

# Baby-sitting or bird watching? The Role of Supervision in IR Simulation Exercises

Unleashing creative learning in conflict resolution and its application for the military<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article is about ways to create better learning environments in the field of international relations (IR) through the use of simulation exercises. It presents the Pax Ludens methodology, which combines two different approaches in simulation gaming theory, the open and closed scenario.

In the first part the authors argue that the key to a successful simulation in IR lies in the design of the scenario. Simulations that create and use a combination of open and closed scenarios offer a genuine learning environment and should take preference over purely open or purely closed simulation exercises. The authors argue that this can be done by putting emphasis on four issues: ownership by participants in the design of the scenario, safeguarding realism before and during the exercise, a sizable control team with relevant expertise on the topic at hand, and a software-based facilitation.

The second part of the paper presents a case study where the authors look at how the Pax Ludens methodology works in practice. The presented case study gives insights into the experiences of the Dutch military, a target group that has a particular learning need for a training programme in international conflict management. The concept proves very useful in practice, and supports the argument that the hybrid format of open and closed scenarios work well if trainers are capable of adapting the simulation process through technical and informational support to players via the Control team. One of the key differentiators with other simulation methods is that this method keeps the simulated initiatives as 'real' as possible.

## Introduction

In the International Relations (IR) sphere, today's learning institutions are adapting to a new era. There is a growing interest in multicultural exchange, coupled with a by far greater mobility and ever more sophisticated technology, able to connect people across continents twenty-four-seven. As a result, students and professionals accept the need to interpret the world in a global context, and are keen to embrace the dogma of multi-disciplinary learning where people go beyond their own field expertise and draw from other disciplines. The investment banker wants to know more about the political changes in China and confront the looming energy scarcity crisis, the European diplomat deals with public diplomacy towards developing countries in Africa, the Dutch journalist runs a

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Diaspora satellite radio station in Iran and the British air force colonel is responsible for the reconstruction of a post Iraq detention system. It is the need to ‘understand the other’ which brings people together in training environments, in a bid to improve each others insights and to enhance one’s chances to perform better in a changing world.

The challenge for teaching and research institutions is evident: what are the most appropriate methods to stimulate effective learning processes, and to connect disciplines in a meaningful way? Classroom lectures, individual assignments and interactive workshop settings all have their distinctive advantages and are an indispensable part of knowledge transfer. Simulation exercises too have a long history in facilitating the most diverse training needs for IR professionals; ranging from classic negotiation techniques to military manoeuvres in the Persian Gulf. The authors argue that with some of the innovations described in this essay, simulations can contribute to better understanding of conflict dynamics.

### **The key to successful simulations: the right scenario**

Each simulation exercise revolves around its scenario. It gives the meaning, the context to the simulation and determines whom participants are representing, what aims they should strive for, and the kind of limitations they have to deal with. This reflects the classic notion presented by Suransky already in 1977 that there are two factors that determine success of simulations in the classroom: 1) a willingness of the participants to research and develop their adopted roles seriously; and 2) the achievement of specific educational goals. “Together, these factors promote a special, experiential learning process which can generate a foundation of knowledge and the motivation for critical thinking.”<sup>3</sup>

A simulation that offers a real-life link for its ‘players’ and does so intensively in the preparation phase through the participants own research for their country, role and strategy papers, is likely to deliver both motivation and valuable interactions during the exercise. Highly motivated participants interacting and learning with each other, tend to take away with them valuable insights into diplomatic complexity and processes which could benefit them in their future careers.

The scenario is the key tool to make this happen. It sketches the context, it creates a hypothetical real-life situation in which all simulated action will occur and presents the platform for the possible outcomes. It is at the centre of the participants’ interest. In other words, the design of the scenario is crucial, and therefore the rest of the simulation – and the facilitation thereof – should be built around it.

There are two main scenario schools within ‘simulation exercising’. The various types and models of simulations have been discussed elsewhere, and this article will not go into this discussion in any relevant detail. A short note should suffice on how the authors intend to use the different approaches in this article.

Many simulations are based on the convergent model, in which there is an emphasis on predictable paths of learning. In general, they use the so-called closed scenario, where participants are encouraged to make choices between certain possible, predefined, decisions. Outcomes of these exercises are – to a certain degree – predictable. This type of simulation therefore allows for a very specific debriefing at the end of the exercise. As trainers are fully aware of mistakes that could be made and the amount of alternative outcomes (there is a limited number of possible combinations),

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<sup>3</sup> L. Suransky: *The Guide to Simulations/ Games for Education and Training*, p.163  
The Play of Consciousness and Educational Praxis - A phenomenology of Learning with the Middle East Conflict Simulation Game Ann Arbor 1980 (Ph.d thesis)

participants can benefit from a well-structured training programme. Closed scenarios are particularly useful for training programmes that make use of existing 'best practices', such as the case in established best leadership or coordination practices, third party mediation or crisis management. Trainers of this type of simulation exercise have access to an existing body of knowledge that allows for generalisations, and can make participants appreciate learned lessons (in the past) by others in similar settings. When teaching goals include management and coordination, many of these simulations rely on ICT infrastructure to facilitate the exercise. This can include various levels of ICT applications, from calculating the new 'scenarios' for a second or third round of play (i.e. in international economy training programmes) to full-fledged computer animations with a multiple choice catalogue for each individual participants. The latter type simulation can be very costly (particularly when it comes to military computer-aided exercises), and some critics say that the involved learning process suffers from the fact that it encourages 'winning', rather than 'learning'<sup>4</sup>. Others argue that these simulations are too technical in nature<sup>5</sup>.

