

## **PEDAGOGY AND THE DISCIPLINE**

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# **Simulating the Cuban Missile Crisis: Crossing Time and Space in Virtual Reality**

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The Cold War is now ancient history to most university students. They can learn the facts of this period, but the feelings associated with the experience are beyond the scope of social science. Such feelings should be part of teaching and learning about international studies. Instructors can present history and politics, but without an emotional sense of empathy, students will never fully understand the subtle complexity of international affairs. They must be able to view the world from different perspectives, participating in the values, feelings, and perceptions of others. This study describes a computer simulation that allows students to participate in the emotional affect of the Cold War, developing a sense of empathy with decision makers. Part one presents a literature survey and discusses the need for control groups and research replication. Part two describes the simulation. Part three evaluates the results on student learning. A conclusion introduces a means by which instructors can replicate the simulation experience.

**Keywords:** simulation, information technology, empathy

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The Cold War is now ancient history to most college and university students, the fear, risk, and danger of that era being only a distant memory. They understand a different kind of danger—the risk of terrorism and the fear of attack against a building or city that could kill thousands. The concept of millions dying from a thermonuclear war over the course of a few days is a concept they may grasp intellectually, but the emotive feelings associated with such a disaster are illusive.

This potential catastrophe was unique to the Cold War era, crystallized in the events of October 1962, 13 days when the world stood on the brink of disaster. Between a one in three and even chance of nuclear war was the retrospective description used by Robert F. Kennedy, and those who lived through this event remember the feelings of helplessness and despair. Today's students can learn about the history, strategy, and diplomacy of this crisis, but the feelings associated with the danger of the Cold War seem lost to the shadows of time.

Such feelings should be an important part of teaching and learning international studies. Instructors can present the facts of political science, diplomatic history, law, strategy, and economics, but without a sense of emotional empathy for others, students will never fully understand the subtle complexity of international relations. They must be able to view the world from different perspectives, participating in “the values, feelings, and perceptions of another” (Stover 2005a:209), in order to learn more completely the spirit of an earlier time or different cultural setting. Including affective, emotional elements in our understanding of international relations is important, for it encourages humanistic discernment, supplementing the analytical, quantitative basis of our discipline.

This study describes an on-line, interactive computer simulation that allows students to participate in the emotional effect of the Cold War era, an experience intended to help them develop a sense of empathy with the decision makers involved in the Cuban Missile Crisis. Part one presents a literature survey and discusses methodology. Part two describes the simulation. Part three evaluates the results on student learning, and a conclusion introduces a means by which instructors can replicate the simulation experience in their own classes.

### **Simulations and International Studies**

Simulations have become an important laboratory in the teaching of political science and international studies (Woodward and Gump 1994). They have been used in comparative politics (Kaarbo and Lantis 1997; Shellman 2001; Marsh and Bucy 2002; Switky 2004), international law (Jefferson 1999; Kille 2002; Ambrosio 2006), ethnic conflict (Ambrosio 2004), Middle East studies (Dougherty 2003; Stover 2005a, 2005b), international relations and theory (Newmann and Twigg 2000; Asal 2005; Young 2006), national security (Kanner 2004), international political economy (Hobbs and Moreno 2004; Boyer, Trumbore, and Fricke 2006), international organizations (Van Dyke, Declair, and Loedel 2000; McIntosh 2001; Shaw 2004; Switky 2004; Chasek 2005), and international drug policy (Flynn 2000). They permit students to become “active participants rather than passive observers” (Mckeachie 1994:163); motivate student learning (Dekkers and Donatti 1981); and present the active experience of international relations (Parente 1995).

Some simulations are simple enough to be used effectively in a few class sessions with minimum preparation, such as “The Isle of Ted” simulation (Thomas 2002) or the “Classical Realism Game” (Asal 2005:366). Others are complex in their concept and execution, like “The International Communication and Negotiation Simulation (ICONS)” where students represent a nation’s diplomatic delegation and negotiate with other groups from countries all over the world (Vavrina 1995; Starkey and Wilkenfeld 1996; Starkey and Blake 2001).

