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Political-Military Games: A Practitioner's Guide

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POLITICAL MILITARY GAMING:

A PRACTITIONER'S GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

AIM

1. This paper aims to provide practical guidance for those who may have to design, develop, organise and run political-military games.
2. It is based upon the author's personal experiences in this field over more than a decade of professional involvement with such games, and on discussions at various times with others, in the UK and abroad, with similar experience. This paper is, however, primarily a personal view and should not be considered representative of any official viewpoint of either Dstl or the UK Ministry of Defence.

WHAT IS A POL-MIL GAME?

3. Gaming is a long-established technique in operational analysis (OA), enabling the relatively realistic exploration of situations of conflict or other stress. Its place in the spectrum of tools commonly used by the OA practitioner can be illustrated as in Figure 1.

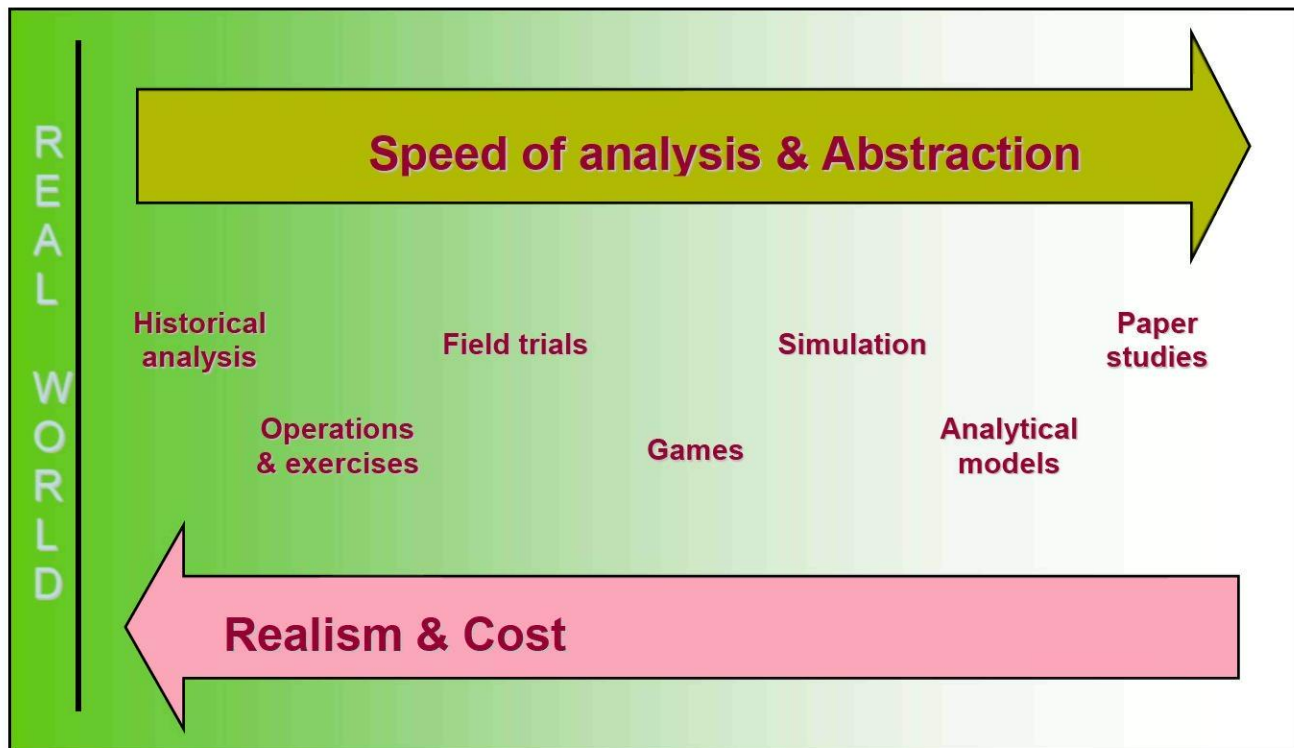


Figure 1: A Spectrum of OA Techniques

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4. A Political-Military (Pol-Mil) Game is an interactive role-playing seminar game designed to explore a crisis situation in which military action is a real possibility, perhaps inevitable, but in which other considerations and options, especially political and diplomatic ones, are also important. The relative weighting of military and non-military factors varies from game to game, largely dependent upon the scenario(s) considered, but the non-military factors should always be sufficiently substantial and significant as to make it inappropriate¹ for players to be making their decisions on purely military criteria alone. If the non-military factors are effectively negligible - if they can be ignored without any serious adverse effect – then the situation is probably better suited to conventional wargaming.