This type of design is grounded in the rational/scientific approach, where people's action depends on logical choices. It assumes that decisions are taken in accordance within a measurable cost-benefit analysis rather than allowing for the more emotional elements in human crisis decision making. It claims to be of a more scientific nature and attempts to quantify interpersonal processes. In simulations, this translates into the key question: "this is the problem, how do we solve it?"<sup>6</sup>

An alternative to the above 'closed' simulation is the divergent model, which is also referred to as high-fidelity simulation.<sup>7</sup> These are designed around an 'open' scenario', where participants have the freedom to shape the simulation according to their own insights and abilities. It often circles on a certain set of issues where participants are confronted with a problem: "this is the situation and what do we do?"<sup>8</sup> In these simulations, trainers mostly work with a broadly defined framework, which serves as a guiding principle for 'controlling' the unfolding of events. For example, the negotiations around the independence of Kosovo<sup>9</sup>, it might be decided in the simulation design not to include neighbouring states and instead focus on the negotiations on UN level in New York.

Within the academic debate, this approach can be placed close to existentialism, which claims that primary reality is not necessarily based on pure rational consciousness. Instead, it encourages inter-subjectivity as a basic learning (and judging!) principle. "It is what happens between people and what comes out of that dialogue that is of value."<sup>10</sup> According to many, the biggest problem with this model lies in its limited 'reality-check'. As participants are free to explore alternatives, they tend to overlook critical real-life issues (be it of an enabling or limiting kind), with unrealistic action as a consequence. As Kaufman puts it: "any simulation is only as strong as its weakest team"<sup>11</sup>. Final outcomes often suffer from a certain degree of frustration by

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<sup>4</sup> M. Prensky: "Simulation – Are they Games" 2001, retrieved at: [www.marcprensky.com](http://www.marcprensky.com)

<sup>5</sup> TNO senior staff, interview with the authors, May 2005

<sup>6</sup> Christopher, E. M. & Smith, L. E. (1990). Shaping the content of simulation/games. In D. Crookall & R. L. Oxford (Eds.), *Simulation, gaming, and language learning* (pp. 47-54). New York: Newbury House.

<sup>7</sup> M. Prensky: "Simulation – Are they Games" 2001, retrieved at: [www.marcprensky.com](http://www.marcprensky.com)

<sup>8</sup> Christopher, E. M. & Smith, L. E. (1990). Shaping the content of simulation/games. In D. Crookall & R. L. Oxford (Eds.), *Simulation, gaming, and language learning* (pp. 47-54). New York: Newbury House.

<sup>9</sup> this simulation has been done by The Public International Law & Policy Group (PILPG), retrieved at: [www.publicinternationallaw.org](http://www.publicinternationallaw.org)

<sup>10</sup> Interview with the authors, L Suransky 2007

<sup>11</sup> J.P.Kaufman: "Using Simulation as a tool to teach about International Negotiation" in *International Negotiation* 3: 59-75, 1998

participants about the fact that the experienced might not be applicable in the real world. Still, the divergent model allows learning experiences about issues where there is no or little best practice available. This is the case for example when exploring new investment schemes in China's current political order<sup>12</sup>, or anticipating alternative futures for the oil industry.<sup>13</sup>

Both the divergent and the convergent model have their *raison d'être*. Yet, the authors argue for a more comprehensive approach that cuts across the strict dichotomy between the convergent and divergent model. Instead, one should aim to combine the positive aspects of the different methodologies in a bid to provide an excellent learning product. While closed scenarios have a distinct advantage regarding the structure of simulations and the design of a debriefing presentation thereafter, open scenarios ensure greater motivation and room for creativity among participants. The latter, too make the simulation itself by far more a result of their own 'making'. For example, the participant that plays Sudan's President Bashir in a simulation on the Darfur crisis will learn more from a negotiation about future options than reconstructing the 2005 attempt to reach the Darfur Peace Agreement. An open-ended simulation creates the necessary space to be 'learning by doing'. At the same time, the complex realities of the Darfur political landscape do not allow for an over-simplification for the sake of a successful simulation. A control element is needed to keep the necessary reality-check. Consequently, a scenario that features both a thorough – controlled – teaching structure and a creative – unrestricted – learning environment would certainly deliver better learning results.

The question is how to combine maximum control of participants' action without restraining their freedom to explore new, alternative scenarios? Combining these two elements might seem a little far-fetched at first, but the authors argue that with some minor innovations (technical as well as managerial), simulations can do just that. The Pax Ludens Foundation lies at the heart of this effort. An interdisciplinary team of IR professionals<sup>14</sup> has spent the last two years developing a more hybrid form of simulation exercise that allows for a different learning (and teaching) experience. This method de facto combines open with closed scenarios.

