Verbal analysis wargaming

"A rose by any other name would smell as sweet."

Over the last couple of years I have dabbled in experimental gaming. My goal has always been to create an illusion of reality. Some of my experiments have been successful and others less so. Until recently though none of my experiments covered anything really new. I believe my latest project is different. This article outlines my ideas on verbal analysis gaming.

Most wargames use numbers in some way to simulate reality, combat factors, movement rates, dice modifiers, and tables for just about everything, abound. In fact theyare so common as to be clichés. I have nothing against numbers as a method for analyzing the world but there is a point when Grok the Caveman becomes indistinguishable from the Starship Enterprise. Both are described by the same concepts like combat factor, Grok 10 Enterprise 9 (obviously on vastly different scales). Not all number games are bad or wrong. Many of them succeed as Picasso put it in being "a lie that tells the truth." Unfortunately the standard is becoming harder to reach as numerical concepts are overworked. So I ask myself, why use numbers?

What!?! I hear you cry. No numbers!? No tables?? No dice rolls!!!? Heretic! That may well be, but why use numbers when we have words? It is true that numbers are extremely reliable (2+2 is always four) but I have qualms about their validity (is Grok really as tough as the Enterprise?). Obviously a number game's validity is only as good as the game designers original concept. If that concept is a cliché then the designer is repeating all the mistakes of the originator of the concept, and then adding a few more of his own. What else favors the use of numbers? Well they are logical, but that logic has a price in breadth of meaning. A combat factor is only useful within a single game and is not generalizable to other games. Thus Grok really isn't comparable in toughness to the Enterprise since the definition of what combat factor means is different in both games (or so they tell us, I personally believe that Groks rock can kick any antimatter powered starships ass). The trouble with narrow definitions is the proliferation of numbers the games use. The more the merrier it seems, at least until information overload sets them. So I turned to words.

Words give a completely different view of the world than numbers. Where numbers are reliable and narrowly defined, words are fluid and filled with many subtle meetings. The difficulty with words is putting them together in useful formats. One thing is obvious, any game using verbal analysis of reality (i.e. words to describe the world) is going to look very different from conventional games. The format has to produce repeatable, reliable and valid output that some way retains the flexibility and subtlety of words meanings.

My solution to the above problem is to use a verbal matrix. What this is, is a format in which small phrases are grouped together in a meaningful way. I practice psychotherapy for a living so understanding how we understand the world is of great importance to me. There is a common thread among a diversity of disciplines that says that the world is orderly and that it can be broken down into component parts. Most disciplines call these parts concepts. All a verbal matrix is, is a visual representation of concepts.

I have two games made that use matrixes in the above manner. The first is a role-play system that uses Maslow's hierarchy of needs as a format. The second is a system to simulate whole societies by looking at their basic institutions. I will describe the later one in-depth (a role-play system can wait, after all there are too many role-play games anyway).

The purpose of the institutional game is to simulate the way national groups function and change in the face of natural disasters and conflict with other groups. The format of the matrix revolves around the idea that humans create institutions to satisfy basic human needs. The players start with a set of generic Neolithic institutions to meet the following needs, food production, goods production, human organization, worldview, and relations with other groups. In the matrix each need is represented by a row of boxes

each divided into an upper and lower section. The upper section contains a phrase or short sentence that describes an institution (i.e. a means to an end, the need). At the start of play the players have the following institutions: hunt, gather (for food), individual craftsman (for goods), family, tribes (for organization), everything has a spirit, men can placate spirits (for worldview), and hostile to foreigners, ritual warfare (for relations). Just by looking at these institutions I have a good mental picture of what they are like.

At this point the institutional matrix looks like a fancy paragraph. It may be interesting to read but if it is unchanging it will soon become boring. Dynamism is added to the matrix by institutional evolution and problems. Each turn of the game all the players must add a new institution or change an old one. Over time every player's nation will naturally become more complex. Not only will the starting needs be better met but players will be able to create new needs to deal with problems that arise. After institutions evolve every turn, one player (a different one each turn) may attack an institution of another player with an institutional problem. What this is, is an un-predictable happening within that institution that makes it dysfunctional. For example hunting might have the problem overhunting, or tribes might have the problem feuding families. The nature of the problems is completely up to the player who is giving it. The only limitation is that it in some way relate to the institution to which it is attached. Problems are written in the lower section of the institutional box. Like institutions, they are described by a phrase or short sentence.