Whether simple or complex, these simulations seem to have a useful effect on teaching and learning as reported by the instructors who use them. For example, Shellman and Turan agree with Brown and King (2000) and Kuzma and Haney (2001) about their usefulness. They report that simulations enhance “knowledge of substantive course material” and “provide . . . a memorable educational experience” (Shellman and Turan 2006:28, 30). Shaw writes that her simulation of negotiation and mediation during a three-way civil war helps students “develop their own negotiation skills . . . , gain a greater appreciation for the subtleties and complexities of the art of international mediation . . . , and learn to listen, (to) strategize, to advocate their own position, and to work toward compromise . . .” (Shaw 2006:63). Marsh and Bucy (2002:381) note that simulations “can be a useful component in teaching . . . students about the diversity that exists within foreign countries and the dynamic of domestic policy-making.” McIntosh claims they “provide the feel and excitement of international affairs while demonstrating that the theories and data taught in class have relevance in action” (2001:276).

These conclusions and many others like them are based on several different types of evaluations. Most simulations include a debriefing, some oral, others written (Lantis 1998; McIntosh 2001; Zeff 2003; Chasek 2005). Additional means of assessment involve the writing of a paper (Marsh and Bucy 2002; Boyer, Trumbore, and Fricke 2006), a legal brief (Ambrosio 2006), an examination question (Asal 2005), and journal writing (Young 2006). A few present a pre and postsimulation questionnaire (Stover 2005a; Austin McDowell and Sacko 2006; Shaw 2006; Shellman and Turan 2006).

These types of evaluations and others like them provide evidence that simulations have a positive effect on teaching and learning. However, research needs to go

beyond basic descriptive observations, following Krain's (2005) challenge to design studies that test seriously their effectiveness, and Gosen and Washbush's call for more careful evaluation of these "experiential learning" techniques (2004:270).

Evaluative studies suffer from two fundamental problems in their methodology, limiting their usefulness in assessing the pedagogy of simulations. First, few studies use a control group with which the simulation participants can be compared. This makes it difficult to ascertain with any level of reliability to what extent student learning is based on the simulation itself rather than extraneous events or personalities. Ideally, a class should be divided into two parts; one participating in the simulation, and the other uninvolved. They would have the same instructor and reading assignments with only the simulation as the independent variable. Alternately, in larger universities, two sections of the same course might be used in a study that could choose one section as a control group and the other as an experimental group. This type of research design could present difficulties in an academic setting where the control group might feel left out of the excitement and enjoyment of the simulation. For studies to achieve a higher level of methodological reliability, however, some type of control is essential.

Second, rarely if ever are studies replicated. One group of students who have participated in a simulation responds to a written or oral debriefing, and perhaps fills out pre and postsimulation surveys. The results are usually positive, and the researchers move on to other things. Educators need to duplicate such studies in different institutions, at different times, with different types of students, lending greater confidence to their findings.

This study presents a simulation involving small group decision-making and negotiation during the Cuban Missile Crisis. One class was the experimental group who participated in the simulation. They were upper-division students, juniors, and a few seniors, who read material about the crisis and spent three class periods discussing it before beginning the simulation. A second class served as the control group. They were lower division, introductory students, mainly sophomores, who read different material about the crisis and also spent three class periods discussing it. The control group did not participate in the simulation.

In addition to the simulation experience itself, there were two asymmetries between the control and experimental groups—a difference in the content of their reading and in their level of academic experience. These were different classes, one introductory, the other advanced. Ideally, both groups would be at the same academic level, reading the same material at the same time, but this was not possible, due to a limited number of courses and students at the institution where the study took place. Moreover, the groups were not selected randomly. The study relied on comparing individuals who had already enrolled in the two classes. Randomization would have strengthened the study, but this is not always possible in an educational setting where research must accommodate the academic mission and class schedules of institutions.