The Pax Ludens methodology finds its roots in the constructivist theory, which assumes that knowledge has a personal meaning and is created by individuals.<sup>15</sup> The trainer has a facilitating role, that of an 'enabler' for a creative group process, based on the platform of intense participant immersion in preparing their country and role profiles for the simulation. This methodology clearly goes beyond what Freire called 'banking education' and leads to a more dialogue-based relationship between teacher(s) and students: "they become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. In this process, arguments based on 'authority' are no longer valid..."<sup>16</sup>. A similar thought comes from Dewey, emphasising "the importance of having a student's knowledge grow from experience" and create "a social environment, where students could come together to analyse materials and to create a community of learners who built their knowledge together."<sup>17</sup> At the same time, this methodology aims to go beyond the mere reconstruction of knowledge, into a mode where the participants create new meaning; they are invited to make history! It draws on the human imagination and capacities, both

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<sup>12</sup> In 2005, the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies organised a series of consultations entitled China 2020 for a investment bank in the Netherlands.

<sup>13</sup> This kind of scenario-bases simulations are being developed on a regular basis by Shell International.

<sup>14</sup> Including experts from the military, foreign policy, academia, medical research, psychology and history.

<sup>15</sup> D. Thanasoulas: Constructive Learning, retrieved at: [www.seasite.niu.edu](http://www.seasite.niu.edu)

<sup>16</sup> P. Freire: "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" Penguin Books, 1970, p.61

<sup>17</sup> Dewey, Building an Understanding of Constructivism, 1995

mental and emotional. Participants are encouraged to inhabit the being of a chief executive, rebel leader or government decision-maker. At this point a more emotional element comes to the fore; simulations of this kind can create insights into the minds of a given leader. Why do they find themselves acting against their personal value systems, to what extent do they enjoy or dislike their power position, what is the experience of loneliness of a leader faced with two equally unattractive options? Some participants actually transform into their roles and inhabit their mindset. As one participant claims: "I wasn't an American any longer, I was a Syrian"<sup>18</sup>. Often, this kind of cooptation lasts well beyond the end of the simulation exercise.

This level of identification is only possible when the scenario allows for a level of real world authenticity about what is probable in the 'real world'. In line with what has been stated earlier, the key assumptions of the Pax Ludens methodology is that there is merit in focussing on real-life cases. Participants are generally more willing and better motivated when allowed to engage in an existing negotiation process. For example, the learning curve can be considered steeper when simulating the question of the final status of Kosovo, compared to for example 'playing' a senior country representative at a hypothetical conference on the future of peacekeeping operations.

While essential for the simulation, realism alone is not enough. The Pax Ludens methodology places its simulations in the immediate future and refrains from using 'past' real-life scenarios. Its scenario development is always based on consultations with IR experts and their current assessment of the situation at hand. A couple of carefully considered extrapolations then lead to a future scenario, which in turn serves as a 'kick-off' for the simulation exercise. For example, a simulation would start with a scenario that already features the French president Nicolas Sarkozy before his actual election.<sup>19</sup>, or assuming a Hamas/Fatah unity government before it came into being. This way, participants are encouraged to pose the question: 'what if...?' and have to rethink or adapt their strategy (i.e. the standing of Lebanon's leadership towards France). While the trainers have a substantial say in the development of the scenario, the extrapolations are based on the written preparations of the participants (their role/team profiles and strategy agendas). The participants' input in developing the scenario enhances the motivation of the group: it creates ownership of the process.

In other words, by combining the convergent (closed scenario) and divergent (open scenario) models, the trainers take up a facilitating role that provides an open-ended learning environment, while at the same time safeguarding the highest possible degree of realism through a real-life *future* scenario and a permanent 'control element'. Also, this design emphasises maximum motivation by participants through 'collective ownership' of the scenario setting. This is not easy to manage. The following lays out how such complex interactions can be organised.

### **Finding new ways for managing control?**

Simulating complex conflict dynamics requires that various elements are combined; in-depth expert knowledge, creating a realistic high pressure environment, information asymmetry and ensuring for realism of participant interaction. Managing such a dynamic environment is a complex task. Trainers must have constant overview of all events unfolding at any given moment and be ready to intervene/coach where necessary. Technology is generally considered a welcome tool for facilitating these types of training

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<sup>18</sup> Evaluations from simulation exercise University College Utrecht 2005

<sup>19</sup> In April 2007, Pax Ludens facilitated a training course where the election of Sarkozy was part of the kick-off scenario.

exercises, but remains an expensive addition to the traditional university academic class. It requires highly paid professionals to develop and maintain the thoroughly designed applications needed for a high-end training effort. Internet can facilitate logistical arrangements, online networks often serve as data exchange platforms, and fully computerised animations are used to simulate certain situations needed in the exercise. In most cases however, there is little or no interest in incorporating substantial levels of ICT infrastructure into today's IR simulations. This article argues that there is a great potential for ICT application to improve simulation techniques.

