Comments by students on the game

"The Dodovirus"

Presented at the Workshop Worldviews and Values in Synthetic Biology

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Gameplay

As a group of 6, we had to select characters to embody and couldn't keep the 9-10 characters intended for the game. Thus, we left aside the singer and the virus who could hardly back positions, whereas we took into account the fate and the lobbying of respectively the deaf and the member of the transdodoist sect. We structured our game around the two extreme positions of the didactor and the dodo leader with the diplomats seeking an arrangement between those rivals, while the searcher and the social sciences expert brought elements during the debate.

We rapidly come to a consensus, which seemed to all the best solution –or at least, the less unpleasant one. Yet, the dictator and the dodo leader being two stubborn leaders when it comes to the long-term survival of their species, the consensus was reached after long debates on important questions, like the possibility for the Dodos to build their own civilization without being threatened by Humans, the fate of deaf people or the possibility for Humans to lead further research on living Dodos so as to find a solution to the dodo-virus or find possibilities to address major health problems (Dodos could be, as we said, a possible solution cancer e.g.).

As an obvious observation was that human beings and Dodos living on a same territory were threatening each other –even if none of them had evil intentions–, we could split the oekoumen in two distinct and distant parts: like for the *Tordesillas* treaty, one of the powers would get a hemisphere and the other power would get the second one. For practical reasons (need of maritime separations between species or the fact that southern hemisphere is almost fully covered by seas and oceans), we decided that Dodos should get the Americas while human beings should occupy Europe, Asia and Africa.

The main opposition to this idea expressed by the two warmonger leaders was the difficulty to have guarantees that they wouldn't be attacked or threatened by the others: Human beings remaining highly vulnerable when a dodo is close to them and fearing this solution would offer the possibility to Dodos to develop rapidly and to plan a mass invasion of continents occupied by men while Dodos could legitimately expect a massive attack from Humans once the separation would be acted; as we assumed that human beings had still a technological advance on the newly-born Dodo societies, it would have been quite easy for Humans to launch atom bombs on Americas.

The best way to secure peace for the diplomats was then to make feel to both parts the advantages they would gain in such a treaty. We left the issues around monitoring outside the scope of our debates, although several ideas were on study: maritime and aircraft (Dodos can fly!) patrols in Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, especially in the Bering Sea, construction of walls along the coasts (like the former Atlantic wall to prevent a D-Day by Dodos –we're the sixth of June). Yet, the existence of powerful and numerous military forces along their borders could hardly make the Dodos feel comfortable.

However, having their own areas would allow Dodos to develop their civilizations easier and, though their safety relies on promises by human beings, they could hardly feel more threatened than in the current situation. Moreover, a security factor for both Dodos and Humans as well as a possible solution to the biological antagonism between the two of them would be to allow searchers to make further researches so as to find a vaccine or a long-term protection against the dodo-virus' activation (of course, the mass murder of Dodos –though backed by the dictator– is not seen as such a solution). Yet, as Dodos became a sensitive and thinking people, they can no longer accept to be seen and treated as laboratory animals. We came to an extreme –and quite amoral– compromise, which would be that Dodos would name –or condemn– individuals to be sacrificed to the science works made by human beings (as the Athenians had to deliver human tributes to Cretans on a yearly basis so as to feed the Minotaur).

On the other hand, deaf Humans would come on a regularly basis –or live among the Dodos– so as to maintain a link between the two species and eventually help Dodos upgrading their civilizations.

At the end, some isolated areas –like the Antarctic or Australia– could become giant labs for reconciling Humans and Dodos and develop urban models making Humans and Dodos compatible.

What is learned from this story regarding synthetic biology:

The story teaches us that:
- Synthetic biology outcomes are not value-neutral objects. As "living tools" they have a moral dimension but it is highly ambiguous: either they are weak and dependent and require constant care and concern from us; either they are robust and independent and require our vigilance as much as our political imagination for organizing the cohabitation between them and us. You don't mess with microbes.

- Synthetic biology products can be useful and deliver benefits provided that our cohabitation with them be thought and politically regulated. Political choices must come first. The mitigation and risk and maximization of benefits can occur only after societal and political choices are made.

- The story is somewhat about containment. It shows in a rather dramatic way that containment is not a technical fix only; it is also a political choice. Thus the solution of containment does not dispense us from considering the moral and political dimensions of our cohabitation with synthetically engineered biological beings.