While this is notable, it should not negate the usefulness of the control group for two reasons. First, while the readings were different in content, both assignments stressed the dangers associated with the Cuban Missile Crisis, and both involved the historical, strategic, and diplomatic context in which the disputant parties found themselves. Thus, both groups were exposed to written material and discussions about the crisis. Second, the difference in age and experience between sophomores in the control group and mostly juniors in the experiential group could be a contaminating factor. However, it should not be so great a difference to abrogate the potential benefit of a control group, strengthening the reliability of the findings. Even in clinical trials involving medical research, the control and experimental groups are never identical. They are just as close as possible to permit reasonable comparison. Recognizing these methodological problems, one may consider this study a quasi-experiment, in which the control group provides some degree of

comparison with the experimental group, despite differences in reading material and academic level.

### **Simulating Decision Making During the Cuban Crisis of 1962**

Students in an upper-division (junior level) class constituted the experimental group and self-selected one of three teams: the United States, the Soviet Union, and Cuba. Within each team, they self-selected decision-making roles of characters involved in the Cuban Missile Crisis. On the American team, the roles included President Kennedy, the vice president, attorney general, secretary of state, under secretary of state, deputy under secretary of state for political affairs, secretary of defense, chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, director of the central intelligence agency, assistant secretary of defense, national security advisor, ambassador at large, director of the United States information agency, a presidential assistant, and a political advisor.

The Soviet team's roles were Premier Khrushchev, the minister of foreign affairs, minister of defense, chief theoretician to the Communist Party, chairman of the Communist Party military affairs committee, director of the KGB, commander of the strategic rocket forces, politburo member for allied relations, ambassador to United States, chief of staff for the Soviet armed forces, and secretary of the Communist Party press and propaganda organization.

The Cuban team was smaller but had enough roles to permit small group deliberation. These included Fidel Castro, the minister of foreign affairs, minister of defense, chairman of the Communist Party committee for defense of the revolution, chief of staff for the armed forces of Cuba, and secretary of the Communist Party press and propaganda organization.

Students read the book, *One Hell of a Gamble: The Secret History of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Fursenko and Naftali 1998), and spent three class sessions discussing the crisis. As part of their simulation experience, they wrote a brief paper described as a "subjective rather than objective effort" at research. They were instructed that the paper should not be a neutral, balanced report. Rather, students should present the paper from their simulated countries' perspective, using sources from the state they are simulating as well as historical news reports and academic, scholarly work. For example, a student taking the role of a Soviet decision maker looked for speeches by political leaders from the Soviet Union, articles written by Soviet journalists and scholars, and statements issued by the government of the USSR. These sources are available on the author's Cuban Missile Crisis website <http://www.scu.edu/crs>.

Students were also instructed to present the paper in an innovative manner, attempting to achieve a degree of empathy with the simulated state. For example, writing a state of the world address by a head of government, a briefing by a foreign minister, messages from an ambassador abroad, or a secret report on military preparedness by a security advisor can help students better adopt the role they are simulating and feel what it is like to be a decision maker in their simulated state. Heads of states wrote about the historical context of the crisis, their countries' goals, and the dangers the crisis posed. Advisors wrote about their role in the government, their values, and the ideal outcome of the crisis from their institutional perspectives.

After this preparation, students received a scenario presenting a listing of historical events immediately before the crisis. The events were written in language reflecting the ideology and values of each involved country. For example, the Cuban team members read:

August 16, 1960: The first assassination plot by the United States against Fidel Castro is detected by Cuban intelligence when a box of Castro's favorite cigars is found poisoned by a U.S. spy. The plan is one of several assassination plots against the Cuban leader devised by the United States government between 1960 and 1962.

May 8, 1962: A multiservice United States military exercise designed to test contingency planning for Cuba begins. Another military exercise in the Caribbean is planned for sometime in the spring or summer. Soviet and Cuban sources conclude that the series of military exercises is additional evidence of United States intentions to invade Cuba.