For example, the ICONS methodology provides an interesting starting point. ICONS is an initiative that originates from University of Maryland and has been designed to offer a fully online learning experience and creates a virtual setting for a particular negotiation process (including online preparations and online debriefing). As a consequence, its focus rests on the generation of procedural knowledge, through the exclusive use of online interaction: it aims to enhance writing skills, and, by excluding any kind of face-to-face interaction, can claim to empower less vocal students<sup>20</sup>. In addition, ICONS features an interesting detail: it does not allow participants to submit negotiation proposals without a trainer's scrutiny. There is an in-built control element for any attempt by players to conclude an agreement and experts check whether submissions are realistic enough to be validated for the simulation. This process extends over days, sometimes weeks, depending on the design of the simulation.

It is this kind of control element that is of interest to the authors. Control over the simulation process enables the trainer to keep a close watch on the participants and their agenda's, which is of particular importance to open scenario simulations. As argued earlier, simulations that create a maximum of negotiation space through an open scenario but fail to maintain a rigorous level of reality-testing, risk losing participants who may veer off into unrealistic coalitions or initiatives which can lower motivation and skew the outcome of the game. For example, a simulated peace process between the Tamil Tigers and the Sri Lankan government would greatly suffer if participants were free to settle for an agreement that excludes the issue of independence for the Tamil homeland. The choice by ICONS to allow a submission of negotiation proposals only after having survived expert scrutiny therefore seems plausible. However, ICONS uses the online platform to run all communication, and limits its 'control' function to the final proposals.

The Pax Ludens methodology goes one step beyond. It opts to significantly enhance the level of hands-on control during the simulation process and monitors the whole process of the evolution of decisions, policies and relationships. It makes use of a specific type of software that allows for continuous supervision. This software, InterACT©, has been developed in 2004 by Pax Ludens and Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael' and is based on the basic principles of an email exchange programme. It sets up a local area network between computer terminals, provides separate accounts for all players, and channels any given message via a control account. This way, a message is allowed to reach its recipient only when validated by a trainer. InterACT© is used in a setting where participants have no visual contact when communicating by e-mail messaging (they are in separate rooms in the same building), but are able (and expected!) to set up face-to-face meetings with each other in order to follow their agenda. The open-ended scenario allows for creative thinking (and action), yet remains controlled to safeguard the level of realism of the simulation at all times. For example, some players might prepare a meeting between two parties that would normally not meet (i.e. US senior officials and Hamas). Reading the incoming messages from party A to party B with the suggestion to meet, teaching staff

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<sup>20</sup> Retrieved at: [www.icons.umd.edu](http://www.icons.umd.edu)

can then decide to either validate or reject. If validated, the expectation would be that party B would not accept the invitation. Participants would be given the option to 'rectify' their own mistakes. This kind of peer review is particularly useful as part of this kind of learning environment. If meeting proposals and agreements become unrealistic, the control function allows for intervention at any given time. This can be done by messaging through InterACT®, or by face-to-face advice or an appeal against a Control decision. This 'hybrid' format enables the trainers to minimise restrictions for the players while at the same time coaching, or even re-directing when needed.

### **Big Brothers are watching you – the trick with the expert control team**

The level of control described in the preceding section needs substantial expertise and adequate staffing. This becomes clear when looking at the numbers: when players are allowed to freely interact through the messaging system, counts go up to three messages per minute by average on a simulation period of 17 hours (spread over three days<sup>21</sup>). While the InterACT software allows for full control, it generates a fast-moving environment, with a substantial amount of messages criss-crossing the network. This might include meeting coordination messages, pre-negotiations before the start of a face-to-face meeting, press releases or intelligence gathering.

The task for the control team is to monitor the process and to make sense of it all. In order to offer a genuine learning experience, there is not only a need for permanent supervision, but for continuous reflection on the unfolding of events. In essence it is not about the software, actually; without the control team, the software itself is meaningless. The value of the ICT application lies in its facilitating potential. As a consequence, the Pax Ludens methodology uses a sizable control team that might seem – at first glance – more suitable to run the operation centre of a military exercise. However, there are good reasons not to limit training staff to the absolute minimum. The control team consists of a number of experts with inter-disciplinary backgrounds. During the simulation, the team is responsible for the overall management of the simulation and performs a number of functions. It is also available for assistance and coaching throughout the simulation. One of the control team's core activities lies in the monitoring and validating all incoming messages, the so-called 'validation desk'. Up to two trainers would be in charge of this task at all times.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the control team runs a number of specific "desks"; one responsible for meetings and another for intelligence. Also, some simulations benefit from one desk in charge of world press and one for the rest of the world.

In general, the highest priority for the control team is to remain in the background. It leaves maximum freedom to the players; the control team is keen to let players explore new, creative paths in diplomacy. Intervention in the game is only required if the realistic character of the simulation is in danger. If learning objectives so require, it is possible to manipulate the state of affairs from behind the scenes, introducing new developments plausible in the 'real' world into the 'game' world. Possible ways of "manipulation" by the control team include: information leakages, civil society developments, radical movements' activities or economic shifts (oil prices, etc).

It should be denoted that the 'control' team in fulfilling its many roles is also a centre for debate and evaluation of developments in the game, sometimes stopping to

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<sup>21</sup> Statistics on interaction for the HDV exercise 2006: Total messages: 2532, pages written: 1670, average 13,2 press releases per team, average 168,5 messages per team, average 52,6 messages per player, average 3.1 messages per minute.

