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A Marriage of Cultures:
An Online, Role-Playing Simulation for Japanese Anthropology

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Abstract

   In this paper, I will discuss a web-based role-playing simulation created around the narrative framework of a cross-cultural wedding between an American man and a Japanese woman. This simulation helps students experience learning as a goal-oriented process involving experimentation, practice, play, and problem solving. *A Marriage of Cultures* requires that each student play a character in a 3-4 week, open-ended narrative that requires collaboration to achieve a particular goal or resolve a cross-cultural dilemma.   The learning process is accelerated and enhanced in web-based role-play simulations when students are required both to successfully role-play characters whose profiles reflect the knowledge and expertise taught in the course, and when students collaboratively apply theories and concepts learned in the classroom to real-life problems and processes. It is my hope that through using this simulation, students of anthropology, women's studies, Asian studies, sociology, and other disciplines can better experience how culture shapes everyday human behavior by playing a character in a dynamic, intellectually rich learning environment that unfolds through synchronous and asynchronous chat and discussion.

Introduction

   As a Japanese cultural anthropologist, I have spent the past two years developing and piloting *A Marriage of Cultures* designed to provide college students in both North America and Japan with a grounded and experientially based understanding of the differences and similarities between the two cultures. This simulation enables up to twenty-five students at a time to experience cross-cultural difference by anonymously role-playing family members and friends of a Japanese bride and an Italian American groom in the weeks leading up to their fictionalized wedding. Students engage and debate the meaning of love and marriage, parent-child obligations, work and domestic responsibilities, the importance of having children, and religious difference through three weeks of experiential online role-play.

   While its content on Japanese history, religion, kinship, gender, and education is equivalent to other cultural anthropology textbooks, *A Marriage of Cultures*, embeds these extensive details within a fictionalized cross-cultural wedding so that students must take an anthropological perspective to better practice and model the behaviors of cultural relativism and to explore the tensions between structure and agency. Weddings present an ideal microcosm by which to examine the holistic relationship of cultural institutions and the ways in which culture is a product of conformity, conflict, and change. Family dynamics, gender roles, and metaphors of social adulthood play out

against the backdrop of the wedding (see i.e., Edwards 1990; Adrian 2003; Kelsky 2003). It is no coincidence that popular film blockbusters such as *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and underground favorites such as *Monsoon Wedding* highlight the chaos, misunderstanding, stereotyping, and performance of cultural identity that characterize these cross-cultural ceremonies. Instead of reading about Japanese culture in an article or book or watching a documentary film, students in *A Marriage of Cultures* assume a more central and active role in the narrative by playing, for example, the role of a disappointed mother, a jilted *salaryman* boyfriend, or a corporate matchmaker.

Upon registering online to play the *A Marriage of Cultures*, players read abbreviated versions of twenty-five character biography sketches, select their top three choices, and are assigned a character by their instructor. Once assigned a character, players are taken to their private "My Character" page each time they log in to the simulation. The My Character private user interface, inspired by popular social networking sites such as *Facebook* and *MySpace*, provides individual players with the tools required to play the simulation and interact with their community. Players can read their character's detailed profile description, access a record of private correspondence with other characters, and initiate relationships with other characters. The full character profile enables players to view a comprehensive character biography, personality profile, and set of confidential instructions, thereby providing each student with a complex, three-dimensional character identity from which to imagine and perform in the cross-cultural wedding.

After submitting his/her top three character choices, one student might be assigned the character of Takahashi Tomoko, who is the bride's older sister and has been married for eight years to a middle-manager *salaryman*, who is not progressing in his career at a rate that pleases Tomoko. They live in a tiny company *danchi* apartment and have been struggling to have a child since they first married. Tomoko feels that it is her sisterly duty to remind her sister that "life is suffering" and that to simply pursue selfish desire will result in profound individual unhappiness and shame for their family. Another student might be asked to play Father Giovanni, the groom's childhood priest who is disappointed about Tom's decision to marry a Japanese woman, who not only is not Catholic, but also is unabashedly vague about her religious upbringing and faith. Father Giovanni sees this marriage as symptomatic of a larger crisis in Catholicism in America—the gradual loss of its members due to lapsed morals, spiritual laziness, and not the least of it, intermarriage. He has heard the arguments that modern culture no longer fits with Catholic traditional regulations on contraception for example, but he feels that it is modern society that must change, not the age-old teachings of the Catholic faith.