5. Because a pol-mil game takes into account non-military factors, it does not attempt to resolve the situation under consideration through simulated clash of arms, in the way a conventional wargame does. Pol-mil games focus on high-level political and military considerations, drawing out the major issues, rather than specific detailed answers².

6. A pol-mil game is (and should be) usually a stand-alone event conducted away from the normal working environment and played continuously, without interruption by other business. Players are immersed in a simulated crisis situation, which progresses more quickly than real-time through a series of stages, i.e. successive actions and decisions by players and the control team. After each stage, consequences will be assessed, either by the game control team or by consensus of the players themselves, and new developments briefed to players. The game then moves on to the next stage.

7. Pol-mil games can come in a variety of guises; an advantage of the approach is that it is inherently flexible:

a. Games can have one or more teams; limited in practice mainly by practical considerations of mechanics and logistics.

b. All players can be on the same “side” or the game can represent two, three or more “sides” in alliance, opposition or more complex relationships to each other.

c. Game mechanics can be purely through seminar discussion or some elements can be computerised.

d. Time scales represented can be of almost any duration; turns can be separated by days or years.

e. Games can be entirely scripted or the course of events can be influenced by the players’ choices and decisions.

8. The limits are practical rather than technical. This flexibility means that pol-mil games can potentially be adapted to a wide variety of scenarios; including peace-keeping, peace enforcement, power projection, confrontation, counterinsurgency, counter-terrorism, homeland security and various other crises. They can also be used to explore potential crisis or conflict situations, before they have actually manifested.

¹ I say “inappropriate”, as opposed to “impossible”, as one can never quite legislate for what players may try to do.

² Although some pol-mil games can generate a limited amount of quantitative data, this is not their area of strength.

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INITIATION

GET THE REQUIREMENT

9. A pol-mil game, like any other OA study, will originate in a customer³ requirement and, again like any other OA study, that requirement should be thoroughly explored, understood and captured at as early a stage as possible and in conjunction with the customer. Put bluntly, we need to know:

- a. What? – the customer requirement.
- b. Why? – what underlies that requirement.

10. Which leads in turn to consideration of:

- a. How? – what is a suitable game design.
- b. Who? – who are suitable game participants.
- c. When? - when must the game be held.
- d. Where? – what is a suitable game venue.

11. **What and Why:** What does the customer *need*? Why do they need it? This may be several things, with several audiences in mind, but there must be *something* that is at the crux of the requirement and we need to understand – not just to *know* but as far as possible to *understand* – what that crucial something is. If we can capture and address that, then we have a good chance of success; if not, then we may produce a beautifully designed and smoothly run game that unfortunately achieves nothing.

12. It is also worth bearing in mind that the customer themselves may not initially have anything more than a vague idea of what their requirement is. Concrete development of it may take time and dialogue over the early stages of the project, necessitating some flexibility in design and management of it.

13. The customer requirement also drives what the output of the game should be. The scope, format and timing of the game output should be agreed upon at an early stage as these will drive the game design and the reporting, both within the game and after it.

GET A BUDGET

14. A pol-mil game costs money and so requires a project budget to make it happen. Like any other project, the eventual budget is likely to be a compromise between what we and the customer would like to do and what the available funding can encompass in practice. Factors like venue hire, whose time the project will be paying for and whose travel, meals and accommodation the project budget will have to cover can have a significant effect on the overall project costs, so get these agreed as early as possible.

³ I shall use the term ‘customer’ here to encompass key stakeholders as well as those who provide the actual funding.

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GET A PLAN

15. Delivering a pol-mil game to time, quality and budget requires as much planning as any other project and arguably more than most OA studies. There are a lot of factors to take into consideration and keep under control. Determine what has to happen by when and how this will be brought about. Since maintaining absolute control over everything will not be possible, have some contingency – in time and people, as well as finance.

16. Make a realistic cost forecast, including anticipated spend profile. Do not just assume that spend will be spread evenly over the whole duration of the project because it won't be. There will be a pronounced peak over the period of the game itself, when the project team will be most heavily committed and additional personnel, such as subject matter experts (SMEs) and facilitators, will be spending significant amounts of time. The bulk of costs from the venue, accommodation, T&S, Extramural support and so on are likely to come in during the weeks following the game. There are likely to be lesser peaks around trial games. Be aware of these spending peaks and plan accordingly, otherwise you are leaving yourself open to unpleasant surprises and an uncomfortable conversation with the department manager.