<sup>22</sup> With no restrictions on the amount of messages per player, the following is indicative: for a group of 25 participants, 1-2 validation staff is appropriate; for 50 participants, 2-3 'validators' would be needed.

decide to the best of its expert knowledge whether something thrown up by players could happen in the 'real' world. In this sense the 'control' team is also playing the game.

The method develops a learning environment that generates a plethora of messages, events and meetings. One of the distinct advantages being that, unlike other simulations, there is no restriction to one or two main issues. Rather, the complex and fast pace of this simulation requires participants to multi-task, take decisions quickly, delegate and give priority in order to achieve the goals stated in their individual strategy. While doing so they are repeatedly curbed in their actions by the counter initiatives of their peers representing divergent national or group interests, and they often have to re-negotiate their strategies.

In addition, the data generated by the software proves a valuable tool for the debriefing. The control team can use visual graphs, based on the participants' own actions to illustrate communication streams and political trends. For example, it is possible to highlight the difference between the active brokering role by the Egyptian Security Advisor (contacts with Hamas) compared to a more symbolic role played by the Egyptian President (contacts with the Arab League). The software data-mining tool can create any type of graph needed to debrief on the exercise.

**...INTO THE PAX LUDENS CONTROL TEAM:**

**Validation Desk:**

...validates (or rejects) all incoming messages before they reach the receiving party(s). The Validation Desk monitors progress of the simulation exercise and controls messages for their level of realism. (One appeal allowed)

**Meetings Desk:**

...helps participants to set up their individual meetings, and monitors some.

**Intelligence Desk:**

...provides any information players would like to receive regarding their financial or military capacity, number of troops in certain areas, poll results or developments elsewhere in the game.

**World Press Desk:**

...monitors world events and received input from trainers and players. The World Press desk is responsible for providing 'neutral' news on events that unfold during the simulation, and press interview to report these in World Press or for Control insight into strategy.

**Rest of the World Desk:**

...represents countries / stakeholders that are not part of the simulation. This desk will assume the role of any personality not among the formal roles in the game with whom a player would like to discuss issues.

### **Case Study: Training the Dutch Military in Diplomacy**

You might ask: does the Pax Ludens Methodology work in practice? Is it possible – and if so useful – to provide a genuine learning experience by using an open-ended, yet strongly controlled scenario, a software messaging system and a control team of up to ten trainers? Over the last two years, Pax Ludens has gained substantial experience with the running of these kinds of simulation exercises. One of the most interesting training

programmes includes the *HDV – Hogere Defensie Vorming*<sup>23</sup> simulation entitled ‘The Greater Middle East’. It is part of a ten-week curriculum in peace and security for up to 50 Dutch military officers, which is outsourced by the Netherlands Defence College to the Clingendael Institute. In 2005 and 2006, Clingendael and the Pax Ludens Foundation were jointly responsible for running the HDV final simulation exercise.<sup>24</sup> What follows is a brief description of the separate stages of this particular simulation. The authors used the five components of simulation exercises described by Lantis. He distinguishes between educational objectives, specific roles, background information, rule of procedure and debriefing period.<sup>25</sup>

### *Educational Objectives*

The goal of the HDV course is to prepare a carefully selected group of military officers and civilian personnel of the Dutch Ministry of Defence to function in the (key) ranks of the high and top-management level within the defence organisation and in international organizations such as EU or NATO. Specific objectives of the simulation include 1) integrating the separate parts of the peace and security curriculum; and 2) enhancing understanding and handling of the dynamics of high level diplomatic decision-making processes in conflict situations. As far as the latter is concerned, it should be noted that there is an important distinction between IR simulations that target civilian groups (academic, NGO professionals, students, etc) on the one hand and military target groups on the other. Often, key learning objectives include a better understanding of a particular conflict and its historical roots. For the military, the organisers agreed to focus on the dynamics behind the decision-making process. After 10-20 years in the military apparatus, most officers have learned to appreciate action-oriented behaviour, adhering to the principle ‘tell me what to do, and I will find a way to make it happen.’ When confronted with the politics of international conflicts, such an action-oriented attitude can be counterproductive.<sup>26</sup> Even though the main learning objectives included various elements (see box below), the key learning objective was straight forward: the understanding of conflict diplomacy and the challenges raised by a political impasse – in contrast to measurable results.

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<sup>23</sup> The Dutch term for: Higher Defence Training

<sup>24</sup> The peace and security is one of three major blocks of a one-year course for Dutch Major-level officers from army, air force, navy, military police and civilian staff members of the ministry of defence.

<sup>25</sup> J.S. Lantis: “Simulations and Experimental Learning in the International Relations Classroom” in: *International Negotiation* 3: 39-57, 1998

<sup>26</sup> This is not to say that vice versa, diplomats and NGO personnel would not benefit from a little more result-oriented thinking.