The meat of the game is how the players solve their problems. Problems are dealt with by action with in an institution. Action consists of some executive order given through an institution which would alleviate the problem. The player presents it in the form of an argument as to why the action would solve the problem. The outcome of an action is decided by a referee (or agreement of all the players if there is no referee). For example say the problem is a shortage of materials for the individual craftsman; the action might be the hunters supply craftsman with materials from their kills (an action in the institution hunting). This argument might work well. The referee needs to take into account the interconnectedness of institutions (more interdependence and greater strength) and the interconnectedness of problems (more difficulty). If the argument is well-made, fits the institution, and is logical, then it should work. In some cases the player will not have a pre-existing institution to deal with a problem, in such cases the player must innovate an institution or create a new one to meet the challenge.

It is interesting that over time national groups become defined to a large part by the problems they face. Also over time the character or feel of a nation can change completely. A historical example of this is the evolution of the Germanic nation. Institutionally, the disorganized tribes Caesar fought differ from the warriors of the migration; who differ from the peasants of the Carolingian Empire; who differ from the burgers of the Middle Ages; who differ from the heretics of the Reformation; who differ from the citizens of a unified Germany; who differ from the Nazis. All are connected genetically and by place but otherwise they are completely different.

I made the institution game to take advantage of maps which cannot be used in standard games (namely a 10 foot round relief globe at Indiana University). With a map, players can come into conflict with one another. Each player starts with a given area of the map. Each turn the player may order an executive action to expand or contract this territory or develop it via some institutions (i.e. build villages, clear forests for farming, build roads, etc.). Exact boundaries and locations of sites are not important so long as the player remembers general locations. When two players overlap in a territory they need to make an agreement on a border or some other arrangement. The settlement must be consistent with each player's relations with other groups institution. The beginning institutions give the players little choice but to fight one another (hostile to foreigners, and ritual warfare) but the fighting is guaranteed to being inconclusive. In the instance where players do fight they engage in a dialogue. First both sides state the goals they want to accomplish. The referee chooses one side to be the aggressor. That side then makes an argument as to why his action through an institution would make him accomplish his goal. This argument is then countered by the defender who makes an argument why his action through one of his institutions would block the aggressors move. The referee decides who wins based on the quality of their arguments and the strength of their vying institutions. If there are more war aims or the referee cannot decide who wins than the players exchange another round of arguments. This goes on as long as it takes to settle the issue. It is possible that neither side has the institutions in place to accomplish their goals (as with starting

institutions), in such cases the referee may leave the dispute unsettled to be re-fought the next turn. Note it is possible for a warrior nation to overrun an urban nation, this does not mean that the urban player is out of the game. It only means that his people are now ruled by the warriors, who had better have institutions ready to rule a hostile population or expected not to rule long.

When a nation is overrun the player may attempt to change the subservient population's matrix by either innovating or adding a new institution. If the defending player can make an action argument through an institution why the people don't accept the change then the referee strikes it down. Even if the change goes through the player remains in control of his people so that eventually his nation may rise again like the Phoenix.

The role of the referee in a verbal analysis game is not to create the world. That job is handled by the players. Instead the referee is needed to make decisions on arguments and to facilitate dialogues. The referee has one other job that he shares with all the players that is to stop continuity jumps. This means vetoing the turn of a player who says his Neolithic society has just invented the steam engine or some other equally ridiculous jump in technology.

I have high hopes for the future potential of verbal analysis games. I believe they offer a method of approach that allows dealing with a problem in a new way. It makes possible simulations of conflicts that could not be adequately dealt with before. In my mind I have the outline for an institution matrix game to simulate the American civil rights movement. I can also see a possible morale game. If nothing else it makes Grok look a lot different from the Enterprise. I hope some of you try out this approach. I am interested in what you come up with.

I run the institution matrix game using a matrix grid of 2" x 2" boxes (i.e. to 2" x 1" rectangles for institutions and problems) with four or five boxes to a row; say 10 rows in all. I cover each matrix with contact paper to give it a plastic surface. All the writing is done with a wax pencil. It cleans easily, your fingers or an eraser will do the trick. All told it costs around five dollars to put together a set for four players.

[When this article was published the editor included a cartoon in which one man says "Have a poke in the eye!" The bubble is poking in to the next man's voice bubble which says the word "Ouch."]