
The pyramid of experiential learning international relations through NationStates game

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Abstract: NationStates is an online game that offers players a world to simulate international relations learning through the creation of their own countries and interacting with other players as international actors. This paper describes how the game mirrors the basic structure of international relations and global politics, and on how it can be used as an education technology during the COVID-19 new normal learning. Using qualitative case study design, researchers utilised virtual transect walk to note observations within the simulation and juxtaposed to interviews gathered from students who experienced the game. Thematic analysis framed both the levels of international relations analysis and Kolb's theory of experiential learning. Results show that that such a game allows learners to experience and understand national power and the conditions within one's state, dynamics of decision-making, participation in the political system and behaviour of the global political actors under the theories of international relations.

Keywords: experiential learning; international relations; NationStates; simulation games; COVID-19 new normal education.

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1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic paralysed human mobility and ushered in a migration of education from the physical to the digital classroom in what is termed as the 'new normal'. Educators have the mandate to not just migrate from one space to another, but rather the call to adapt strategies moving from the New Normal towards a Better Normal. The teaching of International Relations and Global Politics (IR) in college ranges from discourses of theories to discourses of analyses of what goes on in the world. Innovative educators are involved in a continuing path of learning and finding new strategies for their student's learning: films, music, games, simulations, and the use of educational technologies.

The new normal is a different environment than that of the physical classroom. It makes use of digitised classroom and online interactions, with both the educator and the learner adapting to ensure effectiveness. Online learning, in a pandemic, poses new challenges. The quarantine affects student mental health (Grubic et al., 2020), along with it, morale and academic performance (Tria, 2020). This also impacts on college education where enrolment can be considered as a choice and even a luxury (Friedman, 2020) as compared to basic education that is a basic need and even a right (United Nations, 2018; UNESCO, 2020). Part of the challenge for educators is to ensure that students who try to soldier on and enrol do find avenues of learning in the new normal. Instead of simply bringing in the regular activities of lectures, quizzes, and graded recitations, course facilitators would rather use innovations that allow information to be absorbed, raise morale and student interest, and make physically distanced online education a better environment.

Online learning during a pandemic pose possibility of challenges and opportunities in the teaching of IR (Marks, 2002; Bertrand and Lee, 2012). A discipline rich in theory such as IR if handled by a traditional teacher can end up focused only on discourse of ideas without practice. Lectures without innovation lock the discussion high up in the proverbial ivory tower. Too many activities without synthesis to standard expected knowledge in an unplanned class create an uninformed set of learners. An academic website on political science (Active Learning in Political Science, 2020) records a noteworthy set of interactive simulations for the classroom. Professors featured detail

their games, experiences, pros and cons and recommendations. In IR a usual simulation is a Model United Nations (MUN). It is available in many institutions as co-curricular or extra-curricular activity pivoting learning from being teacher-centred to learner-centred. It can be done in class and can be migrated into the digital classroom such as Google and Zoom meetings. Some online modes are free, some require getting used to, and the use of video and/or audio can be problematic if a participant has slow internet connection. Another set of option for simulations for Online IR classes are the wide array of online games differentiated by price, complexity, and the important ease on internet access. These online games, however, must also be evaluated and planned for actual class use.

NationStates is an online game created by Max Barry, author of the politically satirical novel *Jennifer Government* (Bose, 2008). The game can be played through an internet browser such as Google Chrome or Safari. It uses less than 1MB bandwidth, analysed through Chrome Devtools, and does not require audio or video. A player has the creative freedom in the creating a nation, from choosing the name, national animal, and currency; to choosing the political, economic, and social origins and present environment within the territory (Barry, 2016). All these impact on daily events within that nation and characterise status among others in a virtual IR world. It is an interactive educational game where players encounter various issues that affect human life, technology, economy, human rights among many possibilities; and the player gets to read the debates and decide. These decisions become IR news and impact on the country's rankings. For example, an issue banning Harry Potter books can affect liberal rights and the economy.

As of early December 2020, the NationStates site has recorded 232,085 active nations. It is making it a massive online interactive game on politics. As an interdisciplinary paper on Political Science education, this study intends to answer how NationStates as an online game simulate IR by mapping out the architecture of the game in terms of experiential learning, as framed by Kolb and in terms of levels of analysis in the learning of IR.