The simulation's plot is driven by a series of events, such as an *omiai*, a rehearsal dinner, and even the untimely death of a central character, leading up to the climactic wedding day. Each event acts as a springboard for students to debate some of the key issues that make cross-cultural understanding and recognition so challenging and necessary. In one letter, for example, the bride's mother asks if Aya would consider meeting with her ex-boyfriend (who is also Japanese) one last time before committing to the American for marriage. When engaging in the corresponding chat room assignment, students are asked to debate the merits of indulging the bride's mother's request and to consider how their character feels about the prudence of arranging a potentially damaging meeting between the bride and her ex-boyfriend prior to the wedding.

A complete set of instructor features, meanwhile, enables teachers to easily create a customized experience for their own classrooms, and facilitate the simulation as "newsletter editors," which includes assigning characters, coordinating the simulation schedule, creating and distributing assignments to players, and creating new newsletter, assignment, and glossary term content. Instructors also have the option of anonymously playing the simulation

alongside their students, an experience with the potential to productively reconfigure teacher/student hierarchies, especially when students adopt character personae with more power and responsibility than their teacher's character. In the spirit of an open Web articulated in Surowiecki's *The Wisdom of Crowds* (2004), the collective wisdom of a content community has the potential to produce dynamic content that will result in an emergent and potentially more inventive, relevant, and educational textbook than an author's initial publication.

Finally, *A Marriage of Cultures* provides evaluation features that allow teachers to assess student participation and learning outcomes as they relate to the specific content and the general themes of identity formation, the contextual nature of cultural understanding, and systemic thinking. Teachers, for example, can track and print a qualitative and quantitative report of players' asynchronous and synchronous communication, which includes forum and chat entries as well as private letters. The evaluation features also allow instructors to issue and tabulate peer evaluation scores and surveys, as well as distribute, upload, and grade quizzes and exams provided by the software or customized by instructors.

Some instructors might prefer to limit their evaluation of student performance in the simulation to students' quantity and quality of participation, which could be weighted differently depending on whether the course is offered in traditional, hybrid, or online format. I have piloted the simulation in these three distinct types of classrooms at Western Michigan University, and just last semester successfully completed ten instances in a 250-person introductory anthropology course. In my experience, *A Marriage of Cultures* has been used with equal effectiveness in all three classroom formats. In traditional classrooms in which students and instructors meet face-to-face for all class meetings, the simulations are typically assigned as homework; in these instances, class time is often used to debrief about the simulation experience, and teachers can choose to either let students reveal the identity of their character early in the process to enable frank and open discussion about character motivations and behaviors, or conceal those identities to promote more freedom and creativity within the simulation.

In hybrid class formats in which classes are more or less equally divided between online and in-class meeting time, students typically participate in the simulation from a remote campus location or computer lab during designated online meeting times, while portions of class time are used for debriefing. Students seem especially eager to creatively embrace the world of the simulation in online courses that typically provide few opportunities for sustained synchronous conversation. Debriefing within the software has posed some challenges, however, so I have used a supplemental course management system such as Blackboard to facilitate these conversations. However, I am in the process of working with a computer scientist to create a separate interface within the simulation that will allow players to navigate back and forth between their characters' simulated environment and their own debriefing context.

Objectives for Learning

Simulation and role-playing exercises are not recent pedagogical inventions, of course, and their use can be traced to ancient times when games such as chess were introduced to simulate battle strategy and tactics between two opponents. Many educational simulations today utilize variations of a virtual reality gaming model established by the computer gaming industry. Virtually rendered educational simulations are typically single-user games in which players adopt the personae of an avatar or onscreen character and attempt to solve a problem or accomplish a particular goal as defined by the computer's programming calculations. While virtually rendered worlds borrowed from the genre of computer games attract younger generations familiar with computer games, the virtual reality

gaming model may not effectively fulfill pedagogical objectives as well as other, much less expensive text-based role-play simulations like the one described here (Linser and Ip 2005; Vincent and Shepherd 1995).

Students' imaginative capacity is not dependent on having access to ready-made, virtually rendered environments (ibid.). Although both visual and text-based narratives can stimulate identification with characters, that connection is not determined by visuality. In fact, single-user computer programmed virtual worlds can restrict students' engagement with one another and their teachers, and limit their decision-making to options prescribed by the simulation's program. As Linser and Ip suggest: "Identification with the character in a role-play simulation requires learners to be intellectually and emotionally active in the construction of the role. Rather than providing learners with ready-made, out-of-the-box possibilities, learners engage their own imaginative capacity (rather than designers' capacities) to create the character and consequently a deeper emotional bond is established with the character" (ibid.:4). On balance, I feel that this text-based simulation, driven by a concern for student learning and motivation instead of just visual realism and entertainment value, will capitalize on some of the generic features of computer gaming that make them popular with young adults, but ultimately will be informed by sound pedagogical and research practices.

Serious games across a variety of subgenres offer this potential for experiential learning, including epistemic games (Shaffer 2005), multi-user virtual environments (MUVE), role-playing simulations (Linser et al, 2008), and game-informed learning processes (Begg et al, 2005), all of which have been used with increasing frequency to integrate entertaining gaming features with learning objectives. In this way, simulations can provide a sense of "collateral learning" whereby students cultivate profound identification and empathy for socio-economically and historically marginalized and diverse peoples by alternating role-identities between the self and the perspective of one's avatar, or character (Thomas and Seely Brown 2007).

 In-depth character profiles are created to reflect the multitude of cultural and ideological perspectives that students would encounter in this cross-cultural exchange, thereby permitting players to express and empathize with the simultaneity of those voices that can be given abstract and dehumanizing treatment in traditional ethnographies or textbooks with omniscient authors. The purpose, then, is not to use avatars mimetically, but as a creative form of identity exploration that can promote a profound sense of "being" or deep immersion within a digital space that is difficult to achieve in print-based books, and can provide invaluable motivation for students to access, digest, and question the more abstract and often complex details and concepts contained in textual narratives. For students, the process of creating meaning from a written book or article is usually undertaken as a solo activity, as students purchase their own individual copies of books that they privately read, annotate, and highlight. While solitary work and reflection is an important aspect of students' intellectual development, many learning theories, including constructivist (Piaget 1952), problem-based (Hmelo-Silver 2004) and situated learning (Wenger 1998), argue that collaborative or peer-to-peer learning provides the realistic feedback, cognitive motivation, and engagement needed for students to seek and construct knowledge as active learners.

Simulations enable collaborative or peer-to-peer learning by actively involving students in the collective analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of issues, theories, and problems germane to the discipline. In *A Marriage of Cultures,* students embody four unique experiential subject positions or roles—student as reader, student as performer, student as author, and student as collaborator. While print media has traditionally permitted only one of these four roles for students – that of passive reader –digital culture creates an opening for students to play central roles within textbook narratives, while still retaining an unalterable narrative foundation rooted in a knowledgeable scholarly voice. Although students traditionally have come together to exchange ideas through formal study sections and informal conversations, the print media neither encourages nor rewards collaborative work. Through role-playing, students do not learn alone, but rather experience a dramatic shift in perspective when they are put into dialogue with characters of vastly different backgrounds, ideologies, and opinions.

A central component of study within the field of anthropology has been the issue of identity. Gender, class, race, ethnicity, religion, age, and sexual orientation represent some of the affiliations that shape one's identity and serve as "filters" through which people create and interpret shared meaning. For anthropologists, one's identity serves as a standpoint or perspective from which people interpret experience and view and construct the world around them. The study of identity is also an analysis of empowerment; marginalized voices, for example, have the capability to effectively critique dominant beliefs upheld by those whose identity reflects the status quo. Regardless of subfield or area study, an awareness of how identities are constructed, negotiated, and reified remains a central component of anthropology scholarship and pedagogy.