Main learning objectives for the HDV training course. At the end of the simulation exercise, participants will have:

- gained in-depth insights about the case study at hand
- improved analytical skills on conflict and crisis dynamics in general
- increased ability to understand third (non-state) parties
- enlarged creativity in finding alternative solutions to conflict situations
- improved communication skills in both conference and informal settings
- gained insights in the tensions between political priority setting and military/operational planning
- greater understanding for intra- and inter-organizational tensions
- increased appreciation for the role of personal relationships in conflict management

Source: HDV Course Manual, Pax Ludens 2006

### *Setting & Specific Roles*

The simulation exercise 'The Greater Middle East' was organised from 20-24 November 2006 with a scenario set two months in the future (January – April 2007; each 15 minutes in real life represented one day in the simulation). Participants were assigned to various teams to represent a country, institution or political organisation, 'playing' a public figure or authority from that particular 'team'. In total, there were 14 teams (with a minimum of two, a maximum of five people in a team).

In order to prepare for the game, the participants were expected to find out what they needed to know about their character, their team and the relationship with other players in the context of the greater Middle East. Before the start of the simulation, each participant wrote an individual 'role-profile' (5-6 pages) on the person they embodied during the simulation exercise. In addition, they worked together with their team members in order to prepare a joint team profile (which could be distinctively different from the role profile, i.e. considering the difference in interests between President Bush and Condoleezza Rice). Finally, participants were required to submit a strategy paper, in which they had to outline their personal strategy for the simulation (in the form of up to three main goals in bullet points). Their assessment of their ability or inability to realize these strategic goals is great information for debriefing, and lies at the heart of any diplomatic conundrum.

Based on the emerging agenda's, the control team filtered out some key themes that would provide a guideline for the control team to keep an overview of, and to prepare the reference points for the debriefing at the end of the week. The five reference themes for the 2006 Greater Middle East Exercise included 1) oil diplomacy, 2) peace talks (Israel- Palestine, Israel-Hezbollah), 3) proliferation (nuclear and small arms), 4) radicalisation (religious, political, military), and 5) mediation. By using this method, the broad structure of the simulation was de facto designed by the participants themselves.

### **...how to prepare the individual role profile:**

#### Description

- Function (e.g. head of state, minister, religious leader etc.)
- Organisation (e.g. which ministry, political party etc.)
- Personal biography on personal experience, career, political activities, etc. (including photo)
- Current tasks and responsibilities (mandates)
- Personal reputation (friends and foes)
- Personal standing on Middle East (if necessary an explanation on the difference between personal and professional standing)

#### Analysis

- A clarification on the personal agenda (whether this is similar to the country's agenda or whether there are secret personal goals and ambitions?)
- A realistic estimate of the ability to meet the set goals. What are the expectations in the short/long run?
- A summary of the personal strategy in three bullet points.

### *Background Information*

A great range of background material provided for an insightful preparation period. Eight weeks ahead of the actual simulation week, the participants attended a series of lectures on the Middle East, and were introduced to the simulation and were given a reader including articles on the various regions of the Greater Middle East. In addition, a tailor-made news-feed from [www.myheadlines.nl](http://www.myheadlines.nl) would provide the officers with up-to-date information from a large amount of different online news sources.

In order to ensure adequate preparation, the organisers opted to coach participants on particular teams during the eight weeks ahead of the exercise (i.e. a Syria expert would coach the Syrian and Jordan team, etc). This was done largely by distance, be it online, by email or telephone. The coaches spent up to six hours per participant for these contacts. A feedback session at the end of the coaching period served as a last chance to discuss 'role research' in person. Final documents were based on various sources, and benefited from sufficient time for reflection before submission to the control team.

### *Process of Interaction*

The simulation started on a Monday morning and ended on Wednesday afternoon. A quick, informal debriefing was held straight after the final message had bent sent. Thursday would serve as a 'free' day, where all participants had to submit a 'justification' of their actions during the simulation. On Friday, the control team facilitated the official debriefing as a final step. The control team consisted of twelve staff members, including IR experts, country specialists and some support staff from various IR related disciplines. In addition, a professional media team assisted the world press desk in gathering information during the exercise and editing compilations of news flashes for the two short plenary sessions on the second and third day.

The setting was designed to allow for any amount of message to be sent by the different actors / teams. The 48 participants were located in 14 different rooms and each participant had its own terminal and login. The control team included two trainers to

attend full-time to the validation task. Each player had a range of options in order to shape his/her diplomatic activity. Standard messages served as basic means of communication, such as information exchange, lobbying or preparing the grounds for face-to-face meetings. Meeting requests alerted the meeting desk that a number of actors had decided to meet in person to discuss a certain agenda. The control team then decided on a case-by-case basis whether or not to send trainers to observe meetings. Intelligence messages could be sent to the intelligence desk if specific information about their own or their adversaries' capabilities, was required in order to pursue a particular agenda or to confirm assumptions participants made during the simulation. Below you see that participants made decisions based on received messages from the intelligence desk.

Dear Robert Gates [US secretary of defence],

I have been informed by our intelligence [agency] that Iran has upgraded their air defense system [...]with a Chinese procured AA system HQ-7, kh-55's and Vympel R-77. Israel is worried about [this] and time seems to become critical now to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. The point of no return seems come closer sooner than expected. What are the actions of the USA to prevent this terrorist country to obtain a nuclear weapon [?]