#### Soviet team members read:

January 2, 1961: Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev tells a gathering at the Cuban embassy in Moscow: "The most aggressive American monopolists are preparing a direct attack on Cuba. They are trying to present the case as though rocket bases of the Soviet Union are being set up or are already established in Cuba. This is foul slander."

May 29, 1962: A Soviet special envoy arrives in Cuba with a delegation to meet with Fidel Castro and his brother Raul, the Cuban Minister of Defense. Expressing their concern over the possibility of a new United States invasion of Cuba, the Soviet officials state that the Soviet Union is prepared to assist Cuba in fortifying its defenses, even to the extent of deploying nuclear missiles on Cuban soil.

#### The American team read:

June 13, 1961: General Maxwell Taylor submits a report on United States limited war programs following the Bay of Pigs invasion. Taylor calls for the creation of a new program of action against Cuba, possibly using the full range of political, military, economic, and psychological tactics.

September 19, 1962: The United States Intelligence Board states that some intelligence indicates the possible ongoing deployment of nuclear missiles to Cuba. However, it concluded that "the establishment on Cuban soil of Soviet nuclear striking forces which could be used against the United States would be incompatible with Soviet policy as we presently estimate it . . . (and the Soviets) would almost certainly estimate that this could not be done without provoking a dangerous United States reaction."

The scenario followed historical events up to the launch of the United States U-2 "reconnaissance" or "spy" plane that discovered the missiles. Instead of photographing the missiles, however, the aircraft crashed in Cuba, and the pilot became a prisoner of Cuban authorities. This meant that the American team could not be certain that the missiles had been deployed in Cuba. It also provided a possible diversion for the United States, raising a possible necessity for recovering the pilot and aircraft, thus eclipsing the more pressing need for preventing missile deployment. The pilot-prisoner also gave the Cubans (and potentially the Soviets) an immediate issue about which they could negotiate with the United States.

The simulation is set in the fall of 1962, and all actual world events occurring immediately before October 11, 1962, are taken into account at the onset of play. However, once the simulation begins, activities that occurred after October 11, 1962, are no longer relevant.

The teams are expected to enact successfully the foreign policy goals presented by the heads of state in their papers. Advisors deliberate the issues, making recommendations, but the heads of state have final authority for policy decisions. A simulation director (the instructor) serves as a referee, responsible for interpreting game rules, determining whether nonroutine moves may be permitted, judging outcomes, sometimes introducing additional facts into the simulation, and generally assuring that the game runs smoothly.

Students come to class on the first day of the simulation to submit their papers and obtain the scenario. The heads of state then meet with their advisors at a prearranged location during class time to discuss their strategy. The American team deliberated the following questions:

1. How should the United States respond to press reports dealing with the loss of this aircraft?
2. What efforts should the United States undertake to gain information about the pilot and aircraft?
3. To whom should we address our inquiries?
4. How soon can another U-2 flight be ready to verify or disprove the existence of Soviet offensive missiles in Cuba?
5. Are there other means to make that determination?
6. How should we prepare for possible Soviet retaliation for any United States moves in Berlin, Turkey, or Norway, all areas involved in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization?

The Soviet team focused on the following:

1. How can we use this unexpected incident to gain time to operationalize our missiles in Cuba?
2. Should we request the Cuban government to turn over the American pilot as a negotiating ploy to use in our discussions with the United States?
3. Should we request the Cuban government to give us the aircraft debris for examination in order to learn what the Americans might know about our missile deployment as well as to copy the technology?
4. Should we launch a reprisal against American aircraft flying to and from Berlin?
5. Can we bring retaliatory pressure against the Americans elsewhere, such as in Turkey or Norway, both American allies?

