

Negotiation Simulation Games for any History Class

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SIMULATION GAMES are growing in their usage as teaching tools for history and other fields. The pages of *The History Teacher* have provided detailed examinations of using both historical computer simulations¹ and complicated wargames.² The Reacting to the Past Consortium has been engaging in elaborate and innovative studies providing complex role-playing simulation games that take weeks to complete and require that the course be designed about them.³ There have been several simulation games with complex systems providing games covering the German electoral system,⁴ the French Revolution,⁵ political conflict in Latin America,⁶ issues in the Middle East,⁷ and others.⁸

Each of these approaches to integrating simulation games requires considerable commitments of time, either inside or outside of class, as well as the mastery of complex rule systems by the instructor. For instructors with limited time to take away from lectures and class discussions, such complicated simulation activities are impractical. This essay will provide basic guidelines for any instructor to create their own simulations games that do not rely upon pre-existing complicated rule sets, knowledge of wargaming, or the intellectual property of simulation consortiums, and when

compared to computer simulation games, avoid many of the existing weaknesses found in that instructional method. Jeremiah McCall provides useful insights into the pitfalls of computer simulation games that are worthy of consideration when crafting face-to-face negotiation simulations for individual classes. While it is my opinion that face-to-face simulations are generally superior to computer simulation experiences, preferring one over the other is entirely dependent on the individual pedagogical needs of the instructor for the particular class in question. In explaining the guidelines for crafting negotiation simulations in practice, I will present the general outline of two simulations I have run several times. While I will provide the overview of two of my simulations, I will not provide the full details of each game because instructors need to craft the simulation for the individual instructional needs of each classroom and focus of each particular class.

Jeremiah McCall has provided an excellent examination of the benefits and pitfalls of using computer simulation games as a medium for teaching history, and it is worth comparing the benefits and pitfalls of role-playing negotiation simulations. McCall identified three benefits to using simulation games as problem solving challenges for students. In his words, the problem spaces created by simulation games enable students to:

- Acquire a sense of the past as full of possibilities and not pre-determined.
- Learn to identify and analyze the constraints and affordances (physical, emotional, and intellectual) that shape human actions.
- Develop skills of strategic problem solving.⁹

McCall also identified several problem areas for computer simulations games:

- Entertainment Bias
- Oversimplification
- Significantly Counterfactual Outcomes
- Over-Access to Power and Information
- Emphasis on Goal-Seeking and Individual Choice
- Quantification Bias¹⁰

Simple role-playing games provide for educational opportunities outside of those covered by computer games and wargames. The games McCall examined tended to be resource management games of one type or another, where the player takes the role of an omniscient manager of a company, colony, city, or empire. Instead, I have experimented with various scenarios and found simple role-playing of historical negotiations provides unique opportunities for students to explore historical issues that are often quite relevant and alive today. While I have generally called these “negotiation simulations,” they have covered international treaties, tense international standoffs, labor organizing, and constitution building. The general principles for creating all of these are the same.

This essay will examine what is necessary for creating simple simulation activities that can be completed in one or two class sessions. Then it will provide some explanation of two highly successful simulations that this writer has developed and run in multiple sessions. These simulations, covering the U.S. Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia and the Cuban Missile Crisis, have also been successfully run by other instructors. Then, using these examples, I will evaluate simple face-to-face role-playing simulations against the pitfalls McCall identified with computer games. Instructor-designed multiplayer negotiation simulations rate better in all problem areas identified by McCall.

Guidelines for Simulation Design

There are several factors that contribute to the development of a successful historical negotiation simulation game:

- 1. Identify a historical conflict with three or more sides with no obvious solution.** This can be the development of a constitution, negotiating a peace treaty, or trying to come to some agreement that might prevent a war. This might include labor disputes or contract negotiations. Any multi-sided issue without an obvious solution that will satisfy the maximal goals of everyone can serve as the basis for a negotiation simulation. In addition to the aforementioned simulations, I have experimented with simulations involving the fate of Soviet democracy, the status of post-Second World War Germany, and labor organizing in early twentieth-century South America.

