

## Playing the Hobbes Game at Philosophy Camp

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The Hobbes Game is designed to simulate what Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) called *the state of nature*. This is a hypothetical state before humans formed civil societies, a violent state of competition driven by self-preservation, a state of “war of every man against every man”, where one’s existence is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

The original Hobbes Game was designed and published by John Immerwahr in 1976.<sup>1</sup> Others have gone on to revise and discuss the game, including Lee Archie (1995), Martin E. Gerwin (1996), Cristian Bellon (2001), and Ryan Pollock (2014).<sup>2</sup> Pollock’s version is significantly different from Immerwahr’s and I have used it successfully with undergraduates in an ethics course as well as high school students in a philosophy camp. Below I will sketch Pollock’s version of the game, explain its pedagogical value, describe its impact on campers, and offer some practical suggestions for gameplay. For game instructions and further discussion, please see Pollock’s excellent article.

### A Sketch of the Hobbes Game

Arguably, in an actual state of nature, resources (power, material goods, etc.) would be initially distributed in a random and unequal way. A virtue and distinctive feature of Pollock’s

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<sup>1</sup> Immerwahr, "The Hobbes Game," *Teaching Philosophy*, 1976 (1:4).

<sup>2</sup> Lee C. Archie, An Analysis of "The Hobbes Game," *Teaching Philosophy*, 1995(18:3); Martin E. Gerwin, "The Hobbes Game, Human Diversity, and Learning Styles," *Teaching Philosophy*, 1996 (19:3); Christina Bellon, "At Play in the State of Nature: Assessing Social: Contract Theory Through Role Play." *Teaching Philosophy*. 2001(24:4); Ryan Pollock in "Evaluating the State of Nature through Gameplay", *Teaching Philosophy* 2014 (37:1).

version is its use of role playing to simulate these initial conditions: each player is randomly assigned a character to play, and each character has unique strengths and weaknesses. Pollock's game also simulates a state of nature by instructing each player to pursue their own self-interest, which the game quantifies with "glory points". Points are acquired through amassing resources – not only bread, water, shelter, lumber, and weapons, but also the freedom and labor of other players. Whoever survives the game with the most glory points is the winner.

Because of the uneven initial playing field, the pursuit of individual survival and self-advancement requires significant engagement among players. Some of this can be friendly or neutral: trading, sharing, cooperating, promise keeping, forming alliances, etc. But some of it can be downright hostile: attacking, taking someone's freedom, breaking a promise, betraying an alliance, etc. Thus, gameplay is highly immersive, inevitably intense, and sometimes even chaotic.

### **The Pedagogical Value of the Game**

Playing the Hobbes Game is an effective tool for teaching political philosophy, especially at a philosophy camp. I'll describe several of the game's pedagogical virtues, from the more general to the more specific. First, it is highly immersive and the competitive nature of the game insures a high rate of engagement. It works well at the beginning of a camp or semester, not only as an ice-breaker, but also as a means to provide students with a large stock of shared experiences that can be mined and discussed throughout the camp (Archie 1995, p. 265). After playing the game, students are especially primed for more abstract thinking about political theory and the prisoner's dilemma.

Second, thinking realistically about political philosophy requires paying attention to the various conditions in which humans find themselves, such as being powerless or disadvantaged, being empowered or advantaged, being subject to inhumane treatment or betrayal, as well as what it is like to trust someone or betray someone's trust. Because it involves role play, the Hobbes Game provides students with an effective opportunity to imagine and develop an empathetic understanding of some of those conditions. In this regard, the game facilitates self-knowledge – some students, for example, were surprised to discover how easily they betrayed others or, alternatively, how deferential they became in conflicts.