Inculcating in students an awareness and appreciation for the diversity of identities and their impact on culture is an important yet hardly straightforward challenge for teachers in the anthropology classroom. Understanding various standpoints or views of the world rooted in identity can require a great deal of time, empathy, and perspective taking. Instructional resources rooted in print-based epistemologies may constrain this task. Textbooks, for example, often offer only one subject position for students – that of passive reader – while an author's unique voice is disguised behind an authoritative narrative topically organized around central theories, concepts, or ideas. Textbooks also typically reflect a behaviorist theory of knowledge; students' measurable behaviors are observed by giving standardized tests based on a textbook's vast constellation of core concepts and theories, and the resulting test scores provide positive or negative reinforcement for students about what they have learned.

While appropriate for teaching basic skills (e.g. memorization of mathematical formulas) and foundational subject knowledge, the textbook's behavioral assumptions reinforce a passive model of learning that makes it challenging for students to engage in the empathy and perspective taking needed to understand issues pertaining to identity construction. Digital spaces should engage students as readers, but online learning should not use content simply to create passive readers charged with the task of memorization; rather, educators who understand that young

people use the digital media for collaboration and enjoyment, and not just to access information, will shape their pedagogy to provide students with more participatory roles within learning.

Identities are constituted through communities of discourse; students provided with opportunities for anonymous networked collaboration, therefore, are equipped with the freedom, responsibility, and creativity needed to cultivate those identities. One student reflects upon her experience playing the simulation: "The best part of this simulation was getting to be someone else from a different culture, and actually being heard. Having an opinion that was agreed with by people from my own country was great. Sometimes it was difficult to know what to say and what side of the situation I should be on. Takahashi Yukari was my character and because she was a mother, I could very clearly see the differences in families in Japan and the U.S. Yukari helped show me the kind of woman I'd rather be when I'm married and have children. I don't want them to be my life, like her daughter was hers, and her poor marriage is something I'll try to avoid."

Teachers using simulations have the potential to play an active role as collaborators without replicating classroom power dynamics that can inhibit both students' roles as active, empowered learners as well as authentic peer-to-peer learning experiences. In the simulation, teachers are given the option of remaining actively involved in the anonymous role-playing narrative as characters themselves, thus repositioning their relationship to students, especially when students are given more influential roles to play within the narrative. Teachers can still maintain their role as subject experts in conversations that take place outside of role-playing, but the anonymity of the experience can create a healthy disruption of traditional classroom dynamics that can make teachers more aware of their students' potential as active learners in authentically egalitarian peer-to-peer learning contexts.

Applications for Anthropology

This type of experiential learning can improve pedagogy in a number of fields, but is particularly critical in the discipline of anthropology, where one of the key challenges of both teaching and writing is the act of cultural translation and representation. An anthropologist conducts extensive fieldwork and writes a case study or ethnography in an effort to make one culture understandable in terms that students and readers from another culture can understand. In this way, anthropology strives to make sense of differences between people, as well as to uncover cross-cultural similarities. The study of human culture also points to the often times unrecognizable strangeness of our own culture and the familiarity of lives initially believed to be worlds apart. To convey the lives and meanings of other cultures, anthropologists have relied on "thick description" or richly detailed depictions of other lifeways. As Clifford Geertz so eloquently writes: "The ability of anthropologists to get us to take what they say seriously has less to do with either a factual look or an air of conceptual elegance than it has with their having actually penetrated (or, if you prefer, been penetrated by) another form of life, of having, one way or another, truly 'been there'" (1988: 4).

Although professional anthropologists and many graduate students have regular opportunities to become deeply immersed in other cultures through direct fieldwork experiences, the vast majority of undergraduates do not. One challenge for professors who teach anthropology and other courses on cultural diversity is to find ways to help students "walk in the shoes" of others who share different ethnic, geographic, racial, gender, and/or class identities. Grounded ethnographies, replete with quotes of local people and thick description, coupled with ethnographic films that give viewers a visual image, can be effective ways to allow students to imagine and engage with other cultures. But what if, with the touch of a mouse, students could be transported to another cultural realm? What if students themselves could actually simulate the experience of "being there"?

