How to Play

A Martian seeks out the world's foremost empiricist and says, "I want you to have this remarkable machine. It will help you no end in your work."

"Great," says the empiricist. "What can this machine do?"

"This machine," brags the Martian, "can smell pheromones at forty paces, see around corners, measure distances to neighboring galaxies and pick up the smallest nuances of speech. This little baby is amazing. Every empiricist needs one."

"Hey, that's terrific," says the empiricist. "I'll take two."

"Well," responds the Martian, looking doubtful, "you really only need one. It's such a marvelous android. It's all you'll ever need to measure any aspect of the world around you. With it you can record any and all the

occurrences and data that a human can record – times ten! The information this little zombie 'droid collects will keep a thousand empiricists busy for hundreds, maybe even thousands, of years. Why order two?"

Now it is the empiricist's turn to look puzzled. "Of course I need two," she says. "One machine to gather the data you mentioned (and then I'll take the machine apart) and one to study ME."

"Why would you want to dismember the android? And why do you want a machine to study YOU?" cries the shocked Martian.

"I'm an empiricist by nature!" is the reply. "Therefore, I want to know why it is that I *can* make use of this machine of yours. I want to find out how and why this contraption of yours works. Then I want to understand exactly how and why it can smell pheromones at forty paces. Why do I find a contraption that can see around corners, useful? Why is it that I am able to learn how to measure distances to neighboring galaxies? And why do I want to measure those distances? Oh, and one more thing, Martian. How and why is it that I can pick up the smallest nuances of speech?"

"Oh, my dear friend," says the Martian, "You are a strange kind of empiricist. Too uselessly pie-in-the-sky by half. My machine cannot help you measure yourself! God only knows what kind of a machine you need to take your own dimensions. Perhaps a merry-go-round."

"Then I can't have the second machine?" asks the empiricist.

"My mistake," says the Martian. "You may have two machines. You see, where I come from we call philosophers who speculate about the workings of the machine, rationalists. Now I see that all humans are empiricists. Even philosophers."

Weird Tit-for-tat

I tell the apocryphal tale of the Martian and the empiricist in order to explain the impulse, no, the obsession, behind my developing the theory of Weird Tit-for-tat. For ups and downs, time spent on the problem of the socialization of egoists has been a merry-go-round.

A fair empirical question for any one of us congenital speculators to ask about the human machine is this: If we're so selfish, how come we are able

to socialize? How is it possible that people share resources with each other every day? That's certainly the empirical problem I'd place before the tin toes of the Martian's android.

Your local economist wants to know the answer to this question. Knowing precisely when and why people will act as one and share resources will make better charts and generate more statistics and give investors real predictability about market economies. Your local biologist wants to know the answer too. Knowing when and why people will act as one and share resources will make for better understanding of animal psychology and the interrelatedness of living things. We mustn't forget the sociologists and political scientists, either. They also want the answer.

Do you know what? Everybody wants the answer. We simply fascinate ourselves.

So let's cut to the chase. Let's send our imaginations out on a rampage. Let's hypothesize something outrageous – that socialization occurs because humans are instinctive naturally disposed game players.

Next, homing in on the crux of the matter, we want to know whether there is a mother of all games, a matrix game, a game from which all other games spring. I think there is. But then, so do many game theorists. Still, perhaps the game theorists haven't cottoned on to the "matrix game" just yet.

Robert Axelrod, a respected and renowned game theorist,[1] is partial to a two-optioned game called, simply, Tit-for-tat. But a major problem with Axelrod's preferred social game of Tit-for-tat lies not in the stability of the evolutionary game but in what he says about cooperation: "Usually one thinks of cooperation as a good thing," Axelrod states in *The Evolution of Cooperation*. "This is the natural approach when one takes the perspective of the players themselves. After all, mutual cooperation is good for both players in a Prisoner's Dilemma" (125).[2] I ask, what does the way one feels have to do with the way a game is constructed?

The game of Tit-for-tat revolves around the concept of cooperation. The individual player makes a choice: do I go along with the other one, or do I not? Tit-for-tat has two moves, cooperate or don't cooperate. Cooperation

often does seem like a good thing – for a person. The problem is this: what's good for a person isn't great for a game. My objection to Tit-for-tat, as described, is fairly straightforward. Why on earth would any game move be a good thing? Heavens, it's just a game move.

