

puter game that we hoped would eliminate some of the complexities of life and would give us a straightforward answer about whether people have a tendency to keep doors open for too long. We called it the “door game.” For a location, we chose a dark, dismal place—a cavern that even Xiang Yu’s army would have been reluctant to enter.

MIT’S EAST CAMPUS dormitory is a daunting place. It is home to the hackers, hardware enthusiasts, oddballs, and general misfits (and believe me—it takes a serious misfit to be a misfit at MIT). One hall allows loud music, wild parties, and even public nudity. Another is a magnet for engineering students, whose models of everything from bridges to roller coasters can be found everywhere. (If you ever visit this hall, press the “emergency pizza” button, and a short time later a pizza will be delivered to you.) A third hall is painted completely black. A fourth has bathrooms adorned with murals of various kinds: press the palm tree or the samba dancer, and music, piped in from the hall’s music server (all downloaded legally, of course), comes on.

One afternoon a few years ago, Kim, one of my research assistants, roamed the hallways of East Campus with a laptop tucked under her arm. At each door she asked the students whether they’d like to make some money participating in a quick experiment. When the reply was in the affirmative, Kim entered the room and found (sometimes only with difficulty) an empty spot to place the laptop.

As the program booted up, three doors appeared on the computer screen: one red, the second blue, and the third green. Kim explained that the participants could enter any of the three rooms (red, blue, or green) simply by clicking on