2 Literature review

2.1 *International relations education*

Guzzini (2001) iterated that the study of IR is founded on theory, important since such frame analyses of international actors and phenomena, essential knowledge that an IR student must grasp. IR theories that can be classified into the following general groups: Realism characterises the international environment as anarchic and due to the lack of a central authority as states clash with each other in bids for power and dominance. The resulting dominating state or hegemon then establishes order (Guzzini, 2004). Structuralism, also called structural realism or neorealism, where theorists such as Waltz did agree on the anarchic environment and used it to prove that the anarchy situation necessitates structures to create order (Donnelly, 2019). Wallerstein, another structuralist looks at the economy as binding force of this system (Pribadi, 2013; Burhanuddin, 2015). While Waltzian structuralism focuses the system rather than the individual states, and Wallerstein's on structure rather than processes (Pribadi, 2013), the general IR theory of Liberalism places its attention on the individual rather than the state or the system (Sterling-Folker, 2015). It gives importance on the promotion or protection of the rights of the individual and the state; or the system can become the tools towards this end.

Constructivism, oftentimes confused with the building of structure, focuses more on the understanding of situations through sociological interpretation. Peltonen (2017) and Dormer (2017) provide a clear view on the lens of culture and norms as means of interpreting state action in the realm of IR. Critical theory is a set of multifarious ideas, which frame discourses against those that can be considered as ‘wrong’ in the system. These span many areas of life from the common dialectics on economic injustice (Moolakkattu, 2011) to discussions framing an ideal world (Schmid, 2017).

A common simulation in IR classes are MUNs. Studies on this phenomenon attest to the need for a balance of student-teacher preparations towards reaping the benefits. Macintosh (2001) documented MUNs potential for student learning. In the study, he suggested that MUNs can be an enjoyable activity while integrating IR knowledge, yet it also cautioned that the simulation could generate too much excitement. The game can overwhelm the learning and it is the teacher’s discretion to maintain control. Obendorf (2015) affirms this by emphasising the importance of harmonious dynamics between learner and teacher towards the class preparation for an MUN. A conference consolidating a group of studies and presented by the International Academic Forum outlined a set of guidelines for MUN in education (Zenuk-Nishide et al., 2017). These important elements included the need for preparations, the importance of participation, and the relevance of MUN in a flipped classroom environment.

Even in contemporary times, active learning is a missing element in most theory-based classes, and IR courses are among them. Findings from a study by Prasirtsuk (2008) support the necessity for global engagement in teaching IR. Another recent study claimed that politics and IR education can get lost in theory; it further suggested that innovative teaching includes hands-on approaches which evolve based on student evaluations (Ryan et al., 2014).

Politics and IR education also have innovators. Simpson and Kaussler (2009) identify teaching methods such as films, role play, and simulations as effective ways to facilitate learning of theory. Bridge and Radford (2014) studied the use of the board game Diplomacy in its online version. In their research, such a simulation game has the capacity to bring the students outside of the confines of the room without having to leave its physical space. Significant to this review is the part of their conclusion, which averred that since the online game already has a set of rules and the software automates these, adaptation for classes then becomes easy. Haynes (2015) devised a physical card game with game-theory analysis to simulate war theory. This however, being non-online, had flexibility since the game descriptions in the experiments narrated in the article speak of freedom for the teacher to manipulate or change the games parameters in illustrating a certain scenario. Horn et al. (2016) used a Zombie simulation game, a popular genre with which most youth can relate to nowadays. The simulation creates an ‘experimental terrain’ complementing the previously mentioned study by Bridge & Radford. This study also bridges the solution raised by Obendorf regarding MUNs, that the experience on online games also suggest preparation between students and teachers to match with the class outcomes and expectations.

2.2 Experiential learning in education

The benefits of using experiential strategies continue to be documented such as that by Blair (2013) and Tavares de Oliveira et al. (2020). The former studied Twitter as an online tool which democratises learning by creating a pathway for student participation.

The latter studied the use of songs in class as not only affective in making students engaged; the study also found that songs create avenues for more learning opportunities, such as student interactions and interactive communications between students.

Experiential learning is both embedded in and addresses an important part of the new normal – affective learning. Mollaei and Rahnama (2012) attest to the unconventional nature of experiential teaching. They describe it as going-beyond expectations by supplementing learning with the language emotion as self-esteem and the capacity to work with peers. Kojima (2020) adds that emotional experience reinforces the learning process. Moreover, they relate to the findings of Bridge and Radford (2014). Horn et al. (2016) by having stated that social support building can be best achieved when it goes beyond the four walls of the classroom.