There's no good or bad in Weird Tit-for-tat. Players of Weird Tit-for-tat – the game of our lives – frown on the psychologically loaded word cooperate. Cooperation is a muddy, unhelpful concept, fraught with complexity and contradiction. Players of the game of life choose to dominate, comply or defect, and they don't care whether these actions are carried out *cooperatively*, or through *coercion*. The game still plays.

Even in the game of your life, the fundamentals apply, and particularly the unvested standing of game rules. Why should any specific move in a game be "good"? Well, if a strategy works – if it does what the player wants it to do – I suppose the move is a good one. But game moves in themselves are neither good nor bad. They are nothing but moves that determine what is possible and what is not. Is it good to run to first base? Is it good to pass Go and collect two hundred dollars? Is it good to play your four aces?

Good-schmud. Game moves are disinterested. The private reasons that motivate players to select certain moves are *not* disinterested, of course. A player's motivation can be altruistic, or spiteful. And so forth. In time, the game can reveal what a player's motivations are, but, in themselves, the game moves are fixed and inflexible.

Here are some "good" players making their game moves. To try to get a team player from second base to third, Yankee shortstop Derek Jeter bunts the pitch. Jeter runs to first base, even though, being an easy out, he hasn't got much chance of getting there safely. His team member, now on third base, is only one move away from home plate. Jeter sacrifices his own hitting prestige for a team win. That's altruism.

You pass Go and collect two hundred dollars in Monopoly, and immediately share your haul with another player who would otherwise be out of the game. That's altruism. In poker, you play your four aces, queen high, because you want to buy baby a new pair of shoes. How nice are you?!

But in themselves the games – baseball, Monopoly and poker – are not nice. Nor are they naughty. They're games.

Matt Ridley cautions us not to be misled by our morality when we consider how the social game is played. In *The Origins of Virtue*, Ridley says, "The fact that you (and the other player) are both being noble in cooperating is entirely irrelevant to the question. What we are seeking is the logically 'best' action in a moral vacuum, not the 'right' thing to do" (54).

"Ah so," says the curious one. If the logically "best action" is what we are seeking, let's then get rid of all forms of "cooperating." What we want is an ordinary game that isn't easily flummoxed by naughty or nice, nor endlessly qualified and re-qualified by iteration, circumstances and motivations. That game, I argue, is Weird Tit-for-tat.

My theory of Weird Tit-for-tat is based on the idea that socialization emerges from our predisposition for game playing. As we know from our extensive experience with games, game playing is always competitive. Forget cooperative. Forget uncooperative. On a grand scale, these two concepts are less than meaningless. Competitive! That's the word to keep in mind.

Morally neutral Weird Tit-for-tat offers competitive players one more "move" than the game theorists' Tit-for-tat, which has just two strategies: cooperate or not-cooperate. Weird Tit-for-tat has three strategies: dominate, comply and defect. In the game of our lives, survival is the grand prize that tops all the mini-prizes. To survive, you have to compete with others who want the same things as you do.

As a sexually reproducing animal, you face a catch in the game of life. Winning is good, but only to a point. Since it takes two players to make one more player, you have to have several winners to keep the lineage viable. If you are to win, others must win too (unless you have plans to clone yourself). Your innate ability to socialize not only helps you and others to survive; it also helps you and your competitive offspring to accrue many choices of mates.

A game with three moves has got to be better than a game with just two moves, at least in terms of competitive maneuverability.

What does it mean to be socially competitive?

I argue that individuals are socially competitive. It's important to understand clearly, though, that being socially competitive does not mean some humans are dominating hammers, always pounding each other into the sand, while others are relentlessly slavish, always ready to let the other one go first, eat first or climb first up the ladder. Nor does it mean that a majority of humans can eschew society, defect from the game and never have to interact with each other at all. After all, the babies you know are not of virgin birth.

