

San Splendido

A free-form game for military language training by Tom Mouat.

Introduction.

The aim of this game is to provide a simple and competitive free-form game to assist in military language training. The intention is to provide a break from normal classroom instruction to allow students to practice their language and vocabulary skills.

Outline.

The game design uses the Matrix Game methodology invented by Chris Engle in 1982. Chris is a psychologist who wanted to design a game that did not rely on complex book of rules, but a simple and free-flowing system that would allow the players to try anything, within a simple framework.

In essence all you have to do is say what you want to do, and why. The other players then get a chance to interject any reasons they might think of in support or against the argument, and the Umpire comes to a judgement as to how likely that is to succeed. If necessary, a dice is rolled to determine success or failure in order to keep the narrative moving along and avoid getting bogged down.

Example.

Background: There are media reports that a Drugs Cartel operating in the area have kidnapped a local village activist and are holding him hostage. The Governor has ordered that he is rescued!

Argument: Army Player says "I am going to move a Squad in my APC to the village and speak to the locals, with the aim of getting actionable intelligence." Drug Cartel Player says "I don't think the locals will want to talk to you, because they are afraid of the Drugs Cartel, so you won't get any useful information."

Resolution: The facilitator says "There are no objections to the movement, so the squad and APC counter are now placed at the village, along with some villager counters. The Army argument had a few grammatical errors (using "Tank" instead of "APC" and the negative word for "native tribesmen" instead of "locals" or "villagers") but in general it was pretty clear and understandable. The Cartel counter-argument also made sense, both logically and grammatically, so I'm giving the Army an overall -3 (-1 for the grammatical errors, -1 for the good point made by the Cartel Player and an additional -1 because he made his counter-argument correctly). The Army player rolls 2 x 6-Sided dice hoping to score 7 or more (the universal score for success) and rolls an 8, modified by the -3 to a final score of 5. Therefore, he fails. The locals are more frightened of the Drugs Cartel and don't give the Army any useful information.

Rules of Play.

Overall Intention: This isn't intended to be a fiercely competitive game where the players fight tooth and claw to win and crush the other players in utter defeat. The intention is to create a fun, narrative story exploring the use of language, and it is perfectly possible for all of the players to achieve at least some of their objectives in the game.

Rounds: Play happens in rounds. Each round, every player takes it in turn to make a single argument. When all players have made an argument, the facilitator gets one of the players to sum up what happened that round, and then play moves on to another round.

Objectives: Each player should be given a card with their personal objectives on it. This should be something simple and examples are included below. You could even have a player representing "*the spirit of drama*", whose role in the game is to make things go wrong for the players in a way that makes the story more exciting!

Arguments: Arguments consist of a simple statement that is output based "I want to do an action, with the aim achieving something", supported (if necessary) with additional reasons why they might succeed if you think there is a chance of failure. So, if you want to make an argument that you "*move a squad to the bridge and establish at roadblock, with the aim of preventing the movement of the hostage by vehicle*", this is straightforward and should

automatically succeed, unless there were some really strong reasons why it might not happen. The other players then get a chance to make additional arguments either in support of the original argument (Pros) or against it (Cons). They should take it in turns and only present their reasons once (otherwise it will degenerate into a real argument!). This is not a debate – they get their chance to make their point, then the facilitator makes a judgement, a dice is rolled (if necessary) and the story moves on.

Dice: We use dice in the game to add some random chance and also to keep the narrative moving along (and avoid getting bogged down with bickering). The dice used are normal 6-sided dice and the basic score to succeed is a score of 7 or more (this provides a *narrative bias* to the story because this is actually a 58% chance of success). The facilitator should add points for good arguments, correct use of language, idiom and grammar, and deduct points for the reverse (up to a maximum of + or – 4 points). A score of 12 (double 6) is however an automatic success, and a score of 2 (double 1) is an automatic failure. The score on the dice is also a measure of quality or numbers – so a narrow success (a score of 7) means that they only just succeeded or only got a few of the things they needed; a score of 12 means they had a spectacular success and equally a score of 2 means they had a disaster, each option with additional effects that best meet the justice of the circumstances.

Timescale: The players need to understand that the timescale for their arguments is important. Each round is “*about a day*”, so they need to make their arguments appropriate to things that can happen in that time. So driving to a place on the map and searching a farm is something that should be easy to do in a day, but there is a chance they might miss something. If they wanted to do a really thorough, forensic search of all of the grounds and buildings (and therefore *not* miss anything), it might take two rounds. Alternatively, if the Army Commander wants to get helicopter or UAV support from the District Capital, it will probably take a turn to get authority for it to be allocated, before it arrived next turn. Of course, the Cartel player might counter-argue that these valuable assets are busy on other operations and will be delayed...

