose Realism or Liberalism as the best way of viewing International Relations and/or the game of croquet, and to consider whether the game of croquet was a useful analogy for the realm of International Relations.8

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7 In another interesting parallel, in the 2001 game the four-ball game also had one team where three of the players totally abdicated all responsibility for the game to one player, who proceeded to win. When asked why they were so willing to give up control, they noted that their strategy seemed to be successful.

8 The paper assignment was simplified to the application of these two perspectives, although students were encouraged to apply a Postmodern perspective if they were so inclined; none did. This raises a question, to be treated later, as to how easily and effectively Postmodern perspectives can be introduced and discussed in the context of a group activity like croquet. Clearly this is a challenge for the reflective and abstract conceptualization phases of the exercise, conducted in the classes immediately following the game. I am not yet prepared to give up on introducing this perspective to the exercise, however.
Most students preferred to adopt a Realist perspective. In doing this, they did see a clear analogy with the game of croquet. Some common themes presented were the inherent lack of trust that developed in the game, the fact that the zero-sum nature of the game drove each player to win, and the reliance on self-interest. An essentially competitive human nature was posited as being central to all of these dynamics, and the students claimed to see these same dynamics in International Relations.

Beyond these general conclusions, some students made other interesting observations, based on the conduct of the game. One student (a participant in the four-ball game) found one competitive aspect “curious”:

Some teams began hitting other balls out of the way even though it wasn’t in their interest to do so. It appeared that they were more interested in keeping other balls out of the game instead of taking the opportunity to win themselves. (Mangiafico, 2000:4)

Another student, also commenting on the four-ball game, supported this observation with a theoretic conclusion:

The competitive nature often makes bitter rivalries more often than cooperative alliances. The four-ball game featured such a rivalry between [the all-male team] and [the mixed-sex team]. After Dictator Mike [the leader of the all-male team] sent their ball down the slope towards New Road, the [mixed-sex] team not only attacked the leaders, but urged other teams to do so at every opportunity. While the girls were able to obtain some help from the other two teams, [the all-male] team managed to win that croquet game. More generally, any team that takes aggressive action against another team will be more likely to face dire consequences for their actions later in the game. Similarly, any country that performs a political move similar to sending a ball down a steep slope can expect some sort of return later on in time. (Wisneski, 2000:3)

On alliances, one student, a participant in the six-ball game, based his Realist argument on the observation that alliances are subject to the expectation of gain. While this is not inconsistent with a more Liberal perspective, the student linked it to the fragility of alliances in a competitive environment, a more Realist observation:

While playing croquet I saw alliances come together and then fall very quickly. Players would use their alliances to take out the one leading the game. As soon as this was done the allies would turn on each other after seeing their chance to gain the lead. . . . Alliances are really only formed if all the nation-states in it believe they can gain something, and they really don’t care what happens to their fellow allies as long as their goals are met. (Stefani, 2000:1–2)

This same student continued to critique the Liberal claim that institutions help to facilitate communication, thus enabling cooperation:

The real problem I had with Liberalism was the focus on the ability of institutions to communicate to foster cooperation. I believe the only communication allies should have is to talk about how to destroy the enemy. If nation-states communicate too much they reveal their weaknesses. . . . In our croquet matches I found that the teams who told their allies their next moves were the ones to finish last. (Stefani, 2000:3)

While this comment says quite a bit about this student’s innate distrust and suspicion, it is quite clearly consistent with a Realist view of International Relations, and accurately portrayed as such.
One student did note a key difference between the game of croquet and International Relations, while making a Realist argument. “Many will argue,” he states, “that there are far too many variables to take into consideration, but International Relations, like croquet, is a zero-sum game. . . . The difference with International Relations is that the game is never-ending and the stakes, and by this I do not mean wickets or those tiny wooden poles, are much higher” (Cherubini, 2000:3). I wonder, if the croquet game were to be replayed over and over again with the same teams, would this student, like Axelrod (1984), begin to take into account the future effects of current game strategies?

Students who supported the Liberal view in their papers most often focused on the gains that could be had through cooperation in the game of croquet. One student based his argument partially on the possibility of altruism in International Relations (and croquet):

Realists believe that there is only one winner in the international “game” just as in croquet. The Realists believe that we live in a self-interested environment. This I do not believe is the case in our society. There are countries that help or fight for a cause that has nothing to do with their interests. (Gora, 2000:3)

In this comment, the student demonstrates one way that the game of croquet can still highlight a concept in International Relations even when the game is seen as inaccurately reflecting social reality in the international system.