Being socially competitive requires you to use all your innate social resources for social strategizing: sometimes you are the hammer, or the boss, as it were; sometimes you're the friendly charmer, all smiles and chuckles and eager to please; sometimes you're the loner, the one who doesn't play baseball (because you're lousy at it). In playing the game of life, which I've called Weird Tit-for-tat, you invoke all three strategies: dominate, comply and defect. And you play them so fluidly and expertly that sometimes you don't even notice what's happening.

Your awareness of your game moves ebbs and flows. Here, for example, are three fluid social moves, all involving one unpopular man. Upon first encountering the infamous Holocaust denier Ernst Zundel, you give him a friendly, compliant nod. Later, after you've heard his hate schtick, you look shocked and appalled, as though the expression on your face should be enough to silence him. Finally, because – short of terminating him – you personally cannot permanently silence him in the midst of civil society, you turn away and refuse to listen any more. You've used three quick and different game moves in succession. You have played comply, dominate and defect, in that order. The ebb and flow of your game follows the urges of your emotion-soaked intellect.

Are there game imperatives?

One of the imperatives of Weird Tit-for-tat is that you will play all three moves whenever you interact with other people. You may not always be conscious of the details of your game; you just play it as you see fit at the

time. You're fairly sensitive to your social status. You are also sensitive to your feelings. You play to feel happy. So does your opponent. If nothing would make your opponent happier than nailing your hide to a wall, you've got trouble. Amen.

If you are to be a successful social competitor, you cannot forego using the three strategies. You cannot play with only one, or two, and still flourish in public situations.

There is something else. Weird Tit-for-tat is un-sexed, or, if you will, gender neutral. It is adaptable and completely responsive to various situations and different environments. No matter how tightly programmed you are to socialize and to play Weird Tit-for-tat, "the outside finds a way in and the inside responds."[3] On "the inside" (of your head), you devise your social strategy in response to specific incidents or particular circumstances that are external or on "the outside" (not inside your head). Even a delusional person has to cope with external circumstances.

The circumstances that might make a particular man a king can suddenly change. The circumstances that might make a particular woman a president can suddenly change. The game of our lives is *always* played within an external framework that will have an impact on the individual's choice of strategies.

It may be possible to calculate what move a certain individual will make under certain external conditions, but that's a very hard thing to do. The Nash Equilibrium[4] and Nash's formula of arbitration are helpful for economists and mediators who seek appropriate payoffs for competing individuals, but mathematical equilibria cannot fully explain our so-called irrational behaviour, that which we indulge in, every day. Good luck to those who try to explain the way we play Weird Tit-for-tat. Not everyone responds to situations in the same way, despite being advised of their best move in any given situation. We are individuals with customized responses.[5]

So, taken together, the individual's personal psyche and the individual's total environment[6] complicate the social game enormously. The variety of individual psyches and environmental or "outside" circumstances is, now

and forever, the spanner being thrown holus-bolus into the frenzied social game. Responding to unexpected circumstances beyond your control, or beyond your imagining, makes life interesting! The single and only non-variable feature of social life is the game, Weird Tit-for-tat.

Can I play with you? Forming a group = Dominate-Comply interface

All players of Weird Tit-for-tat have three unvested (morally neutral) moves to choose from: dominate, comply and defect. We need at least two players to begin the game, but there can be any number of players.

In the style of Rock, Paper, Scissors, these are the combinations that our two sample players, Gus and Lucy, might run up against.

> Gus picks Dominate; Lucy picks Dominate
> Gus and Lucy = Dominate-Dominate interface

Both players want control of the game. To get control, or perhaps to keep control, Gus and Lucy may try even-steven trades wherein each feels certain that the benefits of the trade are equal and neither side is submitting to the other. Or they may fight. Or they may plot to fight. For example, in North America, First Nations (Gus) and Europeans (Lucy) once had a Dominate-Dominate interface. In this case, the environment had a significant role to play. Starvation, settlement and smallpox did more to force Aboriginal people into compliance with Euro culture than the Euros' domination of them in battle and/or trade.

If we reverse the positions of Gus and Lucy in this scenario, we still have the same interface, Dominate-Dominate.