Sherman and Boukydis (2020) considered a different discourse in the literature from that of Ryan et al. (2014) and from Obendorf (2015) which suggest the need for a balanced dynamic between learner and teacher. Sherman and Boukydis delved into the clash of perspectives between educators and learners on the use of experiential learning, pointing out that some educators claim that experiential strategies address *knowledge learning* more than *value learning*; yet study finds that students believe these two can both be learned through experience.

Several studies address the discourse by providing recommendations on approaching experiential learning strategy implementation. For one, educators must remember to ensure congruence between theoretical lessons and classroom practices (Breunig, 2005). Roberts (2008) proposed three variations of experiential learning:

- 1 experience as interaction
- 2 embodied experience
- 3 experience as praxis.

She further adds the new variation that she considers as a threat, described as embedded with rigid structures rather than flexible processes. Shaw and Switky (2012) stands on the idea that there is no one true way in designing a simulation. The necessity of the teacher's guidance if not their presence to provide purpose or direction is suggested by Baker and Kolb (2012).

Fenton and Gallant (2016) clarified that 'experiential learning' and 'integrated learning' can mean different things. This conceptual clarification is an imperative for better lesson planning, checking experiential strategies since some lesson plans may be integrated but not experiential. Butler et al. (2019) also help the discourse by reporting that additional planning for simulations can discourage educators, hence a recommendation that set of guidelines should be laid out by studies for use by other educators. Padua and Smith (2020) identified a weakness that simulations can miss certain areas of learning, a deficit that is easily managed through teacher-led discourse before or after the simulations.

Kolb's experiential learning theory has been utilised as a foundation to bridge experiential learning and simulation games in many studies (Grady, 2017). Kolb's 4 modes of ELT

- 1 concrete experience
- 2 reflective observation

- 3 abstract conceptualisation
- 4 active experimentation can be related to a similar structure of a simulation game (Baker and Colb, 2012).

Similar to the sensory engagement that occurs during experiential learning, students are also able to think, do, feel, and watch in parts of a simulation game. The environment in a simulation game serves as an avenue for active-based learning which allows players to interact with the effects of their choices without the consequences of mistakes in reality (Saenz and Cano, 2009). Thus, students are able to apply concepts and theories from their course to situations that emulate reality. These simulating processes ultimately lead to understanding academic concepts more deeply (Asal, 2005) while also enhancing critical and analytical thinking skills (Shellman and Turan, 2006). Through these sensory engagements, the cycle of Experiential Learning can therefore be completed. It is to be noted however, that the guidance of a teacher is needed to ensure the facilitation of the Kolb's learning cycle.

2.3 *Experiential learning through online learning tools*

Online tools, when coupled with experiential strategies such as simulations, help address the immobility caused by the pandemic of COVID-19. In Barger's (2020) study, online learning, particularly through massive online open courses, are equipped for mobility and for inclusivity. These options can provide access for students with low internet bandwidth capacity. The wide variety of tools can also provide options for being user-friendly to both students and teachers. Eichelberger and Ngo (2020) add that mobile devices bridge student interactions that are not available in the conventional use of books. Aside from the multitude of digital options that can be done while using these devices, the internet link can allow information sharing and faster communications.

Recent studies also explore a different discourse on the use of technology. Schott and Marshall (2018) attest to the virtual reality technology used as experiential learning strategy as being holistic, immersive, and can substitute for more burdensome activities in the real world. These simulations may require planning yet provide their own benefit by having to have actual trips, which can be costly and of course require more attention. Kolodziejczyk et al. (2020), on the other hand, guard against the phenomenon of *digital comfort*. Oftentimes, technology is supposed to make tasks easier or lighter, but this can mislead in the digital classroom. Sometimes, members of the class, whether student or teacher, may be immersed in experiential activity yet the outcome is only 'information consumption'; but they miss higher skills such as 'information creation'.