The same student, a player in the six-ball game, observed an evolution of cooperation in his game. He observed that he might have been the only player who initially understood the rules and possible strategies of the game: “I do not believe that the 5 other balls in my group understood the whole meaning of the game. . . . I have played the game of croquet prior to this, so I understood how we can use the rules to our advantage.” This student continued to describe the way his example was used to build cooperation amongst the other players:

With my knowledge of the game, I used the surrounding balls to my advantage. . . . My partner started to catch on to my strategy and asked me if I am able to do that, thinking that I was cheating somehow. After this started, more and more people started to understand how the game was really played and they started to cooperate with one another. The cooperation was done more unconsciously rather than vocally. There was really no communication between players, rather if there was a ball within distance they would just hit it and move on with their two extra hits. (Gora, 2000:3)

Then something interesting happened. The student noted that “more teams started to get more competitive and instead of using the two hits to advance their interests, they hit the ball off course” (Gora, 2000:4). While he doesn’t explain the breakdown of cooperation, he does conclude that “cooperation can take place short of forming a mutuality of interests such as that of the security community. . . . Liberals do not necessarily have to believe in generous positive actors but they understand that with cooperation more interests will be met” (Gora, 2000:5).

A second student also noticed the decay of cooperation, this time in the four-ball game, and in the context of an “evolution” of aggression: “In the four-team simulation, three of the teams seemed apprehensive about being the first group to take direct action against another,” he notes. This student was one of the players on the all-male team that had taken an early lead, and ultimately won the game. “Because all three of our opponents followed us [after the first turn], our ball was left in a vulnerable position,” he says. Nevertheless, none of the other teams initially took advantage of his team’s vulnerability. In a stark demonstra-
tion of a spiral of defection, however, this student blames further behavior on his team’s part for commencing a more competitive spirit in the game:

Being the wonderful cooperators that we were, [we] took this lack of aggressive strategy as a sign our competition would be pretty slim within this simulated international system. On our second try, we immediately forced our interests upon the other three actors; we thrashed away any obstacle in the way of the next wicket, be it Red, Black, or Yellow, the team that proved to be our arch nemesis. . . . While at the outset the three other teams were passive and cooperative, once their interests were acted upon their entire mindset changed. (Kennedy, 2000:5–6)

This student continued to make a more constructivist argument similar to Wendt’s “Anarchy is what states make of it” (1992).

A third student noticed this process take place in reverse, as a competitive dynamic became more cooperative. This student, a participant in the four-ball game, noted: “Whenever a team would catch up to the [leading] team, they would be aiming to send [its] ball because of past grievances with the team. All teams saw the game as a zero-sum game where anybody else’s gain was their loss” (Pellegrino, 2000:5). Nevertheless, after the other three teams cooperated out of mutual animosity for the leading team, narrowing the lead enjoyed by that team to nothing, the “[leading] team, wanting to avoid confrontation with all other parties in the game, took up a more Liberalized [sic] posture,” he says. “This is where the overall mood of the game changed to cooperation instead of conflict. . . . Learning proved to be a key concept in the game of croquet, just as it is in the game of International Relations. As states evolve around one another, they learn how to act so that they are not continually drawn into conflict” (Pellegrino, 2000:5–6).

Finally, some students made observations unconnected with a clear argument for one theoretical perspective or another; nonetheless, their observations are quite interesting for their analogy to our understandings of International Relations. The female student who was the real motivator behind the group dynamics in the four-ball game observed that at the outset there was an “immediate sense of direction in the game” (Kotowski, 2000:3). The lead team (all male) was, in her opinion, clearly defined by its leader, “the jock,” whose behavior also dominated the character of the game. Furthermore, she clearly acknowledged the role she had played in the decay of cooperation between the other three teams: “I got a little too carried away and may have taken on a whole new role that tried to dominate everyone’s position,” she notes. “I felt I knew what shots everyone should take and told them how to do it. It may have been the factor as to why the [second all-male] team bumped out our ball” (4).