> Lucy picks Dominate, Gus picks Comply
> Gus and Lucy = Dominate-Comply interface,
> i.e., the culture club interface[7]

Since many compliors can submit to a few dominators, this is the "grouping-up" option – in other words, a complex society. Lucy, in taking

control of the situation, has the language and style that the group will copy. As one of a number of compliors, Gus fits in with Lucy's manners. He is polite, à la mode of Lucy, and he tries never to offend her. In exchange for his compliance and loyalty, Lucy protects Gus and tries to keep him safe. Lucy knows that if she doesn't do well by Gus, there is a good chance he will defect from their relationship, or go for control of it.

C**aution:** Although a Dominate-Comply interface produces order, stability and publicly shared meaning, this interface is always in a state of flux underneath its stereotypical manners. Culture clubs are always forming or being reformed, and other smaller culture clubs exist within them. A member of another culture club peers in and sees nothing but sameness within the group, but that's not the case. Individuals inside a culture club are still playing Weird Tit-for-tat at every interface, despite their allegiance to a larger culture club.

Gus picks Dominate; Lucy picks Defect
Gus and Lucy = Dominate-Defect interface,
potentially an endgame

One player wishes to keep playing, but the other player quits. Game over. For example, think of an invented zero-sum game such as a ski race. Lucy decides not to enter the annual cross-country ski race at Jasper. She seeks a personal endgame insofar as cross-country skiing is concerned. There is no more win or lose for a retired Lucy, even though Gus, who has never beaten her in this race, would like to keep competing against her. If Lucy retires from competitive cross-country skiing, no matter how much Gus would like to race against her again, he cannot. Endgame defeats domination. The skiing competition is over unless Gus can find a way to drive Lucy back into the game.

Gus picks Comply; Lucy picks Comply
Gus and Lucy = Comply-Comply interface

Compliors obey dominator in the form
of a "distant hegemony"

The Comply-Comply interface is neutral. It describes good citizens who respect the rule of law, as well as bad mobsters who respect the rules of the godfather.

A Comply-Comply interface sets out the first on-going condition of the classic Prisoner's Dilemma, whereby no matter what the prisoners do in relation to each other, they operate under the eye of a greater authority that demands their compliance.

Gus picks Comply; Lucy picks Defect
Gus and Lucy = Comply-Defect interface,
or endgame

Gus is willing to give in to Lucy, to do what she says, to follow her lead. Lucy, stubborn and wayward, will not play. The Defect move always signals that a player wants the contest and the relationship to end. A corresponding player who opts to comply will allow the contest to end, with no trouble. Being compliant, Gus agrees to sever the relationship and let Lucy defect.

What about one player forcing another player(s) to act against their will? Happens all the time (and it's a serious loss of freedom).

As seen in the Dominate-Defect interface, a player who opts to dominate when the other has opted to defect may go so far as to take prisoners and force intentional defectors to become reluctant compliors. Warring states are well known for forcing their enemies, at least those they have not killed, into abject compliance. Ensuring that a dominator will never fight against you again is a part of war strategy. In such an instance, the defeated enemy is a reluctant complior.

There can be reluctant dominators too. In both the Dominate-Defect and Comply-Defect interfaces, a dominator or complior can force a potential defector into picking domination and getting back into play.

Forcing a defected dominator back into the game is a prominent theme in many North American television dramas and films.

Points to ponder

Even a child knows that Weird Tit-for-tat shifts from single individuals to homogeneous group formations through a Dominate-Comply interface. The question, "Can I play with you?" is as old as humans. Willing compliance means friendliness. "You can be the teacher, Lucy, and all of us will be your students. Then I'll be the teacher, OK? And then everyone else gets a turn to be teacher, OK?"

There *is* such a thing as forced domination. Your followers insist that you lead them in a certain situation. You don't want to be the teacher, but your friends want consistency and fairness, and they insist that you take your turn as the class dictator. You don't want to be the king, but your brother has misbehaved and Parliament insists that you wear the crown. You don't want to lead your company into battle, but your troops applaud you for being such a good commander, so there you are, on the front line.

Forced compliance (wherein you absolutely insist that another follows your wishes) ranges from ordinary to horrific. For example, it is typical to make your child listen to your instructions about road safety, whereas it is horrific to sell (or to have to sell) your child into slavery.

