

# Participation Game Ideas

## **1. Introduction**

At a wargames convention, many games set up by clubs lack real 'participation' value, for a number of reasons:

- People might be put off by the time investment, even if it's only an hour. They might be afraid to miss something else at the convention.
- The rules used are not always very clear, and require some willingness to focus and concentrate, not always easy in a noisy convention hall.

So, a new approach to setting up participation game smight be necessary.

## **2. Idea**

To design a better form of participation game, it needs to address these problems sketched above, and start from the following principles:

- Time investment could be anything between 1 minute and the full length of the game.
- Rules are not strictly necessary.

The idea is to organise a game, more akin to kriegsspiel-type games or roleplaying games. There is one gamesmaster who runs the game, and will ask various participants their input on some decisions. Depending on the answer of the participants, a single die roll determines the outcome of the action.

Players are not required to learn any rules, or hang around the table for long. They can leave whenever they want. In other words, any passer-by becomes a player, since his only input is an answer to a choice being put forward by the gamesmaster. As a result, he might have to make a single die roll and move some figures on the table.

## **3. Details**

### **3.1. Scenario**

The game should be scenario-driven, and should have some sort of story-line written out. However, just as in a roleplaying game, the specific flow of the scenario depends on decisions being made by the players.

Example of the Zeebrugge scenario:

- British paratroppers land on left side of canal, germans respond
- Para's try to eliminate bunkers and guns, germans defend bridges and guns
- Marines approach in landing craft to the beaches, germans hold beach
- Para's and marines try to conquer the bridges and sabotage them
- Germans try to keep the bridges intact untill submarine moves through.

### **3.2. Gamesmaster (GM)**

The GM is responsible for the flow of the game, and drives the game by offering choices to both sides (the exact role of the players is outlined in the next section). It is up to the GM to direct

the attention of the game towards those areas in which exciting things are about to happen, and to put forward the correct level of detail. This might change from decision to decision.

Thus, the game becomes a sequence of choices put forward by the GM, and answered by the players.

Every choice offered by the GM should offer the player 2 options (or more, as the GM sees fit). Depending on the option chosen by the player, the GM decides on a target number for the action to succeed, or a die roll that quantifies the action. The player rolls the die, and the action is carried out on the table.

It is not necessary to switch actions between two opposing sides all the time, but it is recommended.

Example 1:

- GM: “The 2nd section of paras has just landed and is still trying to regroup. They can either wait for everyone to join, or move forward as soon as possible and take up position about here (points to table)”
- Player: “They regroup”
- GM: “Okay, any stragglers join the section at a roll of 3+, and if you fail, only half of them join up”.
- The player rolls the die, and the result is carried out.
- Note that if the player would have picked the other option (move forward), the GM might have said: “You reach the position safely, but the section loses D6-2 members permanently due to stragglers”. The player would then roll for stragglers.

Example 2:

- GM: “The German platoon right here has been sitting in this house for a while, but the British are still firing at them. They can either fire at this British platoon, or try to fall back towards the bushes right here”
- Option 1: “They continue firing, and cause D6 casualties among the British”
- Option 2: “The platoon commander succeeds in organising the retreat on a roll of 4+, otherwise they only cover half the distance to the bushes”

Note that it is up to the GM to decide what the possible options are, but it is the player who decides what option to follow. Then, the GM decides on a response, involving a die roll that might be used to determine whether the action succeeds, how much casualties have been caused, what distance have been travelled, etc. But only a single die roll!

The GM then decides on the next action, depending on the situation on the table, flow of the game, etc.

### **3.3. Clarifications**

Note that this framework does not allow for a player to put forward a decision, he can only respond to decisions put forward by the GM (however, see role of players, below).

Experienced players might wish to put forward their own actions, as happens in a matrix-game. However, I think this might not be suitable for this type of participation game:

- Involvement of the players might be very short (only a few minutes), so they do not have a good view of the flow of the game as a whole. This is exactly the role of the GM.
- Because many different players can participate, the resolution of decisions might be very uneven. E.g. one player might order a squad to fire at some enemies, while another player might order the same squad to move forward, take the bridge, put some bombs, etc.

If one would have 2 players which are going to play the entire game, this might indeed work much better, but from the point of view of minimal commitment, I think the GM-driven approach has some merits.

### 3.4. Players

To increase involvement of the players, and to allow the players some more control if they wish so (thereby addressing some of the issues raised above), each side has a few mechanisms to alter the flow of the game. This comes in the form of (let's say 5) cards at the start of the game for each side. These cards can be placed in some cardholders, such that they free to see and to use to players on that side. Whenever a player uses a card, the card is handed over to the opponents. Thus, the number of cards stays the same, but switch frequently between players. (An alternative could be that cards are discarded after use, but that the GM hands out a new card every 10 minutes or so ...).

The cards alter the flow of the game, or might affect the outcome of some die rolls:

- “+1 to any die roll”: use this card (before rolling the die) to modify any die roll called for by the GM by +1.
- “+2 to any die roll”: same
- “-1 to any die roll”: same, but usually used on a die roll called for on your opponent.
- “OVERRULE”: use this card to overrule an action put forward by the GM. You can ask for a specific action to be taken place “My squad storms the bridge now!”, and the GM will immediatly put forward a die roll, depending on the action proposed by the player. Good to use if you want to force an action on some part of the table.  
(this cards allows players more control if they wish to do so. I would expect players who have been there some time might start using this option more frequently).