2. Identify what aspects of the historical issues or events you are most interested in simulating. Find those aspects of the issues that might be of most relevance to course materials, student interests, or your own personal interests. By building these into the issues under negotiation, you can actively engage the students in topics and concepts you want to emphasize.

3. Organize the negotiation structure so that it is student driven. One can either assign the role of convention chair or meeting leader, or build multiple agents into the motivational structure that are seeking greater consensus. This does not mean the instructor cannot still serve as a gamemaster for any outside events or contingencies, but the negotiations should be directed by the students. This will allow the creative part of the endeavor to be entirely their own.

4. Keep it simple. I have a great deal of experience with complicated board gaming and role-playing experiences. These do not lend themselves to limited-session negotiated settlements. As a corollary to this, *quantify as little as possible*. Instead, make participant goals qualitative in nature. In an attempt to create a negotiated settlement simulation involving troop levels, I found that I needed a scoring method to compare the more qualitative goals to the quantitative goal of troop levels. If the rule cannot be explained to a student and understood immediately, it is likely too complicated. Likewise, determining the “winner” of such simulations needs to be simple and straightforward.

5. Use secret information. In each game, teams or players will have objectives that are not known to the other players. While this prevents the ability for students to replay the scenario under the original premise, it recreates the historical reality that no one knows exactly what the other parties want. While attentive students will have knowledge of the types of things players might want, the exact details will only be known to the student seeking those objectives. In all of the games described below, the players only know exactly what *they* want; they do not necessarily know what *others* want.

6. Don’t be afraid to cheat. This has two aspects, one more literal than the other. In the less literal sense, feel free to “cheat history”

for the sake of both playability of the game and to include issues you want to emphasize in teaching. This will lead to a greater possibility of counterfactual outcomes, but can lead to a greater understanding of issues. In the more literal sense, reserve the right to break your own rules when necessary. In my Cuban Missile Crisis scenario, I used dice to determine if accidental nuclear war happened, which would therefore end the scenario. As certain events happened, the chance of accidental nuclear catastrophe increased. In one running of the simulation, the dice indicated that a one-in-a-hundred chance had been hit in the first five minutes of class. Rather than end the simulation with everyone losing at such an early stage, I just kept the results to myself and let the simulation continue.

7. Minimize or ignore fairness concerns. History and life are rarely fair. The Cubans have a harder time getting their points across in the Cuban Missile Crisis scenario as the superpowers negotiate. A Paine-like figure has a much harder time obtaining his objectives than George Washington, who runs the Constitutional Convention. Instead, one should focus on the ability of each player to participate meaningfully. With this in mind, each delegate works for themselves in the Constitutional Convention. For other scenarios, the teams are kept small so each member of the team can easily and actively participate in decision making. In reality, many parties have the odds stacked against their success. Don't be afraid to let your simulation reflect this to some degree.

The U.S. Constitutional Convention Simulation

A variety of issues may be explored with variants on my Constitutional Convention simulation. Set in Philadelphia, 1787, this game has every individual playing a different delegate to the convention. Each delegate has five to seven conditions (depending how many students are involved) that they would like the new constitution to meet (these items are either included or excluded in the final document). By having one student play George Washington and another Alexander Hamilton, an instructor can turn the task over to them and simply demand that they create a draft of a constitution approved by at least a majority of delegates present. Each student will be provided an instruction sheet, in addition to their own

personal objectives, that outlines the minimal considerations a draft constitution must have to bring the convention to a close. This minimal outline has included the basic terms of office, selection method, and type of representation to be found in the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. To promote consensus building, Washington wants either two-thirds, three-quarters, or unanimous approval of the draft document, depending on the number of students playing. I have changed the scale of this simulation, with as few as six students to as many as fifty.

In practice, this simulation is quite simple for the instructor to conduct, once the preparation work is completed. After one has a sense of how many students one has for the activity, the first preparatory activity is to sketch out the minimal needs of a functioning constitution. For my simulation, this was the basic structure of the three branches of government, terms of office, selection process, and distribution or limitations on powers. The prepared instructions would inform students that their finished product must cover these issues. Then, with a mind to how many students were to be involved, a list of objectives for each student would be prepared. These objectives would be the “secret information” provided to each student, along with the general instructions. Once class begins, I tend to find a volunteer to run the convention as Washington, allow them to pick their assistant, and assign the more difficult positions to more active students. After allowing a short time for students to read their materials and ask any questions privately, events are entirely turned over to the players for Washington and the assistant to get me a constitution by the end of the allotted time—passed by a majority of the delegates present. Other than intervening to help with points of clarification, the instructor largely has no further role and can simply watch what happens.