DELIVERY

HOW? - GAME DESIGN

17. Having, ideally, established what the core requirement is (or at least having as good an idea of it as possible) we need to consider how best to meet it. Options for game design need to be generated and assessed, with the most promising ones discussed with the customer and the best candidate design selected.

18. *It is crucially important to have customer buy-in in this.* You may be a gaming expert, you may think you know better than the customer in this regard *and you may be right* but it is their game, not yours. *They* initiated it, *they* are paying for it and it has to meet *their* requirement. They therefore need to be satisfied that the design which you are suggesting will meet that requirement, so *you* need to make sure that it does. A design that you are familiar with, and which worked well last time, may not be suitable this time. Examine the *current* requirement, try and understand it and come up with the most suitable design to address it. Be prepared to provide evidence – or at least well thought out arguments – as to why this is the case. Also be prepared to revise your assessment – and your design – if it turns out that you haven't fully understood the requirement (or that it has changed).

19. Of course, once we understand the customer requirement, it is always possible that we will assess that a pol-mil game is not actually the best way of addressing it; in which case we should say so and suggest alternatives. Pol-mil gaming is like any other OA tool in that it should only be used when it suits the problem.

20. Assuming a pol-mil game is suitable, there are a number of potential considerations which will bear on designing it. It is virtually impossible to give a comprehensive list but factors worth considering include:

a. What kind of questions is the game addressing?

(1) If the game is to explore issues concerned with mounting operations in a specific region, then it may be useful to have an active Red team, including regional SMEs, who can provide a realistic and challenging portrayal of the kind of opposition which

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would be encountered in the region. It is a good idea to also include some regional domain knowledge in Blue as players would receive such briefings if they were to deploy for real. DIS regional desks are often good at this – it is part of their operational role.

(2) If the game is not regionally focussed, such that the scenario is meant to be illustrative of a general kind of problem to be examined, then a Red team may not be such a good idea. Active portrayal of Red may lead to the game becoming too focussed on issues relating to the specific country, scenario or even personalities (real-life or player), and missing the more general – and more broadly applicable – insights which the customer needs.

b. The game will be required to produce some kind of output. What this is to be must be agreed with the customer and the game designed to ensure that the required outputs can be produced. This may, for instance, require particular decision points to be reached by the players with the rationale behind the decisions they then take to be captured in some detail. It may be possible to use a decision structuring methodology to systematically capture factors considered and even the relative weightings given them.

c. An interactive game – where players’ decisions influence the course of events for the next turn – is often more enjoyable for the players, who feel that they are ‘achieving something’. However, if there are specific aspects and questions which the customer needs the players to address – and especially if time is limited – it is often preferable to run a tightly scripted game to make sure that the required ground is covered. One game device is to tell the players that their recommendations from Turn One, although sound, were unfortunately not followed by the higher decision-makers and developments have taken a turn for the worse so that the situation is as they are now about to be briefed.

d. An interactive game with multiple teams running in parallel, each starting at a common point at Turn One but able to shape events so that they each follow their own individual paths, is hard work to run but does allow a wide range of decision options to be explored.

WHO? - GAME PARTICIPANTS

21. **Players:** A game requires players. The customer requirement should⁴ drive the selection of the numbers and types of players required. Issues such as the required seniority, breadth of representation, particular areas of expertise, etc need to be considered and the players required to satisfy these identified as early in the project as possible. This is especially important in the case of senior players or others with high demands on their time as it will be necessary to get the game into their diaries well in advance⁵ to be reasonably confident of their participation.

22. It is, however, likely, almost inevitable, that there will be some uncertainty over game players right up to the last minute. Some people will not want to commit until as late as possible, some will pull out due to a more pressing commitment arising, some will send deputies, some may be taken ill. A degree of uncertainty is normal and usually manageable, as long as sufficient key individuals do attend and as long as the team compositions retain the required balance and credibility. If it looks like actual participation will fall short of what is required for the game to be

⁴ In the real world, sometimes particular individuals will be invited to play for political reasons, rather than for the quality of their potential contribution to the game.

⁵ “Well in advance” here usually means months not weeks.

viable then re-arrangement must be seriously considered, as an alternative to effectively wasting time and money. ‘The Show must go on’ is only true up to a point.

23. Give careful consideration to syndicate structure. Syndicates usually require a balance of players from differing backgrounds to give breadth of perspective and balanced discussion but sometimes syndicates can be deliberately made narrow, in order to encourage contrasting views from different syndicates and stimulate debate in plenary. Size is ideally between six and ten players; much larger and facilitation becomes difficult, whilst some players are likely to find it difficult to get involved. Try to avoid any one player in a syndicate being much higher in rank than the others as this will often distort discussion. Military players, in particular, are often reluctant to openly contradict their seniors.

