

# Reciprocity Game

## Dr. Paul Welch

The purpose of this role-playing game is to give you a small taste of what is required to live in the sort of sociopolitical formation often called “Big Man societies.” The classic versions of these societies are found in highland New Guinea, and this game is a highly simplified and stereotypical version of a New Guinea Big Man society. The most significantly unrealistic things about the game are that it has no gender roles (so everyone gets to play by the same rules, and you’ll get married in the abstract rather than getting married to a specific other student), there is no way for you to die, and you won’t actually have to live with the smell of the pigs.

The structure of the game is that everyone starts out as a child, and you each must figure out how to lead a successful life.

At the end of the game, I’ll ask you who you thought played the game best.

**I. Start** You begin as a child. All children are given 4 pigs at birth, so you start with 4 pigs. Pigs being pigs, it’s hard to transport them; you cannot walk around with all of them in your pocket. If you need to go somewhere in the community to talk to someone, make arrangements for someone to look after your pigs “at home” (i.e., at your desk). But you may take one pig at a time with you, to lend to someone else (or bring back home a pig you were lent somewhere else). Anyone caught cheating will have two pigs taken away.

### II. Puberty

- A. In order to undergo the initiation into “marriageable” status (i.e., puberty rites), you have to give away at least 6 pigs. That is, you must actually have 6 pigs in your hands, and must hand them out, one by one, as follows:
  - 1. 4 pigs (at least) you will give to individuals you name; 1 pig per person.
  - 2. 2 pigs will be sacrificed to the Professor God, an otiose deity (i.e., a distant and unfathomable deity that only rarely gets involved in your daily affairs and hardly ever responds to requests for information or assistance).
- B. After you have distributed and sacrificed the 6 pigs, you will receive 2 pigs from relatives (in practice, the Professor God will hand them to you).
- C. After you have undergone this ritual, you will receive (and must wear) a Puberty Purple Necklace, which indicates that you are now eligible to get married.

### III. Marriage

- A. Marriage is the most important thing that will happen in your life, and in recognition of its importance the requirements for getting married are quite onerous. Because marriage is a contract between kin groups it necessitates a transfer of pigs between the two sides of the contract. Further, to demonstrate your economic prowess and hence suitability as a mate, you must give away some pigs to other people, too, and you must sacrifice some pigs to the Professor God. In all, to get married you must distribute at least 10 pigs, as follows:

1. 5 pigs (at least) you will give to your in-laws (in practice, these will be collected by the Professor God).
  2. 3 pigs (at least) go to individuals you name.
  3. 2 pigs are sacrificed to the Professor God.
- B. Because this is a contract between two kin groups, after you distribute your pigs, you will get pigs from your in-laws. Unfortunately for you, marriage is an asymmetrical relation. Even though you gave the in-laws 5 pigs you only get 3 from them (in practice, the Professor God will hand them to you).
- C. To show to the world at large that you have successfully passed into the status of Married Adult, you will receive (and proudly wear) a Grown-up Green Necklace.

**IV. Reproduction. It is important to have children who will grow up and take care of you when you get to be a respected elder.**

- A. When you do reproduce, you will proudly announce this fact to the world at large, by holding a Birth Ritual at which—you guessed it—you give away pigs:
1. 4 pigs (at least) go to individuals you name.
  2. 2 pigs are sacrificed to the Professor God.
- B. Because reproduction is important for the society, society will reciprocate by giving you 8 pigs (in practice, the Professor God will hand them to you). The community also gives 4 pigs to the newborn child, but these will be kept in trust by the Professor God (don't complain, it's how you got those 4 pigs at the start of the game).
- C. Each time you hold the Birth Ritual, you will receive an Old Gold Necklace. You and your spouse are infinitely fertile, and can have as many children as you want. Of course, each time you have another child, you must give away at least 6 pigs.