Through this exercise, any significant political issues of the new United States can be ignored or included. As my course tends to emphasize issues regarding the debates over how much democracy is proper, I throw in an ahistorical delegate that is more in line with Thomas Paine’s views. In addition, I graft non-constitutional issues into the proceedings, such as debt assumption, debt repayment, and what to do with tribes living in the east, to further reflect issues that my course covers in more detail. As you are designing the objectives of the delegates, they can reflect any set of issues and goals the course

seeks to emphasize. The scope of issues covered can also be scaled depending on how much time one wants to spend on the project. In an extreme case where I had twenty students and needed to finish in one hour, I was able to do so by entirely removing discussion of a judiciary from the minimal required contents of a proposed constitution. With smaller groups, I find removing debt issues can streamline activities.

With the Constitutional Convention game, I also devised a motivational structure to push for participation in obtaining a grade. For this activity, I have required each student to write a paragraph about each of their objectives and what happened to that objective in negotiations. If the student is able to obtain the objective, they simply need to write a sentence stating their objective was in the final document. Thus, students are motivated to participate so as to minimize the work for their final write-up of the assignment, but students whose objectives are not included are not penalized in their grades. They simply have to write a little more to obtain full marks.

This particular simulation clearly conforms to the seven guidelines proposed here. First, there are three or more sides without an obvious consensus position. Second, the event highlights the contingent nature of the specific constitution created while providing students the opportunity to debate the issues highlighted in my course (Indian policy, democracy, and economic issues). Third, the activity is entirely driven by the students in the management and creation of the final draft constitution. Fourth, the mechanics are simple and straightforward—the students want the final constitution, passed by majority vote, to reflect as many of their objectives as possible. Fifth, all objectives are secret. Sixth, the simulation “cheats” by including issues that were not necessarily debated within the confines of the historical convention. Finally, the simulation is not balanced for fairness. Those running the convention will wield more power in crafting the final document, and some players will definitely have unpopular positions to try to push through.

The Cuban Missile Crisis Simulation

The most complicated of the games I have repeatedly playtested is the Cuban Missile Crisis simulation. While retaining the secret objective element of the previous games, I wanted to add a component

that reflected the difficulties of communication that nearly resulted in nuclear disaster. In this game, there are six different sides: 1) The Cuban Government, 2) The Soviet Political Leadership, 3) The Soviet Military Leadership, 4) The American Political Leadership, 5) The American Military Leadership, and 6) An ahistorical United Nations player tasked with creating an agreement all parties agree with. By splitting each superpower's governments in to two teams, the game emphasizes that even the totalitarian state was not monolithic in the interests of those with leadership positions.

To simulate the difficult communications, the Cuban, Soviet, and American teams were required to stay separated in various corners of the room, while the U.N. team was positioned in the center. The Soviet team could send a sole ambassador to talk with the Cubans, and the Cubans could act similarly with the Soviets. The U.S. and Soviet teams, however, were forbidden from communicating directly. The U.S. teams were forbidden from ever communicating with Cuba, unless routed through the Soviet team—furthermore, in order for the U.S. and the Soviet teams to communicate, the message had to be sent through the U.N. team, orally. In light of these difficulties, to facilitate negotiations, the U.N. player could call a conference with one representative from each nation—not each team. Ultimately, to reach final agreement between the Americans and Soviets, any agreement had to be approved by a majority vote of that country. Since the U.S. and the Soviets were each split into separate teams for military and political interests, but only one representative per nation was allowed at negotiations, conflicts would then arise as the negotiators not at the U.N. peace conference were often unhappy with the outcome and not willing to approve the agreement.