The Cubans assessed the following issues:

1. Is this the opening of the expected United States invasion of Cuba?
2. How should our revolutionary armed forces respond?
3. How can we encourage our Soviet allies to announce the existence of their missiles in Cuba in order to deter an invasion?
4. Should we release the pilot to our Soviet comrades or hold him ourselves as a mercenary war criminal?
5. Can we use the aircraft debris as an encouragement for the Russians to announce the existence of their missiles as a deterrence against American attack?

After completing their deliberation, the advisory group prepares a memorandum for the head of state and transmits it via email or the website no later than 2 hours after the end of class time, providing a copy to the simulation director.

Having received recommendations from their advisory groups, the heads of state may issue instructions for negotiation, give assignments to team members, obtain reports from advisors after negotiations, and ultimately prepare move forms.

There are three types of moves that the heads of state may use: statements of intent involve unilateral declarations made by one country; diplomatic moves are written descriptions of a bilateral or multilateral agreement undertaken through negotiations during a move period, and military actions involve the use or threat of force. Copies of the move forms are posted on the web site (or bulletin board if there are technical problems) at a specific time on the day following the advisory group's meeting.

After the moves are posted, team members check the website (or bulletin board), meet with their country team members during the next class period, and continue

TABLE 1. Consider the Period known as “The Cold War”. Below are a Series of Adjectives that Might Describe this Period on a Scale from One to Five, Five the Most, One the Least

<i>In Your Opinion, Was “The Cold War”</i>						
	1	2	3	4	5	
Cooperative						Contentious
Friendly						Hostile
Benign						Threatening
Predictable						Risky
Peaceful						Warlike
Calm						Fearful
Safe						Dangerous

the process of deliberation in preparation for the following move. This simulation involved four moves, with the last set of move forms presented in class as part of a debriefing process.

Students in a lower-division (sophomore) class constituted the control group for this simulation. They read the book *Essence of Decision* (Allison and Zelikow 1999) and devoted three class sessions to decision making during the crisis. These students did not experience the simulation. Both the control and the experimental groups were given quantitative pretest questionnaires at the beginning of the course and posttest questionnaires at the end of the simulation. The pretests and posttests to determine quantitative measures of attitudes involved sets of paired adjective scales, presented as follows (Table 1):

In addition, the experimental group was given qualitative pre- and postsimulation questionnaires asking the following:

As you consider your perceptions about the Cold War, write some adjectives that describe your feelings. Write a paragraph that depicts what it might have been like to live during those times?

### Survey Results and Qualitative Evaluations

Table 2 presents the mean scores of paired adjective scales before and after the control group’s study of the Cuban Missile Crisis, showing no statistically significant changes in their attitudes toward the Cold War.

The experimental group’s data suggest a trend indicating changed feelings toward the Cold War after students’ participation in the simulation. The paired t-test computed in SPSS indicates statistical significance. In three categories of paired adjectives, there is a trend in which subjects viewed the Cold War differently after their experience with the simulation. Respondents who participated in the simulation indicate that their feelings about the Cold War changed to the extent they thought it was a more fearful, risky, and dangerous era (Table 3).

TABLE 2. Control Group Responses

(1)	(5)	Pre	Post	Difference	t	Significance
Cooperative–Contentious		3.96	4.22	0.26	–0.899	0.380
Friendly–Hostile		4.43	4.44	0.02	–0.075	0.941
Benign–Threatening		4.14	4.33	0.19	–0.638	0.531
Predictable–Risky		4.21	4.56	0.34	–1.483	0.153
Calm–Fearful		4.43	4.67	0.24	–0.853	0.407
Safe–Dangerous		4.21	4.44	0.23	–0.773	0.450

*n* = 37

TABLE 3. Experimental Group Responses

(1)	(5)	<i>Pre</i>	<i>Post</i>	<i>Difference</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Significance</i>
Cooperative–Contentious		3.94	3.79	–0.16	0.581	0.566
Friendly–Hostile		4.00	4.21	0.21	–0.745	0.463
Benign–Threatening		3.82	4.21	0.39	–1.241	0.226
Predictable–Risky		3.65	4.43	0.78	–2.154	0.040
Calm–Fearful		3.70	4.48	0.78	–2.159	0.041
Safe–Dangerous		3.76	4.50	0.74	–2.241	0.034
						<i>n</i> = 32

It is possible that these changes are due to the experimental group's difference in education level and experience. It is also possible that the changes are an artifact of the small sample size. It is likely, however, that the simulation itself, a lively, engaging, and dramatic experience, is the explanatory factor.

