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The Structure of Decision Games

Each and every decision game consists of six elements. These are:

1. the "setting of the stage" (also called a "scenario", "situation", or "special episode")

2. the introduction of the protagonist (a leader faced with the problem)

3. the presentation of the problem

4. the Socratic conversation (also called a "discussion"), in which players devise, describe, and defend solutions to the problem in question

5. the facilitator's critique of solutions

6. an opportunity for reflection

When a decision-forcing exercise is built around a single dilemma, these six elements correspond to distinct phases of a decision game, each of which follows the other in a regular manner. At other times, the component elements of a decision game are combined in various ways. For example, facilitators often combine critique and opportunity for reflection into a single activity. (This is sometimes called an "after action review" or a "hot wash.") Similarly, longer decision games may take the form of a series of events in which a solution to one problem provides the setting for the next. In such instances, the cycle of "problem - Socratic conversation - critique" repeats itself several times.

"What the researcher observed was that tough cases conducted at the research site actually consist of eleven elements …

1. Background and context. There are usually six to eight learners participating in a tough case that can last from one to two hours depending on the case. A case leader provides learners with background: the case situation and context and the identity of the decision maker and other key parties …

2. Problem presentation and decision forcing question. All learners are presented with a problem that confronted the historical protagonist and the decision he or she had to make.

3. Learner questions. All learners may ask the case leader clarification questions … Seeking additional information can be part of the learning process for learners as they search for information they believe is necessary for the decision they will have to make …

4. Learner decision. All learners make a decision in a limited amount of time. They are often permitted to discuss ideas with fellow learners, but each learner is responsible for making his or her own decision in silence, keeping it to himself or herself initially.

5. Cold calls. A subset of learners provide their decision or action plan without knowing in advance whom the case leader will choose …

6. Decision with rationale. Learners who are cold-called, either individually or as part of group discussion, state their decision and its rationale. Learners may state their assumptions with their rationale …

7. Decision revoicing. The case leader may revoice (paraphrase) some learner decisions. The case leader decides in the moment whether revoicing will facilitate more active participation by other learners through clarification or provides an opportunity to introduce important terminology to the learners.

8. Discussion. Case and decision discussion, primarily among all learners, facilitated by the case leader using a Socratic approach of asking questions, but not answering them. The discussion can be conducted by the learners, guided by case leader questions, or by the case leader asking other learners to comment on decisions made by other leaders via cold calls. Learners may request additional information during the discussion.

9. Review of the historical protagonist's decisions and the consequences. Following a subjective assessment of learner satisfaction with discussion of goals, strategies, decisions, and rationales, the case leader reveals what the historical protagonist's decisions were and what happened in the historical case. This is referred to as the "rest of the story" at the study site. This allows learners to compare their decisions with the course of action chosen by the historical protagonist and learn the consequences of that course of action.

10. Additional discussion. The case leader may ask learners as a group what they learned or what they found surprising about the historical protagonist's decision or other aspects of the case."

Ralph Thomas Soule, *The Learning Experience of Tough Cases: A Descriptive Case Study*, (doctoral dissertation, George Washington University, 2016), pages 126-127

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The Two Types of Decision Games

There are two basic types of decision games. Those of the first kind, which are based entirely upon faithful accounts of events that actually took place, are usually called "decision-forcing cases." (This term, often abbreviated as "DFC," reminds us that, in addition to being decision games, exercises of this sort are also historical case studies.) Decision games of the second kind, which contain at least one imaginary element, are properly called "speculative decision games."

In the years between the two world wars of the twentieth century, Marines used the word "historical" to distinguish between the two basic types of decision games. That is, if a decision-forcing exercise was based upon a made-up scenario, they described it as a "problem," "tactical problem," or "map problem." If, however, a decision game was based entirely upon reality, Marines of the 1930s called it a "historical map problem."

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Marines used the term "tactical decision game" ("TDG") to describe both speculative decision games and decision-forcing cases. However, because the former were much more common than the latter, Marines began to assume that, unless it was clearly labeled as "historical," a tactical decision game contained fictional elements. This tendency was reinforced by the introduction, in 2010 or so, of the term "decision-forcing case." Thus, present-day Marines will often, and, indeed, usually, describe decision games based on factual scenarios as "DFCs" and decision games with made up elements as "TDGs."

"Certain advantages as well as certain disadvantages are inherent in an historical map problem. The situation can not be set up so as to illustrate a particular tactical doctrine. On the other hand, the author cannot be accused of having so stretched and twisted incidents as to produce a situation that could not possibly arise.

The situations in an historical map problem have actually existed and someone has been faced with their solution when a faulty solution might mean the lives of men. The situation is apt to be more vague, information less complete, and events less orderly than in a map problem conceived in the mind of the author.

Many of the decisions in an historical map problem appear minor in a map problem - yet, remember that when these situations were faced by the commander either in battle or in that tense period preceding battle, their importance loomed large."

Anonymous, "The Battle at Rocourt," *The Infantry School Mailing List,* Volume XVII (January 1939), page 1

"Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities. Truth isn't."

Mark Twain, *Following the Equator: A Journey Around the World*, (New York: Doubleday and McClure, 1907), page 156