24. Game players are not the whole story. The game will require various other individuals to run it. These are likely to include:

- a. Facilitators
- b. Reporters
- c. Briefers
- d. Game Management
- e. Administration

25. **Facilitators:** Good facilitation is crucial to the success of the game. A good facilitator will get all members of the syndicate team effectively engaged, enhancing their contribution to the game as well as their experience of it. The facilitator should not be someone who will attempt to actively steer or influence the team along some particular line that they approve of. It is not a trivial role and, especially with senior players, should only be entrusted to experienced, capable and, preferably, specifically trained individuals. Dstl has a list of facilitators, accessible via the facilitation site on the Intranet, but this is not always up-to-date and not all individuals on it will be suitable for handling senior players. Alternatively, there are some – but not many - consultancy firms which can offer qualified and experienced facilitators and this is an option which can work well

26. It is preferable that the project manager for the game should have some significant degree of control over the facilitators, whether they be Dstl staff or contractors. The project will need some of the facilitators’ time for briefings, etc and this can be difficult to guarantee if they are from somewhere else in MoD and just facilitating, effectively, as a favour.

27. **Reporters:** I use the term “reporters” here to mean individuals assigned to capture the key points of the players’ discussions. There will need to be one assigned to each team. The plenary sessions must not be neglected and someone should be assigned to cover them. This can be one or more of the syndicate reporters but preferably not, in order to give them a breather.

28. Reporters need to be reliable people with sufficient judgement to grasp what needs to be written down and what points need to be emphasised. Where the game is intended to capture specific information, for instance the rationale behind particular decisions or the weightings given particular factors, the reporters need to be properly briefed on this so that they understand what is required of them. They also need the confidence to be able to interrupt discussion to ensure that they are correctly capturing key points. The facilitator should aid them in this and it is a good idea to tell the players up front that this is likely to happen and ask for their cooperation.

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29. Reporters, however, should read into the subject area of the game sufficiently to gain familiarity with the terminology, acronyms and names likely to be used, so that they do not have to keep interrupting to clarify these minor points.

30. **Briefers:** There are two broad requirements for briefers:

- a. someone to give the necessary game briefings in the plenary sessions;
- b. someone to brief back from the syndicate sessions to the plenaries.

31. The former role should usually come from within the project team, with one or more people identified and prepared well in advance of the game. Military officers are often quite good in this role. Briefings will be needed on the scenario and developments in each turn. It is also a good idea to have an initial welcome brief, preferably by a senior customer. This helps make the players feel appreciated and provides reassurance that they've done the right thing by coming. It also helps customer 'buy-in'. It is usually a good idea for someone to give a short brief on the game itself, covering what will be happening when, who will be doing what, and so on. Do not forget to also cover the basics, such as transport arrangements, fire escapes, refreshments, toilets and other SHEF aspects.

32. The latter role – sometimes termed a “rapporteur” – is a matter of divided opinion. There are some who advocate that the facilitator should perform this role. While this has the advantage that they can be prepared for the role well in advance, it is not a view that I endorse. The facilitation role is a demanding one and having to brief back between syndicate sessions can make the day a long and stressful one for the facilitators. Also, many facilitators are so focussed on the *process* of the syndicate session - which is, after all, their responsibility - that they do not really take in all that much of the *content* (which may be in an area in which they are no expert, anyway).

33. I prefer to have the brief back to plenary conducted by one of the players. Not only does this give the facilitators a breather but it helps get player “buy-in” and commitment to producing worthwhile output.

34. **Game Management:** A small team will be required to run the game on the day. Usually, this would be the core of the project team that has been developing, designing and organising the game. This team does not necessarily need to be very large but should be at least two people, as one person can easily be unavailable at a key moment. If things go well, this team should not have much to do - so take periods of idleness as a good sign!

35. If VIP visitors are expected, detail someone to meet and escort them. Military officers are usually good at this.

36. **Administration:** While many venues, especially the professional conference centres, provide very good administrative support, not all do. In either case, it has been found that a well-organised admin person dedicated to the game for its duration is a valuable asset and can greatly help the smooth running of the event.

WHEN? – THE GAME DATE

37. The need to give adequate warning time to players is one important consideration in determining when to hold the event. Another is the time that will be required to develop the game design, scenario and materials. A game with senior players will also require trial games at more junior levels; for example a 2*-3* game would probably have trials at desk officer/Assistant Head

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and then 1* levels. Time needs to be allowed for to organise and run these, as well as the main event itself.