This simulation also has a more active role for the instructor, since the instructor must serve as gamemaster, managing outcomes beyond student control. The students can control their negotiations, but teams can also initiate actions that lead to unknown and unpredictable results. For example, the U.S. military can conduct U2 spy plane missions and airstrikes on Cuba. The Soviet military can order submarines to try to sneak by the blockade. And if the Cubans detect an overflight, they may try and shoot down those invading their airspace. Each of these actions runs the risk of accidental nuclear war. For a team to carry out such an action, they must send

a note to the instructor, who will then check if another team has an opportunity to react. The instructor/gamemaster rolls the dice according to the scenario before either privately sending a note about the outcome or more publicly announcing the downing of a U2—or accidental nuclear war. To push the students to complete the assignment within a time limit, simply declare that if no agreement is reached by a certain time, everyone loses—since accidental nuclear war kills them all.

While this scenario is much more complicated from an objective perspective, for the students, the requirements are straightforward. In practice, the initial simulation experience is similar to that for the Constitutional Convention simulation. The rules and objectives must be prepared beforehand by the instructor, and students must look over the materials at the beginning of class. The rules for limited communications are simple to understand, as is the process for obtaining and ratifying an agreement. The biggest difference, outside the additional communications rules, are that students are on teams and can order military operations that have consequences beyond their control (for the various military actions, the students simply send the instructor a properly signed written order, and they will hear what happens later, while negotiations remain ongoing). Proceedings usually start with the United Nations team calling for a series of conferences, either having group meetings with all parties or meeting individually with representatives from the various nations, to hammer out a draft solution. While this goes on, the remaining team members usually launch some form of covert military operation to either gain more information or improve their own strategic position—risking nuclear war with each action. With a little luck, an agreement would be reached and ratified by the teams before accidental nuclear war. In practice, I prepared charts for generating random military outcomes, but an instructor could just as easily have all military actions conform to historical events or determine the outcomes on the fly to conform to the pedagogical imperatives of the class.

The Cuban Missile Crisis simulation also conforms to the seven guidelines for simulation design. First, there are three or more sides without an obvious consensus position, though many students do take the historical solution as a basis for negotiations. Second, the simulation focuses on instructor objectives of stressing the difficulties

with communication, the competing political rivalries within the superpowers, and how very close the world came to nuclear war. Third, the activity is entirely driven by the students as the United Nations manages negotiations and each team has other military-related decisions to make on their own. Fourth, the mechanics are simple and straightforward—communications are limited, military instructions are sent to the instructor, and an agreement must be ratified by the superpowers within the time limit. Fifth, all objectives are secret. Sixth, the simulation “cheats” by including a much more active U.N. team to simulate difficulties in communications. Seventh, the game is unfair as the Cuban team has a much more difficult time having its voice heard. In the rules I use, the Cubans can even be completely shut out of a final decision, though that would prevent a maximal victory for the U.N. team.

Assessing Instructor-Created Simulations against Problems Common to Computer Simulations

In managing the above scenarios, and others a bit more complicated, I have found that simple negotiation simulation games do as well or better in all of the problem areas identified by McCall. Small, simple negotiation simulations are in most ways superior to computer simulation games because they are created by the instructor and tailored to the specific pedagogical needs of the particular classroom setting. I shall now examine each of McCall’s problem areas in turn.

Entertainment Bias: As McCall identified, commercial computer games are commercial enterprises first, and part of their marketability is their entertainment value to the purchaser.¹¹ The purpose behind the creation of most computer simulation games is to make money, not to educate. By controlling the creation process yourself, as the instructor, you need mostly be concerned with the students’ own biases in understanding the motives, choices, and possibilities inherent in previous negotiations. I would urge those designing their own games to be willing to jettison historical accuracy for both playability and entertainment potential of the game, keeping in mind that if an instructor has built any ahistorical portions into the game, these divergences from reality may easily be dealt with through further class discussion.

Oversimplification: McCall has noted that the factors considered by programmers must be limited to have manageable playing systems. In empire management games such as *Civilization*, important factors as internal city politics or environmental conditions are overlooked.¹² Simple negotiation games of the type I am suggesting also require a great deal of oversimplification and paring down of issues to manageable levels. However, this serves to let the class recreate aspects of negotiations that once took days, weeks, or months, forcing the process to fit in one- or two-hour class sessions. Again, the situation is superior here, since the instructor will be directly managing which issues are considered crucial.