Amir Peretz [Israeli minister of defence]

In addition, participants could opt to send out press releases (only per team, not per individual player). The world press desk would monitor these messages and gather additional information by holding interviews with certain players at certain moments. For example, the TV crew went to interview Syrian President Bashir after he came out of a meeting with President Ahmadinejad in order to record his take on the diplomatic encounter with his Iranian colleague. The last, ultimate 'tool' available to participants can have drastic consequences. The so-called 'action form' gives the individuals or teams the opportunity to change the current status quo of the simulation. The example below shows that participants have to make an analysis of the situation and consider various options and argue how their action will impact the game:

**MESSAGE STATUS: Validated**

**ACTION REQUEST**

**From:** Syria  
**Sent Time (Game):** 2/18/2007  
**Sent Time (Real):** 2006-11-21 13:52:20Z

**A. What is the problem/event you are addressing**  
*UK (US) request sign of good will and wish Syria closed its western borders with Lebanon to prevent resupply of Hizbollah via Syria*

**B. What are the options that you consider for addressing this matter**

**1. Do Nothing**

Negative outcome	No sign of good will to UK and US -> No movement on Golan dossier
Positive outcome	Nothing
Likelihood of success	1 - very low

**2. Double Syrian border patrols western borders (Lebanese Syrian border)**

Negative outcome	UK US may see through this and lose confidence in Syria. Hizbollah might get frustrated
Positive outcome	Moderate sign to UK US. We don't say we absolutely stop Hizbollah resupply.
Likelihood of success	3 - fifty-fifty
<b>3. Stop resupply of Hizbollah across Syrian border</b>	
Negative outcome	Frustrating Hizbollah
Positive outcome	Good sign to UK US. However, how much further will this take the Golan dossier
Likelihood of success	2 - low
<b><u>G. ACTION you choose from the above:</u></b>	
2	
<b><u>H. REASONS why chose this option</u></b>	
<b><i>We would like to give a moderate sign of good will to UK and US and see how they respond, without absolutely frustrating the Hizbollah relationship</i></b>	

The control element in this kind of simulation is limited to keeping a watchful eye on the realism of the simulation. In order to do this, it could reject every seemingly unrealistic message. As argued earlier however, the Pax Ludens methodology gives preference to the peer review effect.<sup>27</sup> Participants tend to correct and remind each other of their mistakes. Still, there are ways to re-direct the simulation in a more subtle way. Pax Ludens occasionally uses mini scenarios, for examples when certain teams should be more involved in the simulation. For example one of the mini scenarios, which Pax Ludens had prepared for the United Nations team, had Al Jazeera report that a UNIFIL commander was involved in smuggling weapons.

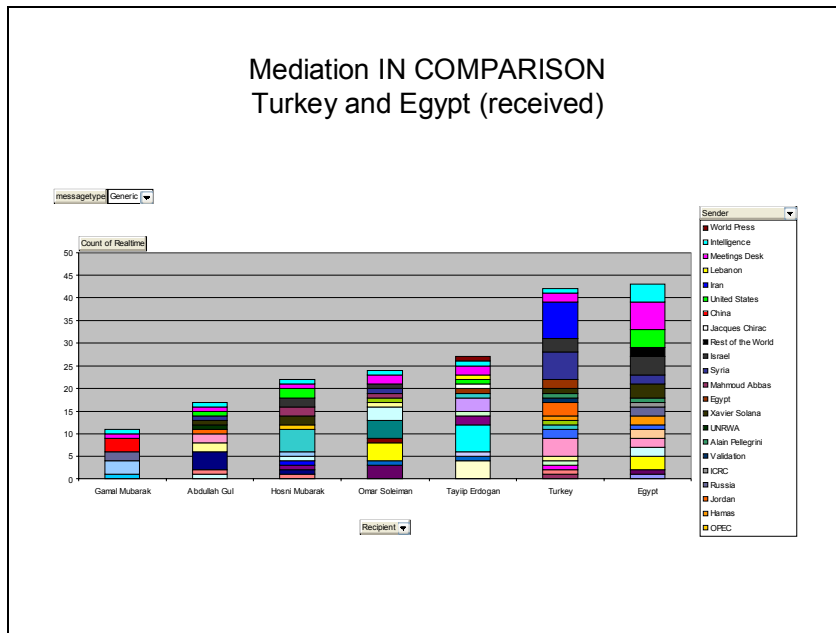
All in all, the Greater Middle East was a simulation characterised by an extremely open-ended scenario that encouraged all actors to become actively involved, to lobby and work towards achieving their personal and team agendas. The thorough preparations, the clustering into five main themes and the large control team enabled the trainers to facilitate the process. Meanwhile the participants were pressured by the great amount of messages, combined with numerous meetings and the preparations for these. They had to think fast, act quickly, lobby effectively, persuade judiciously, and always prioritise given the limited time at their disposal. Invariably mistakes were made, and frustration became a reality – a main learning objective for this kind of simulation exercise.

### *Debriefing*

The personal experiences from the simulation are intense and useful; however the maximum learning effect depends on a thorough and to-the-point analysis thereafter. There were two debriefing elements as part of the HDV simulation. The first informal style debriefing session took place at the end of the last day. During this first 'hot wash up', everybody was free to give a contribution from his/her perspective to unravel what had happened in the game, secret agendas, clever strategies, betrayals...all fodder for the learning experience. The official debriefing follows after one day of rest and is based on analysis of the control team.