**V. Other things that can happen to you during your life.**

- A. Hostile neighbors sometimes launch raids that carry away some of your pigs. This happens without warning. Unfortunately, you live in a weak village and have no ability to retaliate in kind.
- B. If you think someone has stolen a pig (or pigs) from you, you may accuse that person of theft. Guilt or innocence is determined by popular opinion. If the community agrees with your accusation, you get the stolen pig(s) back plus 1 additional "penalty" pig for each one stolen. If the accused party is deemed to be innocent, however, there is no penalty (except the ill will of the person you falsely accused, and everyone else's annoyance at you for not being able to keep track of your own pigs).
- C. Witchcraft sometimes kills pigs. If you accuse someone of witchcraft, the community decides whether the accused is innocent or guilty. If the accused is guilty, that person loses ALL their pigs and you get at least half of them, with the rest distributed as the community sees fit. If you accused someone falsely, however, half your pigs will be given to the falsely accused person.
- D. If someone borrowed one or more pigs from you but did not pay them back as expected, you can present your grievance to the rest of the community, who will settle the issue and decide what, if any, penalty to impose.

- E. Pigs reproduce. Unfortunately for you, the timing and size of the litter is unpredictable; it all depends on when and where the Professor God delivers piglets (hint: don't expect your pigs to reproduce unless you have at least a Puberty necklace).

### **Notes for the Professor God:**

Your job during the game will NOT be to answer questions; let students argue about the rules themselves. They may wind up deciding on an interpretation that is clearly contradicted by the written rules, but societies often practice rules that differ from those they enunciate.

You will have to distribute the necklaces as required, and receive and distribute pigs as people pass through their life-cycle rites (and occasional "piglets" as the pigs reproduce). This turns out to be very time-consuming. You'll need an assistant god (either bring an assistant along or make use of someone who loses all their pigs early in the game).

If you run out of pigs, or decide to shake things up, conduct one of those "raids by hostile groups," or introduce a 'swine flu' that kills off a bunch of pigs. Or just steal some pigs; you are a God and can get away with anything.

What were the results? Here's a report on the first section that played the game:

It was a big success! They had one witchcraft trial (guilty, lost all pigs) and one theft trial (innocent, accuser shamed). One person lost all pigs and was made an "assistant god" to help with all the demands for pigs and necklaces. Everyone else attained marriage, although some remained childless. One group – a self-formed clan – accumulated many pigs, so many they not only each had lots of kids (including triplets), but requested permission to become polygamous in order to have more helpers with the pigs.

Class decided the "winners" had neither too few nor too many pigs. Too many was just "too difficult" to take care of, and created problems.

In our experience so far, almost everyone gets married, and most reproduce at least once. Only a few students adopt the bump-on-a-log strategy of permanent infancy. Kin groupings that are in effect clans (or perhaps endogamous kindreds) form in many classes, sometimes even explicitly identifying themselves as clans. These groups really clean house, with every member reproducing multiple times within the 40 minutes of game play. Some individuals decide polygamy is a good idea, with as many as three marriages for a single individual. Students in at least one section requested the rules be changed (the Professor God remained mute) to let them marry actual persons, so that one spouse could take care of the pigs while the other spouse went around arranging deals. Two sections had theft accusations, and one had a witchcraft accusation. The end-of-game discussions about "who was most successful" were lively, with discussion of what the meaning of "success in life" ought to be. Most students initially assume that success means most pigs and/or most children. But on being queried about their reasons for that assumption—the rules do NOT say what success is—opinion shifts to a more varied and nuanced set of goals. Except for a few unsociable students, most really liked the game.

Sources of materials: For little piggies, try a local toy store (which may be cheap but may not have the quantity you'll need) or see <http://www.realcooltoys.com/littlepiggies.html> which sells them for \$3.99/dozen (they may give you an academic discount if you call them). You'll need at least 15 per

person on average (with 360 for 25 students we ran short a couple times). For the necklaces, [www.mardigrasbeads.com](http://www.mardigrasbeads.com) is a cheap source, but they may not be able to guarantee the correct mix of colors, and don't try ordering right before or right after Mardi Gras. You can also make necklaces out of ribbon, which is very cheap but will require some time to cut and tie/staple the necklaces. Quantities: for a class of 30 you'll need around 35 puberty necklaces (I had one student go through puberty twice, which I really didn't understand), 35-40 marriage necklaces (some students thought polygamy was a good idea), and around 144 children necklaces (some students reproduce *a lot*).