Significantly Counterfactual Outcomes: McCall warns of computer simulation games that create outcomes that could not have happened, such as the Aztecs discovering gunpowder and defeating the Spanish.¹³ This, of course, is a purely philosophical position of McCall. As far as I am aware, there are no physical conditions that would have precluded the possibility of the Aztecs making such a discovery, and if we happen to believe in a multiverse of infinite possibilities, there would then be an infinite set of universes where the Aztecs could and did defeat the Spanish for many reasons. Alternatively, “our” history only happened once. From this contrary philosophical perspective, for all the actors to be who they were, *exactly*, there could only be one possible outcome—what actually happened. Outside of a simulation designed to teach the futility of human choice in avoiding fate and destiny, most would agree that a simulation that had no possibility of alternative outcomes would be a simulation better presented by participating in a costume drama or film production. Simple negotiation simulations are superior because the range of counterfactual outcomes are only limited by the framing conditions crafted by the instructor and the creativity of the students. Some of these outcomes can be deeply counterfactual, but also open up the ability of students to see or create alternatives that the actors themselves often could not find. Other counterfactual outcomes can serve to emphasize the difference in priorities of students today, as compared to the roles they have been assigned to play. The confining structure of the Cuban Missile Crisis game almost always leaves something similar to the historical outcome, but with about one in three games ending in nuclear war—a significantly counterfactual outcome that was not only possible, but probable.

Over-Access to Power and Information: Computer simulations have a bias towards omniscient managers of various forms.¹⁴ The simple negotiation games I have created depend on the participants not knowing what the others are seeking. Such face-to-face role-playing where people work with and against each other to craft an agreeable outcome recreates the actual limitations of historical actors. Though students like to issue military commands and sometimes launch nuclear war when things are not going well in the Cuban Missile Crisis scenario, they have little control over the outcomes of the military commands issued at other points in the scenario.

Emphasis on Goal-Seeking and Individual Choice: In computer simulations, goals are often quantifiable and obvious, spelling out the desired outcome quite clearly. In addition, they emphasize the choices of the omniscient manager as directing the movement towards these goals.¹⁵ This dynamic is completely changed with multiplayer role-playing negotiations. While the game will work much more smoothly if the objectives of each player are clear and easy to understand, it is not entirely clear how best to obtain those objectives, and students can apply a variety of possible strategies. In the Constitutional Convention simulation, some students are working to obtain objectives merely to avoid writing more in the final assignment. The form the final document takes to meet as many of their objectives as possible is not entirely clear. In the Cuban Missile Crisis scenario, players are seeking to reach the highest of their ranked objectives while thwarting others from achieving an objective ranked higher than theirs. Some the players do not know the objectives of the other teams—they do not know if the agreement they reach will allow their opponents to achieve objectives ranked higher than their own. Thus, they do not know if they have won or lost the struggle until after the simulation is completed. Students are presented with objectives, but how best to obtain a victory is unclear—just as it can be in real-life struggles.

Quantification Bias: Computer simulations tend to be about quantifiable resource management, and often try to quantify such things as human happiness or satisfaction.¹⁶ While it is possible to create negotiation games with quantification of resources, it adds layers of complexity that will detract from more qualitative factors. In the Constitutional Convention game, I do have some

positions staked out over term lengths, but those are generally broad qualitative conflicts over longer monarchist terms of office or shorter, more democratic terms. When using quantitative measures, such as victory points, to convert qualitative outcomes to units commensurate with quantitative things such as resources and troop levels, a considerable amount of playtesting is necessary to work out fair or appropriate values for victory point scales. As my games rely on secret information and have no replay value for players, one would need a steady stream of players to test different quantification scales. If you can only recreate the events in question with negotiations parsing out exact quantities of anything, the better path is to move to a different historical scenario.

Additional Advice

While simple role-playing negotiation simulations are in all ways superior to computer simulations in the identified problem areas, there is one additional pitfall to look out for in group role-playing games—the students themselves! In an effort to ensure participation in games, I lied to my students in one series of experiments, telling them that their grade for the day would be determined by how well they succeeded at the Cuban Missile Crisis game. My intention was to simply give them all full marks if they participated, and I thought the white lie would help with motivation. To my surprise, one group decided to deconstruct the game. They opted for open negotiations with everyone, putting all their cards on the table by sharing their information and tried to craft a solution where everyone won.