This student was one of the few to note the possible role of gender in the dynamics of her game:

Although we did not win and [one all-male] team did win, I learned about the different strengths of each group. It seemed an all-girl group was weaker. They did not have a competitive angle as much as the guys did. Further, a jock being on the team helped for that group to develop and execute a strategy more efficiently. The [other all-male] team, which did not have any jocks [or] girls, was a combination of the two teams. They were more competitive than the girls but laid back as well. They made a few of their own decisions but not in the same manner as the [first all-male] team. Our team, the [mixed-sex] team, had a jock that was a girl, two guys that were in the same mode as the [second all-male] team guys, and me, very dominant and with an objective to beat the [first all-male] team. I felt our team worked well together and they did not kill me, which was good. (Kotowski, 2000:6)
The “jock” also commented on the role of gender in the conduct of the game:

The composition of each team forged a direct effect onto a nation’s stance on their international decision making. All-male teams tended to be more aggressive which frequently caused situations that became detrimental and even caused the nation to regress rather than advance. All-female teams on the other hand were far too passive and called on their femininity to be granted reprieves for their ineptitude in playing the game. They essentially made themselves inferior to the competition and would always be relegated to the positions assigned by the “leaders.” The mixed team offered the greatest ability to compromise, pulling the genuine, strong, and “good” qualities from both genders, while leaving the negative aspects behind them. (Burdo, 2000:5–6).

The possibilities for discussion of gender in International Relations from these observations alone are quite fantastic.

Another student had equally revealing observations about her participation in the six-ball game. “I thought nothing of cheating to catch up with the other teams,” she said.

I would have stopped cheating (testing the system) if other players thought I was being unfair, but no one said anything, so I therefore continued to cheat. Although I was cheating, I was not a threat to get ahead in the game, and therefore no one seemed to mind if I cheated, or took extra turns. If I was in a position to catch up, or possibly even get ahead, I know that my cheating would not have been tolerated. (Hutton, 2000:5)

This student was one of the team members who constructed an alliance based on her team’s sacrificing its own goals at the end of the game. She justifies the role her team played in promoting another team’s interests by saying “my team had nothing to lose and decided that we might as well get something out of the game” (6). In concluding, this student observes that thinking of croquet as an analogy for International Relations implies that, like croquet, there can be only one winner. This kind of thinking, she notes, encourages Realist thinking. “The alliances that were established,” she says, “still only guaranteed that one team would win” (7).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is quite apparent to me that the croquet exercise was a success in getting students to think about—even to experience—the many different aspects of International Relations theory I had introduced them to. In this respect, croquet was quite effective as a pedagogical device for a course in International Relations. I have concerns, however, as to whether its use is entirely responsible. A game of croquet, useful as it is as an analogy, is still quite different from the realm of International Relations. While it allows us to test ideas of human agency in a structured environment, whether the central competitive aspects of such a game are fairly representative of International Relations is exactly the crux of theoretic debate in the field. The zero-sum nature of a game of croquet, as many of my students observed, almost automatically leads one to adopt a Realist perspective. This may be one reason most of my students adopted such a perspective in their papers. By teaching that International Relations is such a competitive environment, an assumption at the heart of much of twentieth-century IR theory

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It is interesting that this player wrongly remembers the game as being between one all-male team (his), one mixed-sex team, and two all-female teams. In fact, there were two all-male teams and only one all-female team.
(with roots far older), are we leading our students to expect that competitive behavior is the best guarantee of success? It is by addressing such questions with students that the Postmodern perspective can, and should be introduced. Clearly, the burden of any active learning exercise in the classroom is on the “debriefing” phase following the exercise. This is supported both by Kolb’s work emphasizing the value of reflection and abstract conceptualization to consolidating knowledge, and by other authors who have commented on effective experiential learning techniques (see, e.g., Petranek, 2000). In order to more fully delve into the Postmodern perspective, it may be useful in future classes to ask students prior to the croquet game which perspective, Realism or Liberalism, seems intellectually more appealing to them. Later, these opinions could be compared with how the student played the game and what her or his conclusions were following the game. The question then can be broached as to whether it matters for the way social interaction plays out what beliefs are held prior to that interaction.

Finally, while croquet is an enjoyable and effective way to raise many of the ideas and theories we teach in International Relations while actively engaging students, it is not a direct simulation of international behavior. There are other games and simulations—such as model United Nations, for example—that can more closely approximate the world of International Relations. Nevertheless, with proper preparation and adequate discussion following, croquet can be one tool for conveying an understanding of systemic perspectives on International Relations.

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