This simulation encourages students to grapple with key anthropological issues in a unique way. Although learning outcomes from the simulation will vary based on the course, instructor, students, and discipline, there are three primary anthropological learning objectives that have informed the development of the simulation.

1. **Explore the holistic relationship of cultural institutions and the tension between structure and agency**: Because a wedding functions as an ideal metaphor for the holistic relationship of cultural institutions, students will be challenged to confront how, for example, family dynamics, gender roles, the relationship between families and corporations, and ideals of love and romance both impact one another and generate conflict between institutional constraint and individual freedom of choice.

2. **Employ ethnographic field methods**: Because the wedding scenario simulates an initial cross-cultural encounter, students will have a chance to practice methods used by cultural anthropologists to build rapport and trust with peoples of other cultures, to learn local customs, and to adapt to different cultural expectations and constraints.

3. **Experience cultural relativism and challenge ethnocentric views**: Because the simulation enables students to learn about culture as an everyday act or performance, it can contextualize cultural behavior and therefore serve as a useful vehicle to help students understand that other cultural behaviors have as much validity and logic as their own. Additionally, because students have an opportunity to "perform" an identity different from their own, we are confident students will address, confront, and hopefully challenge the blinders of ethnocentrism, racism, ageism, and sexism.

This project enables students to grapple with questions of stereotyping, ethnocentrism and cultural relativity in a unique way, even playing with students halfway around the globe. One American student who recently played the simulation concluded:

I think the most rewarding part was just being involved in the simulation and learning about the Japanese culture through the unique interaction between the two families. Each side brought out some characteristics in each other that would usually be hard to understand solely through reading and studying them … After

a few days of chats and discussion boards I started being able to look at all of the events through a Japanese person's eyes. I would read a letter and react like a Japanese person would instead of an American ... I would even look at some of the American responses and start to question the American ways.

Another student claimed:

I very much enjoyed playing my character. It was a refreshingly unique and also a fun way to study Japanese culture in the classroom. The anonymity of our roles added to the excitement of playing a character. I was able to really play the part without worrying what other students were thinking about how I acted. I was quite caught up in the plot of the simulation and in my character, and I frequently gave my roommate and boyfriend "updates" on Tom and Aya's relationship.

A Marriage of Cultures is not meant to replace study abroad in Japan, as the invaluable experience of living in another culture cannot be duplicated, but rather is intended to serve as a prerequisite or an enticement to living in a culture outside of one's own. Furthermore, I am aware that a simulation that positions a Japanese family against an American family in chat rooms and the like may have the unfortunate potential to exaggerate cross-cultural difference and reify stereotypes. The instructor, however, far from assuming a passive role, remedies this effect by actively playing a character, moderating chat discussions, and leading in-class debriefings that stress cultural relativism and tolerance. Also, I should note that I took great care to create a cast of complex characters who defy stereotypes by reflecting the heterogeneity of both cultures.

I would like to conclude by stating that I certainly have no interest in disparaging print-based resources. Books can and always should remain a central part of a student's intellectual growth. In fact, as I have illustrated, *A Marriage of Cultures* draws heavily upon the printed word, and requires students to conduct extensive reading of primary documents, original content, glossary terms, and extended character biography sketches. New forms of social media can motivate students' pursuit of learning and improve learning outcomes in anthropology and other disciplines if text is embedded within engaging role-playing narratives whereby students access, analyze, critique, and apply that information as actively engaged readers, performers, authors, and collaborators. In this way, traditional print content will serve as an invaluable supportive layer of information that students must thoroughly engage in order to successfully rehearse the learning behaviors that comprise successful communities of practice. I firmly believe that the simulation experience will fundamentally change how students conceptualize cross-cultural difference, stereotyping, and ethnocentrism, and fulfill the promise technology offers as a vehicle for inspiring creative, collaborative, and intellectually rigorous forms of learning.

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