Online games provide a safe space for trial and error, and participation. McCreery et al. (2011), Neys and Janz (2019) and Hanly (2017) found in their study, that players are able to simulate decision making process for real life inspired scenarios in videogames and experience the consequences of it. Such samples are failures, or what would happen if they decided to take a certain approach towards a certain scenario. Players would simulate the roles of those involved in the outcome of the scenario. However, these do not bring the risk that comes when making such decisions in real life (e.g., death or losing money). For this reason, online games are even used by the military and medical institutions as a medium for learning the necessary skills for the job (McCreery et al., 2011); since simulations allow students to fail, repeat and try a different approach in the next attempt with more understanding and capability to adapt to scenarios

posed by the game (Neys and Janz, 2019). Through such experiences, the player can make well-informed decisions in their actual life because these virtual experiences provide the necessary informational prerequisites for them to be more critical (Neys and Janz, 2019). Furthermore, the element of interaction as focal point for enjoyment in these types of games, as supported by Lisk et al. (2012) and McCreery et al. (2011) shapes a cooperative learning environment that intrinsically motivates the players to share and generate knowledge with other participants.

3 Framework

This paper is framed by two disciplines namely, Education and Political Science; both of which trace the architecture of NationStates as an educational game simulating the elements of IR. Experiential learning is framed through Kolb's theory that maps two continuums. van der Horst and Albertyn (2018) graph these as the continuum of transforming experiences, doing and watching; and the continuum of grasping experience, feeling and thinking. In this scheme, learners who are more akin to doing things learn through active experimentation. Those who are more affected by emotive lessons learn through concrete experience, and students who learn by watching, learn through reflective observation. Finally, learners who are more involved in thinking learn through abstract conceptualisation.

There are five theories in IR, lessons which students need to be familiar with, to frame their analyses on the dynamics between states across the globe. This research traced the educational architecture of the game of NationStates through the three Levels of Analysis in IR: individual, state, and system (Dolan, 2014; Ray, 2001). The first level places the perspective on the individual person, on the way international events can affect and on the way he or she factors in. The second level is on the perspective of states as international actors, represented by their leaders; this level is at the stage of state planners and their decision-making experiences towards the world outside their borders. The third level is on the world stage, looking into the actual interactions of states, as guided by systems or structures.

4 Methodology

4.1 Design

This is a qualitative research using online tools to describe the phenomenon of experiential learning architecture of the NationStates online game. Through experiential learning and a dialogue with learners, the game can be documented to help fill knowledge gaps in the literature (Warren et al., 2014). The research uses the case study design, with NationStates as the case of a simulation game functioning, as a technology for experiential learning of IR. Using the interface of Kolb's framework and the levels of analysis in IR, the case study can trace how the game can facilitate IR theories.

4.2 *Subjects and study site*

There are two aspects of sites for this study. Firstly, NationsStates is a digital space where learners go to play and experience running their own state and interacting with other states. On this level, four researchers explored the game doing a digital version of an ocular visit, taking researcher notes and describing observations while within the game. Secondly, the Digital Classroom for the course Introduction to International Relations and Global Politics where NationStates was used as an adaptation to the challenges of innovating online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nine participants qualify for having undertaken the Introduction to International Relations and Global Politics, and have played the game for at least one week.

4.3 *Mode of analysis*

Collected data was treated through content analysis using two disciplinary sets of closed codes. Field notes were analysed through the levels of IR: individual, state, and system. These were consolidated and plotted into a simulacrum, used as a visual tool during the validation interview. Transcriptions were read and noted then classified, based on the levels of the framework: IR Analysis themes of Individual, State, and International levels were used as main categories of knowledge being learned. These were further supported by experiential learning codes: ‘doing’, ‘feeling,’ ‘watching,’ and ‘thinking.’ The interface of these codes produces a validated framework of experiential learning in IR through an online game.

4.4 *Ethical considerations*

This research conforms with universal research ethics standards. All secondary data are cited following APA 7th edition. Interview participants are informed of the purpose of the study, given assurance of privacy through anonymity, and only proceed with the interview upon the giving of consent. Identity of each subject are protected through anonymity of code names and no personal data are exposed in the study.

5 **Results**

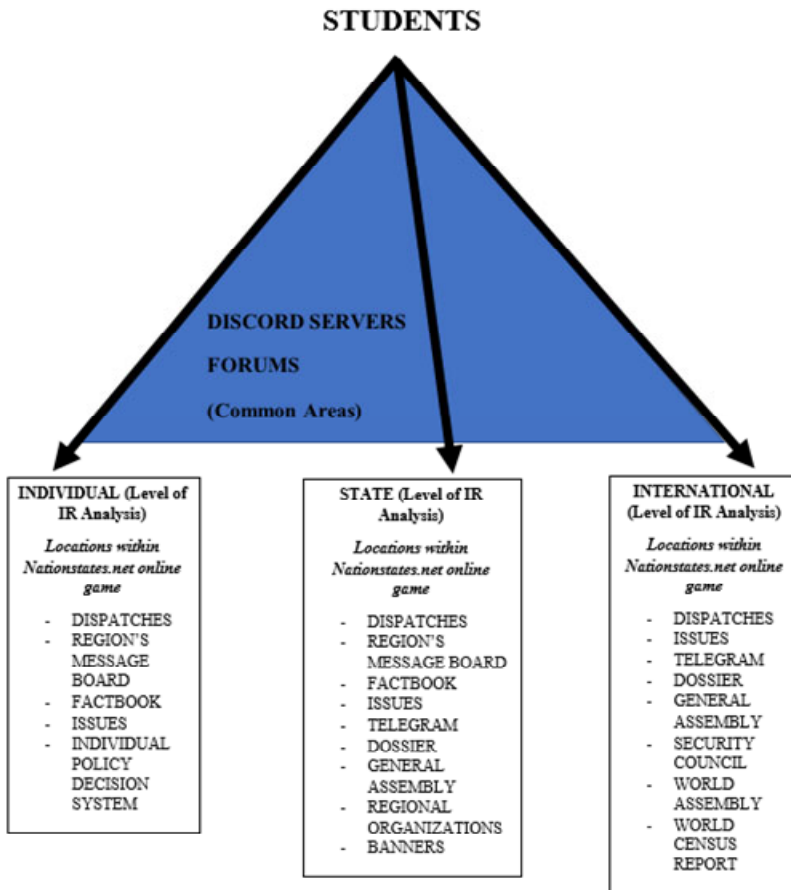
5.1 *The pyramid of experiential learning in NationStates*

Digital transect walk and validation interviews affirmed this paper’s resulting simulacrum (Figure 1). A pyramid with the students at the top and three pathways leading to the foundation of IR: the individual, the state, and the international system. Embedded within these foundations are structural elements of the NationStates online game. Some of the structures are indicated with colour blue for those that repeat in each of the foundations, and green for those that repeat in the interface of state and the international system. The structures with black text are those unique to each foundation.

The pyramid is the cyberspace where players or learners go and interact with other players in the interest of their created nations. These are forums created within and for the game, and the popular technology of Discord as a server for creating cyberspaces for people to meet. The common areas are the regular cyberspace of NationStates reachable

through the game’s website: Nationstates.net. Once a learner enters NationStates, he or she can create a fictional state/nation facilitated through a set of questionnaires, the answers that the learner chooses in this stage will influence the social, economic, and political character, along with unique nuances of the state being created.

Figure 1 Pyramid of experiential learning in IR through NationStates simulation game (see online version for colours)



5.2 Individual level experiential learning

NationState areas unique at the foundation or level of the individual are the individual policy decision making system. The areas for Issues, Factbook, Dispatches, and Region Message Board do not simply allow for experience at the IR level of the individual but also interface with the state and the system, creating a holistic IR experience. In the Issues, every day, a set of issues are generated by the game, current debates on concerns within the state, taxation issues, censorship of certain literature, or the slaughter of particular animals. A player selects the title of the issue and is brought to a new webpage where the main points of the discussion are laid out for the player to choose from. Sometimes, there are just two clashing sides, may be leftist or rightist; sometimes there

are more stakeholders. One scenario was a debate on allowing a rally by Nazi sympathisers that was simply between two sides, pros and cons. While at another issue, the census was being discussed, particularly on its potential to invade citizen privacy rights. This one had five sides from conservatives, ranging from those who promote surveys think-tank employees, to social media sector representatives promoting their own social media survey tools.

Interviews validate students' experiences that in several parts of the game i.e. dossier, security council (SC), general assembly (GA), and telegram, they get to interact with other nation states. As described by student player Bruno in an interview, GA allowed him to do things by participating as an international actor through participation in legislation. "Once you become a member you become bound by past legislation because you're part of the voting public... it features the characteristics of international law" (Bruno, interview coded participant). Apart from the GA experience, the SC also encountered decision-making through voting on policies and reforms. Players can both vote on resolutions and policies, as well as create their own, which is then deliberated upon by other players in the regional message board or the forum. 'Chang'e,' described the fluctuation of certain aspects of one's nation state in connection to the player's response to issues. It is in the Issues that the game indeed became an IR game. "There (issues), you would consider your every move because it affects everything" (Chang'e). She highlighted that issue response does not only affect the state per se but also has an impact on the nation state's profile, as well as having international repercussions.