<sup>27</sup> The majority of messages were validated. In fact only 5% of all 2532 messages were rejected.

The debriefing served to discuss the highlights of the simulation and to filter out the most important insights gained during the exercise. In order to do so, the control team had a full day to analyse the events of 17 hours of simulation. The justifications submitted by the participants, together with the InterACT© generated data formed input for the debriefing. It is evident that technology is a valuable asset for this endeavour: the InterACT© software allows to generate graphical overviews and to research all interaction data to identify and explain the underlying dynamics. An example is shown in the box below.



Illustrative graph from the HDV debriefing 2006: Comparing Egyptian and Turkish mediation efforts

The two debriefings of the Greater Middle East simulation exercise led to some key observations. For one there is a clear indication that participants enhanced their declarative knowledge about conflict dynamics and the Greater Middle East. The learning curve was evident: on the one hand there were less rejected messages over time, and secondly participants confirmed in written evaluations that the simulation contributed significantly to their understanding of the region. Experts on the Middle East conflict who monitored the progress over the days stated that the way participants adapted their understanding of complex issues in the Middle East was impressive. The evaluations also showed a great increase in concrete knowledge about the conflict: One participant stated: *“The challenge to deal with such complex items under great pressure was really a great experience. I was also surprised how much knowledge I collected in a short time about the Greater Middle East.”* Another stated: *“Historic knowledge is essential to understand the context of complex issues like the [Israel-Palestinian] conflict.”*

Second, the simulation helped participants to increase their ability to ‘understand the other’. Participants identified with the roles and countries they played and gained significant insights in the way leaders/countries/organisations look and deal with the world: *“I learned to look at the conflict through different (Arab) glasses.”* A participant who had played the Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas stated: *“I found it difficult to get things done, to get deals closed. A couple of times I had a deal with a country or*

*organisation, however having returned to [the capital] the deal was off due to fact that the highest representative of a country (who did not attend the meeting) did not agree with the deal I had made with his subordinates.”*

Another observation includes the procedural knowledge: negotiation skills were tested and improved, as well as the preparing/chairing of meetings. As one quote illustrates: “[...] as [a] mediator I found that if your are moderate, the negotiations never get stuck [completely]. If you are a hardliner, you get [probably get] away with one success once.” Another pointed to the importance of scenario building; “[...]when operating in] international [politics] facts are not enough, you have to think in scenarios and be able to recognise scenario patterns in everything you hear, read and see.”

Additional quotes from written evaluations provide some interesting details on the participants’ perception on their personal development:<sup>28</sup>

- *“the awareness that you can also achieve your goals with a more reactive attitude... (not quite soldier like!!).” –*
- *“Don’t press to much on results (typical military). Take time and invest in relations. Be pro active, although in a sensitive way.” –*
- *“I have a tendency to go to fast from problem to solution. In some cases I was too enthusiastic in initial negotiations.” –*
- *“To play chess on the different boards. Give and take in one situation can help to gain result on another topic.”*

## **Conclusions**

There is no need for a dogmatic distinction between open and closed scenarios. Even though there is room for further refinements, the Pax Ludens methodology shows that a more hybrid format for IR simulation exercise is both possible and useful. It points out that there is merit in a more experimental approach that serves to maintain a chosen focus while at the same time makes it possible to keep a team of experts in control of the proceedings. Participants appreciate the level of freedom provided for by the open scenario and clearly benefit from substantial supervision and coaching through the InterACT© software.

To date, however, there is limited knowledge on how best to use ICT applications to improve training programmes in the field of IR. The digital data mining creates a valid set of data to inform a debriefing on declarative (concepts and content) and procedural knowledge (negotiation strategies and skills). With the experience at hand, the concept is ready to be developed further, although it is far from being finalised: in order to fine-tune some of the concepts described in this article, the authors invite simulation practitioners to engage in a creative dialogue about the Pax Ludens methodology. There are two questions that are of particular interest: first, whether there are more efficient ways to organise the control function in order to decrease the number of experts needed to manage the simulation. One possible solution is still in the try-out phase: to run (parts of) validation and intelligence desk by online control team members (who were then included in the debriefing through audio/video link). The second question is about the potential use for research: not only can students learn from simulations, they can also serve as a ‘creative pressure cooker’. By taking place in the control team, IR researchers can observe the unfolding simulation and can test how possible scenarios can ‘play out’. Experience shows that the Pax Ludens methodology often creates scenarios that later

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<sup>28</sup> Participants of the HDV course were asked to answer the following questions: How did you perform as a negotiator? What have I learned about yourself? What would you do differently next time? What skills would you like to improve?

occur in reality and therefore offer a certain value to IR experts with research agendas. Taking this one step further, one could also think about a more pragmatic application for foreign policy: Simulations that 'employ' students to play out certain scenarios (i.e. the post-UN resolution scenarios in Kosovo) in order to serve as input for officials from the foreign ministry.

In conclusion, the possibilities of the Pax Ludens methodology are endless. While improvement and fine-tuning is necessary, the authors believe that the Pax Ludens methodology could be applied to a variety of less IR related contexts, where there is a need to investigate opportunities or faults in communication systems, to represent contesting agendas, and to archive what is valuable in the interaction for later analysis.