Weather: The weather is going to have a real impact on operations, and the language associated with this is worth exploring. It is therefore a good idea to think about changing the weather each turn. You can start the game with the first couple of rounds in good weather, to make it easy on the players in the beginning, but then adding a rainstorm later will make it more interesting.

Player “death”: If, during the game, one of the players succeeds in killing one of the other players, this is a perfectly acceptable part of the game and should be considered like any other argument. Their character will, of course, be replaced by someone else and the player can continue to make arguments for their successor.

Ending the Game: The game can go on for as long as you want, but it can be useful to end the game with a round of “*final arguments*” from the players as to what they think happened afterwards. These arguments are not based on the “*about a day*” limitation, but should represent what happens over the next few months or a year.

Notes about Matrix Games in Military Language Training.

The idea is to create a story – a narrative that is controlled by the player arguments. It is not meant to be wildly competitive and play that adds to the narrative should be praised and rewarded, and negative actions should be discouraged.

The use of arguments in the game is specifically intended to allow the students the opportunity to use their imagination as to how they can succeed by the use of language to get their point across. If they can't think of the right words for a specific course of action, they are free to come up with an alternative – the idea is that they have objectives to achieve and how they can achieve them is up to them. With this in mind, so long as what they are arguing to happen is clear and understandable, they should be rewarded with bonus points even if there are minor errors in tenses or grammar. We need to focus on what we are trying to achieve – equipping the student with enough language skills to succeed in their objectives!

The games run best if the players add to the evolving story, so success in arguments keep things moving along. To this end you should bear in mind that using two 6-sided dice means that the effects of positive or negative points are not linear! A penalty of -4 gives the player a 97% chance of failure, whereas -2 gives them an 83% chance. So try to keep the bonus and penalties in the mid-range of + or – 2 unless there are good reasons not to.

Notes about San Splendido.

In this game there are essentially up to 4 roles:

- The Army Commander.
- The Drug Baron.
- The Village Leader.
- The Police Chief.

If you have a different number of players, allocate roles as follows:

- For 2 Players, use the Army Commander and the Drug Baron.
- For 3 Players, use the Army Commander, the Drug Baron and the Village Leader.
- For 4 Players, use all the roles.
- For 5 players, add an additional role as “The Spirit of Drama” whose role in the game is to make things go wrong for the players in a way that makes the story more exciting!

Setting Up.

Sit the players around the map and stick the map to the table with Blue-Tack or something similar – the counters are light, so if the map is knocked the counters might be sent spinning all over the place.

Set up the counters as shown on the game setup map.

Arrange the additional counters so the players can see them and explain that they can make arguments for extra reinforcements, resources, etc., during the game. You will note that the location of the kidnapped hostage is not shown on the map – this is because he is “hidden” and the players will need to make a successful argument in order to find out where he is located.

There are also some small wooden cubes that can be used to keep track of things, such as drug shipments, ammunition, etc. There are also counters for arms caches, roadside bombs and +1 or -1 counters showing support or increases / decreases in morale / effectiveness for various units. The counters are laminated so you can write on them with water-soluble pens.

There are 2 x 6-sided dice included.

Timescale.