Qualitative explanations and descriptions of these attitudes in the questionnaires support the quantitative data. Before the simulation, students described their feelings about the Cold War using adjectives such as distrust, deception, deceit, disbelief, competition, hostility, intrigue, confusion, uncertainty, and resentment. After the simulation, they used words like fearful, scary, life threatening, unpredictable, dangerous, paranoid, anxious, worrisome, stressful, tense, and risky.

Students expressed their newly found feelings of fear in short statements, reported in the students' own words (corrected for spelling and grammar): It would have been "frightening to live during those times . . . under the constant fear of global annihilation." "I would have been scared to walk home from school every day." You would have been "a prisoner of your fears in your own country." "With the threat of nuclear war wiping out humanity, it was probably hard for one not to be scared."

The emotive expressions of danger appear as follows: I would have been "suspicious of those around me and of those in charge. I think that people were living on the edge, but hoped that the idea of mutual assured destruction was protecting them." "With the real threat of a nuclear war, people would have felt helpless . . . not knowing when and where the enemy might attack." "The imagination was sure to run wild, making it a time of much panic and uncertainty." "The anxiety must have been psychologically devastating to much of society (for) people still had in mind Hiroshima and Nagasaki." "The people of all three . . . nations must have been terrified constantly." It must have been "especially difficult because of the so recent events of World War II (and) nuclear bomb drills." "It seems like there would have been a constant worry in the back of your mind that might make you a bit paranoid."

Feelings of risk were expressed in the following phrases: "Everything was unpredictable." It was "an unsure and dark time for the American people." Average persons "had no control over their own destiny." There was a "likelihood of nuclear destruction . . . because of the possibilities of accidents, misinterpreted orders and personal emotion." "It was hard to have a sense of security, even in one's own home as the threat of a . . . nuclear attack was in the forefront of everyone's minds." "It was a time in which everyone was holding their breath, hoping that with each new day, the world would still be intact." "People were closer to nuclear holocaust than at any other time in history."

### Conclusion

These quantitative and qualitative responses suggest that students have a better appreciation about the risk, danger, and fear associated with the Cold War as a result of participating in this simulation. By including their feelings in the learning process, students may have a deeper understanding of the decision makers'

perceptions and values, a more humanistic appreciation for the agony of decision-making under threat of annihilation. Despite the methodological issues described above, the introduction of a control group provides a somewhat greater level of confidence in the quantitative findings, and the qualitative responses support the statistical data. Replication of this study and others would help lend greater reliability to findings about the effect of simulations on teaching and learning.

Such replication is made easier by a website sponsored by Santa Clara University where on-line simulations can be created and studied. The conflict resolution simulation site <http://www.scu.edu/crs> presents several simulations and templates for creating new ones that can be shared by instructors of international studies and political science. The Cuban Missile Crisis Simulation, the subject of this paper, is found on this site. Additionally, the site presents a contemporary Middle East simulation that involves universities, faculty, and students in Egypt, Lebanon, Israel, Morocco, and the United States. Instructors can join this simulation during the scheduled times or create their own version using the template on the site. A third deals with international legal adjudication that has been useful in the teaching of international law. Finally, the site contains a method for facilitating a dialog among Christians, Jews, and Muslims (Stover 2005b, 2006).

Using simulations like these that involve many countries as well as different types of students and universities over extended time periods, researchers can contribute to Krain's challenge by developing new methods for teaching and learning and conducting studies that measure their effectiveness.

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