The same range applies to adults and compliance. Willing compliance is friendliness. "Hey, Bob, can you teach me how to drive a stick shift?" Forced compliance (you must obey or you will be punished) runs the gamut from the ordinary, which would be complying with traffic laws, to the horrific, which would be complying with your kidnapper or your insane colonel.

A Comply-Comply interface is part of culture clubs. Many individuals willingly comply, not only with each other but also with an old, established culture club. For instance, citizens generally find themselves in the Comply-Comply interface with regard to their country's foreign policy or major religions. In these cases, a not-present authority regulates external relations for the supposed benefit of all members within the club. In terms of trade, nothing highlights and identifies various regional culture clubs within a

country as the way, and for whom, a federal government regulates trade and tariffs.

The means of gaining homogenization within a group is the "mannering process"; thus, the mannering process creates culture clubs.

Weird Tit-for-tat is the game of your life. It works like a charm.

Notes

1. Robert Axelrod is the Arthur W. Bromage Distinguished University Professor of Political Science and Public Policy at the University of Michigan (See http://www-personal.umich.edu/~axe/).

2. The Prisoner's Dilemma puts two people within a stronger culture club wherein they try to follow the rules of the stronger club and still do well for themselves in smaller, weaker clubs. According to Axelrod, "The Prisoner's Dilemma is an elegant embodiment of the problem of achieving mutual cooperation….In the Prisoner's Dilemma, two individuals can each either cooperate or defect….(The best strategy at the tournament for playing the Prisoner's Dilemma) was attained by the simplest of all strategies, Tit-for-tat. This strategy is simply one of cooperating on the first move and then doing whatever the other player did on the preceding move. Thus Tit-for-tat is a strategy of cooperation based on reciprocity" (*The Complexity of Cooperation: Agent-Based Models of Competition and Collaboration*, 15, online at http://pscs.physics.lsa.umich.edu/Software/CC/CC1.html).

3. This sentiment is courtesy of David S. Moore, Professor of Psychology at Pitzer College and author of *The Dependent Gene*.

4. Morton D. Davis describes the following situation to explain the Nash arbitration scheme, based on the Nash Equilibrium. ("If there is a set of strategies with the property that no player can benefit by changing her strategy while the other players keep their strategies unchanged, then that set of strategies and the corresponding payoffs constitute the Nash Equilibrium.")

   "Suppose a rich woman and a poor woman can get a million dollars if they can agree on how to share it between them; if they fail to agree, they get nothing. In such a case the Nash arbitration scheme would generally give the rich woman a larger portion than it would give the poor woman, because of a difference in their utility functions…. The relative attractiveness of $1 and $10 to the poor woman would be like the relative attractiveness of $1 million and $10 million to the woman who is very wealthy…Under these conditions, Nash's suggested outcome would be that the rich woman gets two-

thirds of the million dollars and the poor woman only a third" (*Game Theory: A Nontechnical Introduction*, 122-123).

What if, halfway through the proceedings, the women decide they would rather defect (get zero dollars) than cooperate with the arbitrator? There is no mathematic accounting for this seemingly irrational conduct. The women, according to all theorems, should hang in there and get their best payoff from the situation. But neither woman does that. The rich woman feels bad. She has suffered enough humiliation from the arbitrator. Let the poor woman have the money, she thinks. The poor woman is angry. She thinks that the arbitrator and the formula are ridiculous. Irrationally, from a mathematical perspective, the poor woman would rather have no money at all than comply with such an unfair system. Both women decide they will be happier without the money. We play competitively, yes. Playing competitively means making full use of our three choices; we can always defect if we want to. If we're free, we don't have to comply with unfair schemes. We play to feel happy. That's a difficult state to calculate.

5. See Antonio Damasio and his description of customized emotions in *Descartes' Error, The Feeling of What Happens* and *Looking for Spinoza*.

6. Please note: Environment is not just for geography and topography and weather. Environment is contextual, including all the unimagined and chaotic circumstances and beliefs that may surround and invade the mind of the individual player at any given moment.

7. A culture club is a group of people who have a shared public purpose. Within a culture club, whether the individual who assumes the role of dominator is great or small, good or evil, the compliance of other individuals to the will and style of the dominator creates a mannered society. For details, see Minsos, S., *Culture Clubs: the art of living together.*