The students ran into some difficulty as they did adhere to the rules regarding limited communications. When the draft agreement came back to the different nations for final ratification, the U.S. military team pointed out that the final agreement would grant them a singular victory and leave every other team finishing second. Rather than take the victory, a new round of negotiations was called to work out the difficulty. Negotiations ultimately ran out of time and the game ended in accidental nuclear war. The class was relieved to learn I had fibbed to them as to the structure of grading for the day.

This incident taught me an important lesson in structuring the grading component for any simulation exercise. One needs to build the motivational structure such that victory in the game reduces

student work load while not linking the final grade to success in the simulation. Of course, one could simply grade participation, but some reflective component would help emphasize the issues involved. For the Constitutional Convention game, I have found the easiest way to do this is to eliminate a part of the required written assignment for each objective obtained. Thus, those who obtained every objective during negotiation have to write much less than those who obtained nothing, but everyone can still obtain full marks for participation. This type of motivational structure seems to minimize compromise for the sake of improving everyone's grades. Though, when I did tie completion of the draft to when class ended, more than one convention leader pointed out that if everyone accepted the current draft, they could all leave, and writing an additional paragraph or two would probably take less time than potential further negotiations and a delayed ratification.

Conclusion

Simple negotiation simulations are an easy way to bring more active learning into an introductory class that, often by necessity, is dominated by more conventional instructional methods such as lecturing. By setting aside one or two class sessions, such simple scenarios can provide new context and depth to the understanding of whatever historical issues the instructor feels are most relevant. These simulations do not require extensive time commitments by the instructors and do not require additional time to be spent outside of class, though Solomon K. Smith's students seem eager to do so with his wargaming sessions.¹⁷ While some may be unhappy with the content focus or skills emphasized, these examples merely show what I have chosen in my scenario construction. The beauty of these simple scenarios is that they are quite easily modified by the instructor to fit their own preferences and classroom needs.

Notes

1. Jeremiah McCall, “Navigating the Problem Space: The Medium of Simulation Games in the Teaching of History,” *The History Teacher* 46, no. 1 (November 2012): 9.
2. Solomon K. Smith, “Pounding Dice into Musket Balls: Using Wargames to Teach the American Revolution,” *The History Teacher* 46, no. 4 (August 2013): 561.
3. Carl A. Anderson and T. Keith Dix, “‘Reacting to the Past’ and the Classics Curriculum: Rome in 44 BCE,” *The Classical Journal* 103, no. 4 (April–May 2008): 449.
4. Stephen M. Shellman, “Active Learning in Comparative Politics: A Mock German Election and Coalition-Formation Simulation,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 34, no. 4 (December 2001): 827-834.
5. James Patrick Kiernan, “The French Revolution: A Simulation Game,” *The History Teacher* 11, no. 4 (August 1978): 515-523.
6. Joel S. Cleland, “A Teaching Simulation on Conflict in Latin America,” *The History Teacher* 27, no. 3 (May 1994): 289-310.
7. Chad Raymond and Kerstin Sorensen, “The Use of a Middle East Crisis Simulation in an International Relations Course,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 41, no. 1 (January 2008): 179-182.
8. Thomas Arnold, “Make Your History Class Hop with Excitement (At Least Once a Semester): Designing and Using Classroom Simulations,” *The History Teacher* 31, no. 2 (February 1998): 193-203.
9. McCall, 12.
10. Ibid., 16-17.
11. Ibid., 16.
12. Ibid., 17.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 17-18.
17. For an interesting account of one instructor’s efforts to use off-the-shelf wargames in his teaching, see Solomon K. Smith’s “Pounding Dice into Musket Balls,” 561.