38. A constraint on time, however, may be the customer requirement. If the game output is required by a particular time, then that places a limit on when the game must be held by. Strike a practical and pragmatic balance.

WHERE? – THE GAME VENUE

39. The game will need a venue. This is an obvious point but not one to be complacent about. Good venues tend to be much in demand and often need to be booked several months in advance. The suitability of venues will be influenced by the game design - how many syndicate rooms will be needed and of what size? How large a plenary room? What facilities are needed – e.g. multimedia? What is the required classification level? There are also practical and administrative considerations – where will the players be travelling from? What of accommodation and catering?

40. The game venue should be sufficiently far away from players' normal place of work that they won't be tempted to slip back to the office during coffee breaks or anything else that would divert their attention from the game. The venue should, however, be reasonably accessible by road and rail so that players are not unduly taxed in getting there.

41. Dedicated professional conference centres are the best choice, if classification and security issues will permit. Events like this are their core business and they are well prepared, resourced and organised for it. Other venues, such as hotels, clubs or MoD establishments may be very good but this kind of thing is a sideline for them and it tends to show.

42. In any case, candidates for the game venue should be identified early on and visited by the project team at an early stage to get first hand knowledge of the practicalities. It is also a good idea to establish early on with the venue exactly what they can and can't provide; from multimedia to post-it notes. If you are going to be using the venue's IT facilities for briefings, etc, check that the software and hardware that you are bringing will be compatible. That means physically take it there and try it.

43. If the game venue cannot provide accommodation, this needs to be arranged as soon as possible. It is preferable from an organisational and administrative view if all participants can stay in the same place and most hotels cannot provide thirty or forty rooms at short notice. It may be a good idea to arrange transport, such as a coach, between the accommodation and game venue.

44. If the game will involve a number of senior military and MoD staff staying in a hotel or other civil location it is a good idea to inform the local police ahead of the event. They may wish to take precautions against any potential security threat.

45. A game dinner, held either the evening before a one-day game or on the first evening of a longer one, helps break the ice and can also assist in team forming. Having the players stay overnight before a morning start makes sure that they will get there on time – arrange for a preliminary briefing if you feel that you need a further reason to get them there the night before.

OUTPUT

46. The required output – scope, structure, format, timing - should be agreed with the customer well before the event. Pol-mil games are stronger at providing qualitative insights than detailed data but some quantitative output may be possible through use of structured decision methodologies and

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support tools. Such approaches need to be considered, designed and planned well ahead if they are to work effectively; not added on as a late afterthought.

47. It is often a good idea to produce a short (2-4 pages) summary of the key findings of the game within a few days for distribution whilst the event is fresh in participants' memories. This will help maintain momentum and ensure that the game does not just come, go and be forgotten. Producing such a summary report quickly can only really be done by someone who attended the game and with speedy access to the reporters' notes.

48. In any case, the reporters' notes need to be provided to the person producing the game report as soon as feasible. Memories fade with time and the conflicting demands of life back in the office. It is desirable if the notes can be in electronic form, both for legibility and ease of incorporation via copy-and-paste but sometimes time can be the greater consideration.

49. The game report should focus on the key insights and lessons arising from play and discussion, both in plenary and syndicate. Do not give a chronology of the project; it's of interest to very few. Bear in mind that one game is only a single point iteration and do not make excessive or universal claims based on it. Be balanced and objective; say what can be clearly supported by the play and would stand up to scrutiny⁶.

CONCLUSION

50. Pol-mil games can be good fun for the players but are often hard work for the team responsible for putting them together. Organisation, imagination, planning and flexibility are the keys to making sure that the game flows well as an event and fulfils the requirements placed upon it. There are less challenging and stressful OA studies around but few that offer such immediate satisfaction of a job palpably well done. Pol-mil gaming is hard work but it is worth it.

Good luck!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

51. As mentioned previously, this paper is essentially a personal view, but I would like to acknowledge the advice, assistance and inspiration I have received from a number of people over the years, in particular Roger Cockram, Geoff Beare, Steve Lea, Paul Hollinshead, Andrzej Frank and Martha Williams in UK MoD, Ragnvald Solstrand (Norwegian Defence Research Establishment) and John Elliott (US Centre for Army Analysis).

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⁶ D Scrutiny are often represented at pol-mil games, which are just as eligible for scrutiny as any other OA study.

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