Since cards never go out of the game, cards will be used very frequent. But this is good, since we expect players to particpate only for short bursts of time, and therefore, players should be able to fully participate, including playing as many cads as they see fit.

### 3.5. Participation

So, how does this lead to a better participation game?

First of all, the GM drives the game story forward, so there are hopefully no lulls in the action.

Secondly, passers-by can usually, after a brief situation sketch, answer options with a simple yes or no, or make a choice when it's put forward by the GM.

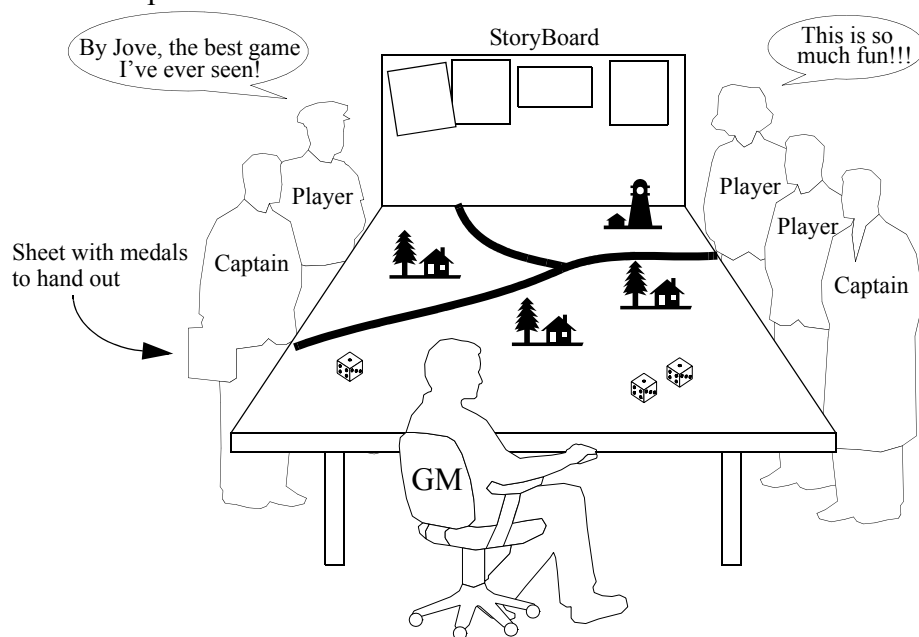
### 3.6. Table

As a practical set-up, I would suggest the following: Each side has a player (one of us) assigned as ‘captain’. These captains play the game when no-one else is present (i.e. answering the GM's

calls for decision), but at the same time draw passers-by into the game by ‘forcing’ them to answer. Each captain addresses the players at his side of the table, so it might be that one side has some more people than the other side. Which is perfectly okay, since the GM addresses a side to answer, and the players on that side have to answer.

Thus, the game progresses, even if no passers-by are present, because this will attract people. A table where nothing is happening does not attract people!

A particular setup could be as follows:



As a PR ploy and cute gimmick, we could even print out self-adhesive, round labels (easy to get in various colors from e.g. FNAC), in bronze/silver/gold, saying “Raider of Zeebrugge” (for the British), or “Defended Zeebrugge” for the Germans. Each captain has sheets of those, and hands out these bronze medals for everyone who participated in at least one decision. If the player was involved in something above average, he gets a silver medal. If he did something exceptional (e.g. destroying a tank), he gets the gold. When players leave the table, they receive this medal on their sweater, and this will in turn advertise the game in the convention hall.

Thus, the role of the captains, is:

- recruit passers-by to spend a few minutes at the table
- press people on his side of the table into making decisions and make them move the figures
- hand out medals to anyone who participated

The role of the captain is NOT to “win” the game as such, but more to act as a coach for whom-ever is resent at the table at that point.

### 3.7. Storyboard

Additionally, a storyboard is a good device to brief players what has happened so far, and to attract attention.

Every so often, the GM puts notices on the backdrop (or in some other suitable manner), about actions that have taken place on the table so far. These could take the form of newsclippings,

covers, orders, dispatches. etc. We can prepare several of the blank documents, and then fill them in as the action unfolds.

Other ideas, but less feasible at this point:

- use a laptop + projector to project images on the backdrop (continuous slideshow ...)
- use a Polaroid camera to take pictures and use these pictures immediately in the storyboard
- same idea, but a digital camera (in conjunction with the laptop/projector)
- laptop + printer to print out the storyboard elements

These options are definitely very enticing, but might pose too many problems in a convention setting.

### **3.8. Organisation**

From an organisation/logistics point of view, nothing much needs to be changed compared to a normal game as we have run over the past years.

However, we need 3 people (GM + 2 captains) at the table to ensure a smooth operation. It would be possible to run the game with a GM only, but that would be very stressful!

A timetable should be made to make sure that the role of GM and captains is rotated, such that everyone involved in the organisation of the game has enough time to shop, chat, walk around or enjoying a beer at the bar.