Third, the game engages a variety of learning styles. According to David Kolb, students learn by drawing upon the following four elements of experience.<sup>3</sup> The game engages each of them. Students who learn through *abstract conceptualization* have the opportunity to reflect on whether and how gameplay dynamics illustrate or can be explained by theoretical models. For example, the game naturally raises questions concerning whether psychological egoism is true and whether humans are social by nature (Aristotle) or only by practical necessity (Hobbes). Students who learn through *concrete experience* benefit from the highly interactive gameplay. For example, players are drawn into making deals, forming alliances, taking risks – sometimes in secret, and sometimes deceitfully. Students who learn through *reflective observation* have the opportunity to watch and ponder the dynamic and complex human interactions that gameplay unfolds. For example, students can observe (and be subject to) the dynamics of self-interest, negotiation, loyalty, betrayal, and

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<sup>3</sup> These learning styles are taken from David Kolb's work as cited in Gerwin (1996). Here I am largely drawing upon and somewhat simplifying Gerwin's discussion of Immerwahr's game and learning styles. His discussion applies equally well to Pollock's version.

payback. Finally, students who learn through *active experimentation* have the opportunity to devise, implement, and test various gameplay strategies. For example, a key tactical issue is whether or not to form an alliance to attack a more powerful player. Sometimes this works, but sometimes it backfires dramatically.

Fourth, the game provides both occasion and fodder for discussing a number of interrelated philosophical questions. Some of these concern the formation of *civil society*:

- What is human flourishing, and to what extent does it depend on things like chance, fortune, intelligence, hard work, initiative, friendships, etc.?
- What is fairness, and is it possible for humans to move from a state of nature to a fair civil society?
- Under what conditions and through what processes does civil society come about?
- What roles do self-interest, cooperation, and rationality play in the formation of civil society?

Other questions concern *human nature*:

- What are humans naturally like – is there such a thing as human nature?
- What role does human nature play in the formation of civil society?
- What theories about human nature explain what happens when real individuals interact and especially when they attempt to cooperate or form a civil society?
- Is a human being “by nature a political animal”, as Aristotle thought, or was Hobbes right that we only give up our freedom and form societies when it is mutually advantageous?
- Do people cooperate only when it is in their self-interest to do so?

Finally, some of the questions are about the *philosophical relevance of gameplay*:

- To what extent and in what ways can gameplay imitate the real dynamics of self-interest and cooperation?
- To what extent can gameplay provide a way to test philosophical ideas?
- Can simulations like the Hobbes Game tell us anything about human nature or the nature of political society?

### **The Impact of the Game**

In my experience, playing the game impacts the students in a number of ways. I'll mention two. First, the game gives life to the sorts of philosophical questions noted above. Indeed, it tends to lodge a number of them in the collective mind of the students, where they provoked discussion over the remainder of the camp or semester. Second, the immediate emotional impact on the students can be mixed. Gameplay is not always pleasant for everyone – and this is by design. As Immerwahr said of his version: “a proper Hobbes game ought to bring out the worst in players rather than the best” (1976, p. 435). The students themselves see this dynamic. For example, one player hollered out “you all don’t even know me and you’ve already attacked me!” Not surprisingly, players who end up being betrayed or ‘enslaved’ in gameplay sometimes report that although they did not enjoy the game, they found it highly worthwhile and would like to play it again.

### **Suggestions for Playing the Game**

I will close with a few suggestions for running the game with your students. First, to understand the setup and rules for the game, please see Pollock’s article. Second, I suggest creating and distributing a document that introduces the game prior to game day. In my experience, gameplay goes more smoothly if students have a chance to read over the rules in

advance. I have created a document for this purpose, along with other ready-to-print game materials, and I would be happy to share them upon request.<sup>4</sup> Third, in Pollock's game, there are 10 character roles to be played. If there are a few more than 10 students, I would suggest asking students to pair up to play a single character. With groups of 20-25 students, I would suggest splitting the group in half and running two separate games at once.

Finally, I suggest drawing attention to the fact that the rules do not prohibit promise-breaking, betrayal, or outright lying — all of these can happen without violating any of the official game rules. Of course, as students immediately see, these actions are risky and can backfire. Furthermore, although such actions are legal, students sometimes feel uncomfortable with the idea of attacking or betraying another player. As one student said, "It feels icky!" In light of this, at critical moments of game play (such as when players are negotiating a deal) I suggest reminding the players that there are no rules against making false promises. Not only does this increase the drama, it also helps students understand what a state of nature would be like and leads to gameplay that better simulates an unregulated pursuit of self-interest.

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<sup>4</sup> Feel free to email me at [Robert\\_K\\_Garcia@Baylor.edu](mailto:Robert_K_Garcia@Baylor.edu)