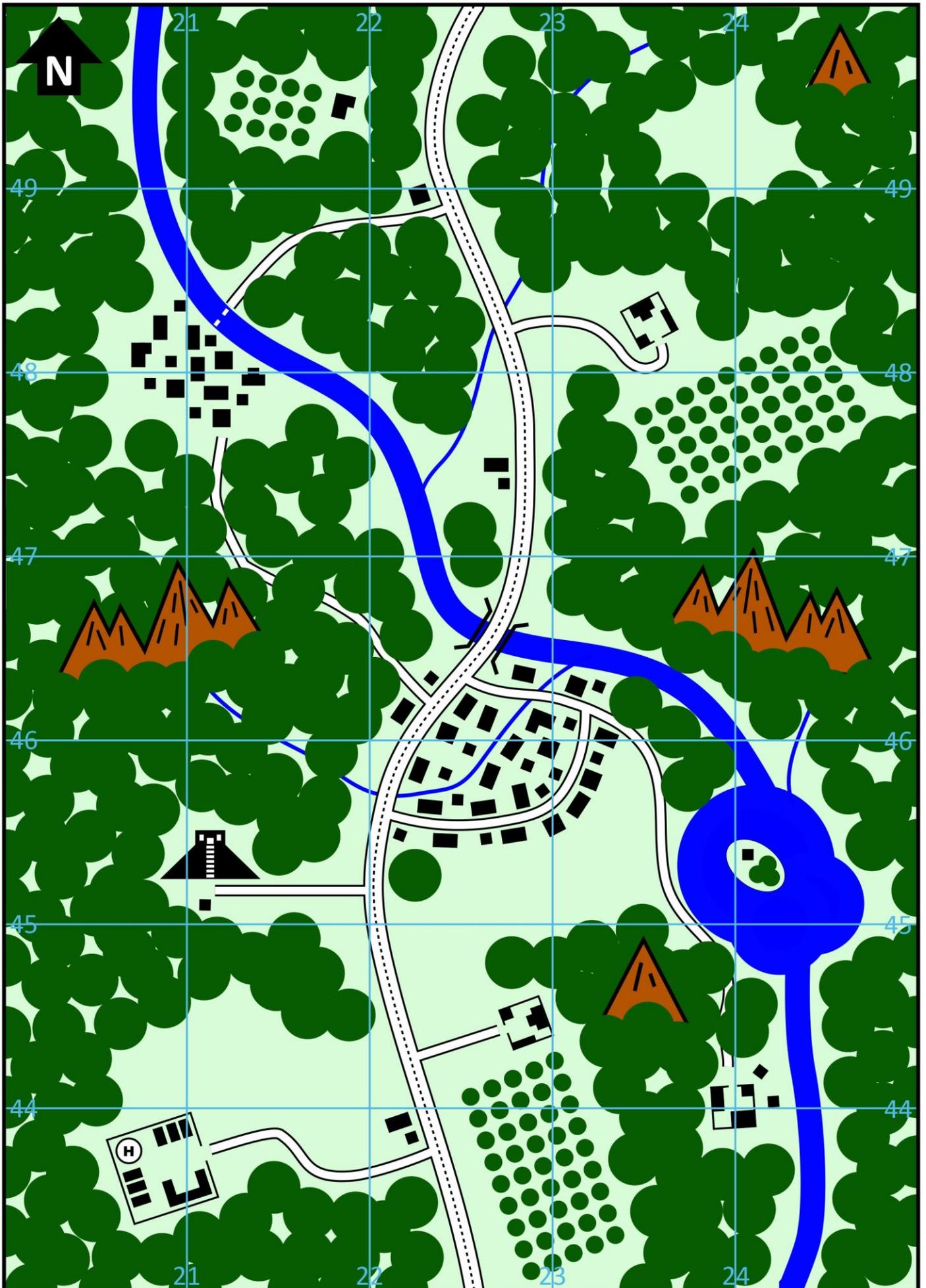
Each round is “about a day”.

Order of Play.

The order of play is as follows:

- The Police Chief.
- The Army Commander.
- The Drug Baron.
- The Village Leader.
- The Spirit of Drama.

Game Map.



Character Cards:

Army Commander



You have heard that an outspoken critic of the Drug Baron has been kidnapped and taken hostage from the Village at GR2184. The Governor insists he must be rescued!

This is, of course, primarily a Police matter, but you know some of them are corrupt, and don't have the manpower or resources to mount a rescue, so it is time to show them what the Army can do!

Objectives:

1. Rescue the Hostage!
2. Show how great the Army is!
3. Do something that will get you promoted and transferred to the city!

Drug Baron



One of the local villagers has been an outspoken critic of you! You have ordered him to be kidnapped and held for ransom.

You do a lot for the locals in these hard times. If it wasn't for your kickbacks and employment many would starve. They are ungrateful and need a lesson! You have a Police informant in your pay...

Objectives:

1. Make money!
2. Teach the locals a lesson!
3. Survive the game alive and free!

Police Chief



You have heard that an outspoken critic of the Drug Baron has been kidnapped and taken hostage from the Village at GR2184. The Governor insists he must be rescued!

This is, of course, a Police matter, but you don't have the manpower or resources to mount a rescue, so you will need help from the Army!

Objectives:

1. Rescue the Hostage!
2. Show the Police are not corrupt!
3. Make sure you get credit from the operation!

Village Leader



A young man who was an outspoken critic of the Drug Baron has been kidnapped and taken hostage from the Village (GR2184). His family is distraught and are trying to raise the ransom!

This is a difficult situation. The Drug Baron provides money and employment to the village in these hard times and the corrupt Police are no use.

Objectives:

1. Have the Hostage returned!
2. Don't anger the Drug Lord!
3. Look after the Village!

Game Counters:

