

International Dialogue

Game Concept Document
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International Dialogue is a game in which players individually encounter a simulated game world in which they need to wrestle with complex, ambiguous, and unsolved problems related to cultural competencies in a business context.

This game concept takes the form of a *single-player adventure game*, in which players navigate a fictional story, are asked to make decisions within a simulated business context, and are provided a space on the CIBER site to reflect on the game experience. Through this simulation of a business problem and a specific, real-world business context, players will have the opportunity to choose from a variety of courses of action, go back and change their decisions, see the *consequences* of a number of courses of action, and then reflect on the ways that understanding different cultural backgrounds can positively influence business practices.

While the game offers a compelling narrative, with characters and situations that simulate a real-world business negotiation context, the game is a *standalone game* that is playable by any participant within the CIBER site and CIBER-related programs, and serves as a *game for change* intended to provoke conversation and further discussion.

Game Genres: *Single-player adventure game*
Implementation: In-browser game, HTML5 or Adobe Flash
Game Inspirations: *Ayiti: The Cost of Life; L.A. Noire; Twine games*

Overview of Learning Goals

As with many recent educational games, the learning goals for *International Dialogue* are implemented through the embodiment of the player within a fictional setting that simulates elements and systems present within the real world. In this case, the player adopts an *avatar* — a virtual character that he or she can craft and personalize through the course of the game, while embodying a compelling narrative that he or she can also influence. At the beginning of the game, *International Dialogue* first strives to signal to the player that the game will be an immersive experience that he or she can control, as a means to drive engagement in consequential choices.

Once the avatar has been created, the player is provided with a set of simulated international business scenarios — several scenarios (three or four, maximum) will be ideal to provide players with multiple entry points into the game, as well as provide the player with replayable content (up to a point). The player will thus be able to *customize his or her experience* to some extent, providing the player with the potential of greater engagement. The goal of the player for the scenarios as a whole is to achieve *success* by avoiding worker dissatisfaction, increasing profits, and other means of signaling that cultural differences are being managed effectively.

The player will be provided with multiple international business scenarios in which he or she represents an American businessperson needing to achieve a number of communication goals with colleagues and employees from other cultures. The specific scenarios will be crafted with consultants from the Kelley School to fit actual situations faced within international business contexts, but may include:

- Creating a new manufacturing plant in a recently-industrialized part of mainland China
- Negotiating work schedules with employees at a recently acquired plant in Saudi Arabia
- Planning for the development of a new relationship with a manufacturing partner in Brazil.

In all scenarios, players will interact with a range of *non-player characters* to achieve in-game goals. Key to the design of this game text and game choices represented in *conversation trees*, a common means of implementing branching choices and branching narratives in games.

Players will determine the ways that the cultural backgrounds of non-player characters — and their own — shape the success or failure of simulated projects. Within the single-player environment, players will have the opportunity to converse with non-player characters,

change and correct mistakes, and develop cross-cultural competencies within a space safe for experimentation.

Description of Gameplay

As part of the larger CIBER site initiatives, and CIBER-related programs, *International Dialogue* will be promoted as a standalone gaming experience, overtly advertised to aid participants in developing cross-cultural competencies. As such, the game can be embedded in a variety of locations on CIBER sites, with links to the game (and its associated discussion forums) located at a variety of entry points for participants. In this way, entry points to the game will be easily moveable and relocatable to appropriate locations within the CIBER site offerings, while also implemented in such a fashion that the game could be shared with other audiences (e.g., *Games For Change*). Additionally, the game's self-contained nature will make it very easy to share with outside partners or interested parties.

Upon the loading of the game, players will first see an *avatar creation screen* — this screen will allow players to craft a persona within the game that will have only minimal consequence for the player's choices, but will allow for players to imprint their own individuality upon the game. Players will be free to choose the avatar's name, gender, skin color, hairstyle, and other physical attributes. While seemingly unnecessary, providing the player with the option to craft his or her own character within the game has been shown to drive player engagement and immersion in the game experience. The player avatar determined at the time of the game's startup will remain the player's avatar throughout his or her play of *International Dialogue*.

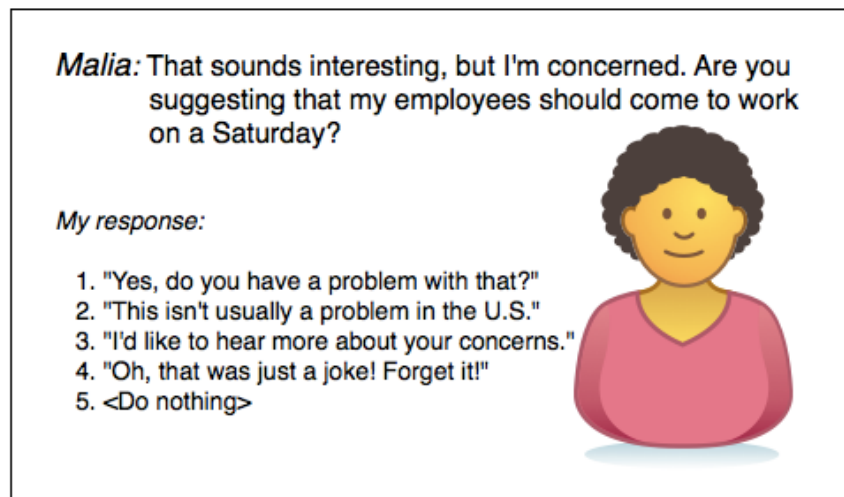
Next, the player will experience an opening storyline, framing him or her as a new employee working for *AstroCorp*, a fictional American company seeking to develop new manufacturing relationships in other countries. The opening storyline will be presented within the game as a montage (akin to the game *Diner Dash*), giving players a sense of their character's history, motivations, and settings. As the player completes the opening montage, he or she will be faced with a goal — to successfully establish manufacturing relationships in multiple countries.

At this point, the player will have multiple options, based upon the locality that the company will be attempting to develop manufacturing relationships with. The player can choose between three or perhaps four potential sites to coordinate the construction of a new manufacturing site, the management of the workers at the site, or other practical matters that would be found in a similar, real-world international business context. The specific details of each scenario would be determined through consultation with Kelley School representatives, who have the content expertise to guide the development of effective simulations.

Conversation

Regardless of the details for each scenario, however, the game will follow a common *interactional structure* — players will encounter a complex problem, and have to negotiate a solution with a non-player character or set of non-player characters who represent the other cultural concerns. For the player, the interaction will be through choosing options within what are known as *dialogue trees* or *conversation trees* — interactions that branch according to choices made by players at each turn. After going down a particular set of branches, players will see the results that these choices yield. With conversation trees, players will not engage in simple, binary choices, but will interact with *multi-factor cultural difference problems*.

The interaction with non-player characters will be reminiscent of complex “choose your own adventure” stories, in which a variety of optional responses are presented to a player at any given stage in a conversation with a non-player character. For instance, in the mockup below, the player is interacting with a non-player character (“Malia”) who is expressing tentative concern over changes to her company’s work schedule that will be necessary within this scenario.



In a full scenario, this would be one of perhaps several dozen such conversation screens, providing the player with numerous options on how to react and what kinds of consequences those actions might have. By not *telling* the player much detail on the non-player characters’ cultural backgrounds, the player is forced into choosing a variety of options — perhaps by trial and error, or perhaps through a desire to explore different choices. This navigation of the game’s complexity is what drives the learning in the game; players must treat the game like a story that they are attempting to shape to an equitable conclusion for both themselves and the non-player characters.

The cultural factors that play a role in the game are still unclear, however, and will depend largely upon the specific cultural contexts that are determined by representatives of the Kelley School to focus upon. But, at the very least, these would include factors such as: Religious differences, gender differences, relationships between labor and management, language barriers, and issues of globalization. The particular mixture of these factors will be consequential for the design of the game, but will necessarily come from a consideration of the specific cultural contexts that are to be simulated in the game.

Replaying & Post-Game Learning

One of the key elements of this game design — and many single-player games in general — is the ability for a player to play and replay the game until a desired outcome is reached. Since the game is envisioned as a set of scenarios within a larger game, the possibility exists for results of one scenario to be incorporated into a subsequent scenario, further indicating the complex interactions of cultures and business practices. Regardless, the game will feature the ability for a player to simply reload the webpage that the game is housed in, create a new character, and begin anew.

This is a *central feature* of single-player games, and can contribute to the learning capability of such games. With prompting, players can be encouraged to seek specific kinds of outcomes in the game, or to just explore the systems of the game in order to develop a broader view of how the game attempts to teach cross-cultural competencies. Both approaches are actively encouraged, and can drive further conversation or reflection regarding the game and its intent. As a player completes a run of this single-player game, he or she will be prompted with *questions that provoke reflection* on their specific game actions — for instance, “You didn’t strongly value Malia’s religious beliefs and she was unwilling to work with you. How might you accommodate such differences in the future?”

To this end, an online discussion forum for the game will also be created, and populated with threads that link directly from the end state of the game, driving users to reflect in a virtual, communal space. There are many approaches to incentivizing play and replay with the game, including creating social challenges within the forums (e.g., “How many endings can you find in which Malia’s manufacturing plant comes online within six months?”), or perhaps through the use of digital badges that can recognize activities accomplished within the game environment.

Game Narrative

Of the concepts provided, this game features the most in terms of overt game “narrative.” The game can be tuned to feature a compelling, and even emotionally rewarding story for the player — one that, if crafted with enough complexity, enough options for the player, and compelling enough scenarios, can compel the player to play and replay multiple times, to explore the many narrative options.

This game concept provides an interesting balance between the player’s desires and a storyline that has been crafted and shaped by CIBER representatives. In this way, the game both provides options for players to investigate simulated spaces of consequence and leave their own imprint upon them, while operating within confines laid out by consultants who have expertise in international business issues. Unlike the other game concept, this is a design that focuses highly on real international business scenarios, but is also one that will require work to create believable and important scenarios for players to immerse themselves within.

Summary & Key Features

Summary:

- *International Dialogue will feature single-player play*, in that players will play the game individually, allowing for players to create their own unique avatars, make their own unique choices, and replay the game to achieve desired goals
- *The game will necessitate discussion*, in that the paths to completion of the game will be varied and yield quite different results. For players compelled to discover a variety of narrative endings, the conversation tree structure of the game will motivate play and motivate replay which can be unpacked and reflected upon in online discussion forums
- *The game will be based on real-world scenarios*, tied to specific real-world cultural contexts, and with the intent of guiding American players into cross-cultural competencies based upon actual real-world international business issues.

Key Features:

- *Replayability* — The game will be complex enough and deep enough to create hundreds (if not thousands) of unique playthroughs for each player. This staggering complexity arises out of only a small number of choices, but can be motivating for players to play and replay the game, driving its potential impact.
- *Modifiability* — The game can be easily modified to include new scenarios as they need to be incorporated into the game. If new, emerging markets arise that will need to be incorporated into the game, a simple structure for making these changes can be accommodated.

- *Narrative* — The game will allow for player involvement in creating the characters (the player avatar), and in directing a compelling story. The game will use narrative and story to pull players through the game experience, and to motivate replayability.

Challenges

Finally, there are a few challenges and difficulties to this design that need to be noted.

- First, the game will require significant *consulting with Kelley School experts to craft meaningful scenarios*. The scope of this concept document and the subsequent design document will be to describe the structure of the game, but content creation will be left to the implementation stage. Scenario design could be time-consuming and will need to be carefully conducted during game playtesting to avoid creating a detailed simulation that is not engaging as a *game*.
- *International Dialogue's* single-player focus may allow for the creation of an individual experience with the simulated cross-cultural contexts of the game, but it is still unclear how to best leverage these individual experiences into reflection and discussion.