5.3 State level experiential learning

The state is a political actor with one foot within its territory and the other on the global stage. It is a member of regional organisations, represented by its banner, which is an artwork that is displayed above the state's profile page. These banners change depending on the state's management of issues from within its borders. Individuals making decisions within the state, and the resulting vote impacts on many aspects of life. These then release postcards which can be used as banners, displaying the state's achievement. In the issue on chewing gum legislation, there was the usual anti-gum and pro-gum rhetoric; but there was a third camp that did not hate gums but was still concerned with the solid waste generated on the streets thus proposed to proliferate trash bins and encourage the correct discipline of disposing the gums in the bins. When the player chooses this option, it produced several new banners for the state to display – 'modern steel' (for having reached 100 on the good environment and economy index) and 'modern paradise' (for having promoted a good environment).

'Tigreal' mentioned that the regional organisations allowed him to experience the game by integrating him into it, mainly because all members can join different organisations, a phenomenon of experience through feeling. Polls can be conducted within the Organisations to decide on certain things and on when the player gets to vote on the polls. Another core Location is the Banner, which is not merely a proclamation of feat; rather, it is a fruit of critical strategising, and state management. The experience of the players of the State can be determined through the player's participation in the Dossier. According to 'Bruno', viewing the contents of the Dossier kept him informed about the current happenings within his nation; and it also updated him about the statuses of his associates.

As a virtual International actor whose part of the International Assembly, ‘Estes’ stated that interaction with other nations was realised through the feature of ‘endorsing’. With endorsements, players can endorse each other, allowing for increased cooperation among states. Wit and merit play a huge factor in gaining endorsements from states. Not only do endorsements create friendly ties with other nations, but it can also provide the player a reason for what is happening in the international community. However, the easiest way to know and understand the current situation of the world is through the integration of checking at the resolutions and counter-resolutions at the GA, and keeping updated with different Factions and Regional Organisations, ‘Estes’ added.

5.4 International system experiential learning

If Regions have forums, the world assembly (WA), NationState’s version of the United Nations (UN), has the GA and the security council. There is no forum in the WA; instead the high impact activities here are done through resolutions, proposed by any WA member who can get endorsements from two other members. Proposals await for support from other states and eventually go for a vote. In the Security Council, proposals are meant to promote harmony in the world. Those in the GA though mimic the essence of jurisdiction, for only legislation that passes in the floor becomes laws, which all WA members states must abide by virtue of membership.

Regional systems encourage everyone to endorse one another but makes it mandatory to endorse the officers of the respective regions. This is for the purpose of making sure that the officers can have a say in the legislative process in the WA. The delegate nations still need the support of at least two other delegates from WA to have the power in granting proposals, like the way it usually works in the International Systems in reality: the North American Treaty Organisation (NATO), Association of South East Asian Countries (Asean), European Union (EU) or the UN. Support from other member nations is the social capital necessary to push an agenda to be proposed and passed as a resolution (researcher’s fieldnotes).

6 Discussion

Through NationStates, theory becomes experienced through simulation. The game becomes a mirror of reflection, an arena for thinking, a space for doing actions, and a place for observing other states. Throughout the game, a student can go through the four levels of IR. A student sees the way a policy affects him/her. Students also sit on the perspective of state managers when they see the big picture of the discourse in a local issue. Afterwards, the student also sees how the events within the state impact on world ranking through the Recent Trends area and in the World Census Report area of the game. From this point, the student can explore various areas of IR, such as interactions within the region or activities in the WA.

Similar with the experience in Diplomacy online study (Bridge and Radford, 2014), students in NationStates activities are guided by the rules of the game. Human behaviour in the students translated to in-game behaviour are guided by the system’s structure creating an observable dynamic of realism and structural realism. Just as Guzzini (2004) wrote that two dilemmas which yield characteristics of realism are: identity and power; and practical knowledge as used in diplomacy. States in the game are created with the

political identity of the player, which allows the players to reflect and sometimes discover the reality of their actions as presupposed to assumptions at the beginning of the game. Power or the capacity to do actions is curbed by two forces, the power of other states (players), alliances in the region and in the WA, and the in-game system.

Notable here is the excitement on engaging other players in war. The system of NationStates has no war system and thus gives birth to structure as juxtaposed to the Waltzian argument for the structure as born out of its absence (Pribadi, 2013). In-game structure is similar with Waltzian structure (Donnelly, 2019) to address anarchy. Apart from Waltz, Wallerstein's World System can also be seen where the economy surfaces in most decisions in the issue resolution page of NationStates. Krasner's (Keohane, 2013) regime theory is also simulated through the rule of the WA and the power of alliances in a region. In Krasner's IR theory, regimes are not created through state power but through the power of international groupings or through formal institutions. In the realist-structuralist dynamics, such evidence of the system further proves the efficacy of structure in moulding the game's activities.

In conjunction with Wallerstein, Liberalism, which focuses on the individual and the protection or respect for rights (Sterling-Folker, 2015) can also be experienced within the game. The entry point to this experience is of course the decision-making system for the state; however, the concern for citizens in the territories of member states can be in many times evident in the resolution of the WA's GA and the Security Council. An indirect experience is the simulation of critical theory discourses. State creation begins with a questionnaire on state character based on ideologies, and these ideas will be seen clashing in many areas of debates whether local or international in the NationStates. To a lesser degree though are constructivist theories, theories on interpretive analysis (Peltonen, 2017) needs some time in-game, and may not always be seen, felt, done, or thought of. It is only the part on norms, though, which may be experienced when one makes decisions within NationStates on behalf of one's state. Analogous to NationStates' game design, Statecraft is an online political simulation game that promotes active learning by allowing students to participate in the decision-making of national territories. The complex political nature of the game opens up educators in international relations to integrate a new method in their pedagogical approaches (Raymond, 2015). The findings of the study presented similarities as the researchers conclude that the simulation game influenced students' perception on aspects of moral expectations, behaviour, and political ideologies (Kaftan and Linantud, 2020).

Simulation games tend to have the most propensity for decision-making, and in model diplomacy, it is the essence of the game. The simulation puts the player into the role of a policymaker or decision-maker working in the US National Security Council (NSC) or UN Security Council. The mechanics of the game is simple yet engaging, from creating policies that tries to address a specific issue in international relations to examining problems of global health and economic concerns (Butcher and Njonguo, 2020). The experience of students who played model diplomacy shares similarities with the students who played NationStates. The findings in both studies emphasised the importance of human interaction and knowledge in international relations, which echoes the latter's experiential learning codes—doing, feeling, watching, and thinking. In Butcher and Njonguo's concluding remarks to their paper, the researchers stated that the students perceived to learn better from simulation games than that of conventional lectures.

The usage of games to simulate wars is nothing new; however, its pace as a medium of teaching international relations is gaining more traction. With such, the simulation of the Bargaining Model of War is an example of an intuitive way to teach International Relations in the classroom incorporating combinations of active experimentation, concrete experience, reflective observation, and abstract conceptualisation. Gameplay here relies on the ideas of the logic of bargaining, costly conflicts, and misrepresentation—all of which are key aspects of war. At the end of every game, the educator explains the premise of the simulation while seeking feedback from students (Haynes, 2015). The findings of Haynes' study indicate that the logic of bargaining, costly conflict, and misrepresentation aspects of the simulation involves experiential learning.

It can be observed that students mostly experience IR at the individual level in features of the game that involve decision-making, such as voting in policies, responding to issues, joining alliances, establishing state membership and more (authors' field notes), are activities where one is able to 'feel', 'watch', 'think', 'do'. Interaction and communication with other players allow students to experience IR simulation on a more personal level. Through these parts of the game, students experience all 4 stages of Kolb's theory of experiential learning: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. Students gain concrete experience of the whole game as an educational tool simulating IR by observing international processes in the game similar with reality and participating individually as an international leader, not only in decision-making but also in communicating with other players. The researchers observed that the experience of the players at the State level of analysis is holistic despite sharing most of the locations with other Levels of Analysis. While other core Locations provided context to the way the State functions in the game (Dispatches, Region's Message Board, Factbook, Issues, Telegram, Dossier, GA), the Regional Organisations uphold procedures where the players get to experience active participation in matters concerning the state and international realms through exercising their votes.