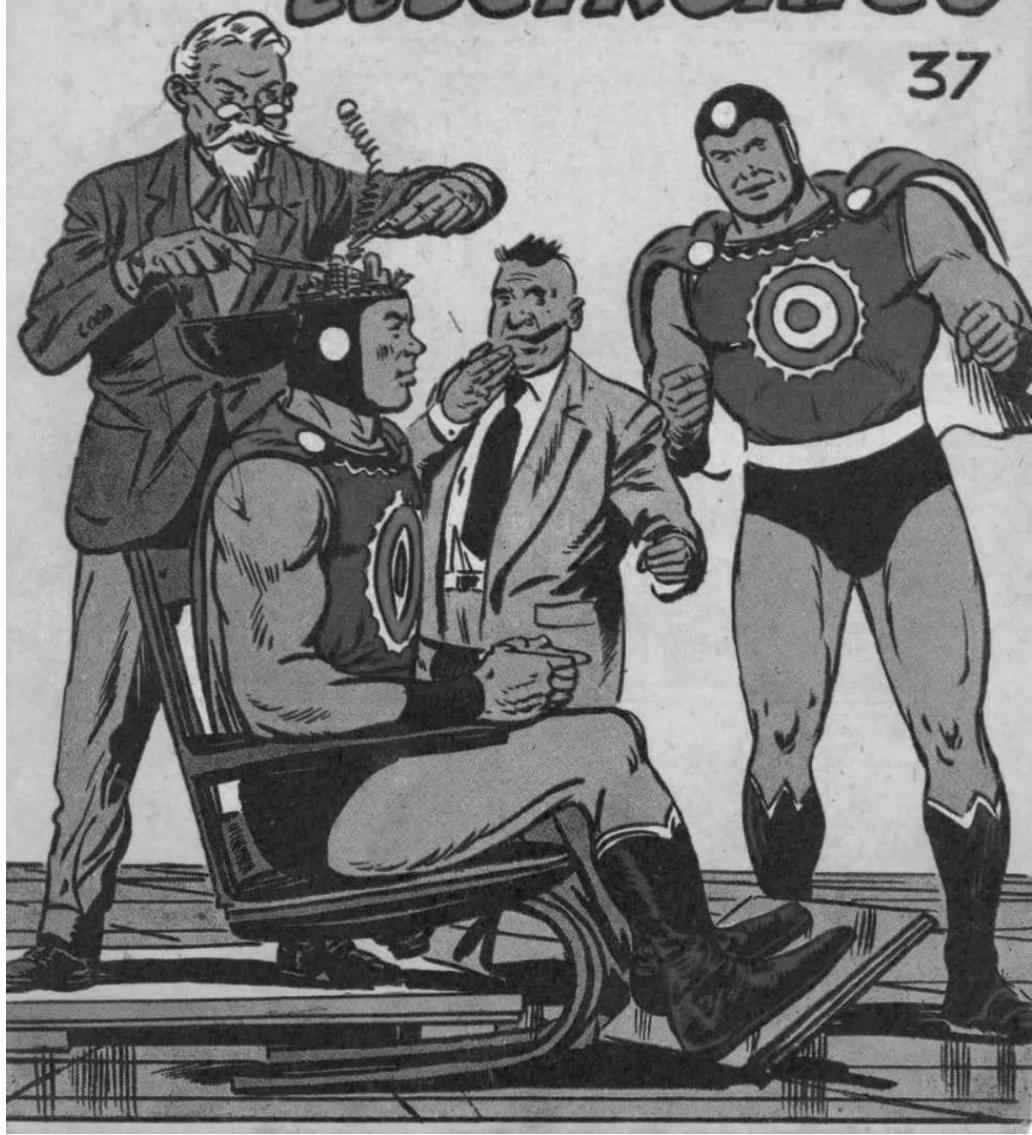


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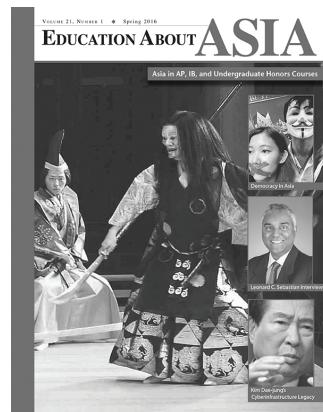






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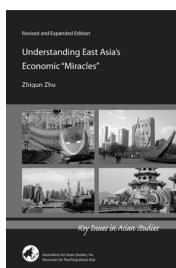
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