Being able to propose policies falls in the category of active experimentation in Kolb's theory. Through this, a student player is *doing* the process of legislation (from creating policies, to deliberating, and voting). This, as described by Chang'e, that the situation can be likened to the UN, where one can vote and push for policies that could benefit one's nation state. Chang'e stated that she felt like an international actor through connections established with other players through the messaging via the telegram. The Issues part of the game encourages thinking, which is also included in Kolb's experiential learning. On the other hand, parts such as the census reports and the dossier provide updates on the events in the WA. As stated by Bruno and Benedetta in an interview, it is through these parts that international processes are observed by the player, which in turn affects their decision-making in essential parts of the game. In connection to Kolb, these parts—encourage reflective observation of the individual player. Furthermore, Red's experience with international interactions through the utilisation of the WA was enhanced by sending Dossiers and Telegrams. With the tools provided by the game, Red was able to communicate with other nations in matters pertaining to legislations or events. Similar to Bruno and Benedetta, the WA influenced much of the subject's decisions regarding legislations. Red's sentiments regarding the WA were shared by Blue. According to the Blue, WA and GA was a vital tool in making the subject experience what an international actor feels like in international relations simulation. Through the lens of GA, the

international community would be able to express their sentiments, whether they are for or against a specific law. Blue stated that the features such as WA and GA were key aspects that allowed the subject to become one with the simulated international community. Ultimately, the overall interaction with states including agreements and disagreements helped Red and Blue analyse events in International Relations, which also correlate to Kolb theory in terms of participating, observing, feeling, and thinking as state actors.

To further understand the context of the in-game locations, it is pertinent to categorise them based on Kolb's Parameters – Think, Do, Feel, and Watch. According to 'Estes', Telegram, GA, and Issues allowed the participant to analyse the events in terms of the Think, and Watch category, stating that "You can see the interactions in that part, you cannot conduct matters regarding IR without interacting with states and/or you do not do anything that affects other states". When aggregated, these Core Locations create a holistic experience—enveloping the 4 parameters of Kolb—that allows players to have a medium for discussing pertinent matters in IR (Issues), exchange and execute ideas that could affect the welfare of their own states (Dispatches/Factbook/Dossier), assemble a committee with other players to discuss International Law (GA), and understand the basics of IR.

Lastly, in-game process allows players to experience the essence of politicking in the quest of widening their reach and influence in an international system. 'Cecilion' was able to relate this kind of experience from NationStates to the personal and academic experiences he had. Cooperation and teamwork are present in completing academic tasks and in playing an online game. Participant also mentioned the necessity of having these connections or systems to execute the task or the game perfectly. Furthermore, all the interviewees (Cecilion, Chou, Chang'e, Bruno, Benedetta, Tigreal, Aquila, Estes, Red, and Blue) who participated in the study gave a common denominator of mentioning the importance of telegram/ forum in interacting and creating relationships with other nations. These allows the player to experience the process and powerplay in the international systems in the Feel, Think, Watch and Do categories.

7 Conclusions and recommendations

NationStates is a good case for a game which harmonious structures that facilitates experiential learning of IR theories and concepts. There is an opportunity for students to 'do' activities, 'watch' and thus observe, 'reflect' on events, and think on discourses relevant to politics and IR. In NationStates, active experimentation begins at the moment when students create states and make decisions for their states in the voting systems. Locations such as regional organisations, the WA, and the Security Council create opportunities for concrete experience in learning international relations and global politics scenarios. Reflective observation, and abstract conceptualisation are experienced in all these locations as students are given leeway and creativity. However, it is always important to note the that one cannot make do without class synthesis as guided by the professor to ensure reflective observations and conceptualisations to be accurate with class lessons.

The game is light on internet use suitable for new normal classes and its structure simulates the dynamics of realism and structuralism with some elements of liberalism, critical theory, and fewer on constructivist interpretations. Moreover, the structure offers

educators a controlled environment, with few preparations. However, there is still a need for balance between the game and the presence of the teacher to help synthesise the activity. It is also recommended that a qualitative study be conducted on the level of capacity of such structures; and that educators balance the simulation with supplemental outcomes-based formative assessment to complete the experience. Furthermore, comparative studies can also be conducted on online simulations games thus determine common grounds for active learning.

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