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# Actual Play: Shell Shock in Gaza

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I promised to playtest Shell Shock if I could find a group to play it with. In early January I hooked up with these guys on teh interwebs (okay, two out of three were old friends) and arranged a test game. We played the first session last Wednesday. Here is my actual play report along with some notes on parsing the game and preparing for the session.

As it says in the game's introductory text, Shell Shock puts you in the role of young recruits sent to the frontlines. Facing the hardships of military life and war they will have to make tough choices to survive.

Shell Shock is a set of rules which will allow you to tell the stories of these soldiers. There is no predetermined setting. You can tell the stories of US soldiers confronted to the horrors of the Korean war or the lives of guerrilla fighters on the Polar front of the Mars independence war of 2135. Whatever the setting, the question remains the same: how far will they go to survive?

You can find out more about Shell Shock on this thread in Story Games. Shell Shock is available in pdf format on Kobayashi's blog.

## Parsing the Game Text

I was the only one in our group to read the game text before the first session. This didn't provide any hardships for us as I was prepared to explain the rules and had read them with thought a couple of times beforehand. On first reading the Shell Shock text seemed a bit unpolished and hard to catch. The character creation was tightly covered as well as the conflict system. The role of the game master and the preparation and the course of events in the game were more vague to me after the first reading (this spawned my questions on Story Games). With second reading (and with Kobayashi's kind answers) those parts become clearer. I got hold of the rigid scene progression (patrol - combat -r&r) and that the game was intended for short 3 to 5 session games where each session would cover one important part of the conflict in question. With more thorough reading however some questions rose about the conflict system. The text states that every conflict that a player loses should lower her character's wounds or stress. Is this intended in the rules so that the group cannot have a conflict of purely story level consequences? That is how we interpreted it.

## Preparation

The game is designed to work with any conflict with soldiers with modern sensibilities. I didn't have any particular scenario in mind when I suggested playing Shell Shock so I opened the floor for discussion. The players came up with lots of ideas, of which two prevailed: The Battle of Stalingrad and the (at the time) ongoing Gaza conflict. I thought we couldn't really go astray with either of those choices so on my suggestion we agreed that we would make the final choice of scenario in the beginning of the first session. I didn't mention this to the players but I had another reason for not choosing a scenario beforehand: I wanted to keep it open so that the players wouldn't start creating their character beforehand. This was because I wanted to see how the character creation would work with no preparations.

I made some research into background material to be able to GM in either of the two scenarios. My primary source was Wikipedia and the articles used as references in the Wikipedia articles. This was mostly to get an overall picture of the conflicts and to extract interesting tidbits and anecdotes to use to color the game.

When we met for our first session we decided to set our game in Gaza. The subject seemed to hold great potential and especially playing the Israeli soldiers seemed to fit the spirit of Shell Shock. During the course of our conversation a doubt was cast whether we could treat such a complicated and intricate situation on a sufficiently meaningful level. We agreed that we would see how far Shell Shock would take us on that road. In my mind the game will probably tell a lot more about ourselves and our attitudes about the Gaza conflict than about the actual conflict and the people involved in it.

Then we pondered what would the unit the characters were in be like. I had prepared an answer for that in advance and the players bought it so the characters were set in a unit guarding an outpost along the northern border of Gaza. The start date for the events in the game was 23rd of December 2008, the day the cease-fire negotiations were on-going but would be aborted in the following day. We also decided that all the main characters would be young Israeli conscripts.

### Character Creation

The character creation went on following strictly the rules in the game text. The character creation in Shell Shock consists of a series of choices, most of which have four options. First you choose the character's attitude towards the conflict in question, after that her attitude towards military etc. Using this method the characters were made quite fast and with no fuss. Two pieces of advice which are not given in the character creation part of the game but which did help our character creation process greatly were 1) to try to make as diverse a group as possible and 2) discuss the different options and choices out loud with the rest of the group throughout the process.

The choices of the characters' attitude towards the conflict and the military focused the players and characters towards mutual interests and the focus of the game itself. We could see instantly what the dynamics between the characters were. These dynamics also developed and became more concrete

Part of the character creation process was developing the rest of the unit. We decided during the process that the unit the characters were in would be a pretty standard group with a sergeant, a corporal, a radio operator, a two-man machine gun team and a couple of grunts. In Shell Shock you need to pick a name and attitudes (towards the conflict and the military) for the supporting characters. Choosing the attitudes for all five NPC's at the same time seemed a bit tricky so we decided to fill in the blanks during the play.

After the chargen process the group looked like this:

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- Sergeant Baruch ("Kischke") - Indifferent, the scape goat of the unit (played by Matti)
- Corporal Spielberg - a pasifist, goes with the crowd (played by Simo)
- Jääkäri (machine gun) Lewandowski - believes in the conlict, slacker (played by Laku)
- Private, machine gun loader - frightful, eager to be in the military (supporting cast)

### The Actual Play

So, the preparations being done we went head first into actually playing the game. I had prepared one course of events for the players to respod to beforehand, so I went with that. In the end it got us going for the rest of the evening.

The first scene was set in the ground floor of the guard tower of the border outpost in the evening of December 23rd. Sergeant Baruch's gorup had been ordered to guard duty for the night. Corporal Spielberg held watch in the tower with one of the privates while the rest of the group spent time on the ground floor. Sergeant Baruch drank whiskey.

The routine was broken by a call. The radio operator gave the satellite phone to the sergeant. The news was that the intelligence had seen possible enemy movement near the border near this particular outpost. Sergeant was ordered to keep his group alert.

Sgt. Baruch ordered his machine gunners to the tower and followed suite. Raanan hurried up as Lewandowski slowly rose from his bunk and started to gather his things. When Cpl. Spielberg heard the new, he concentrated on watching the border area. Meanwhile Lewandowski and Baruch answered Raanan's firghtful questions about Hamas, one calmly and the other with spite.

After a while Spielberg spotted some movement with his binoculars near the restricted border area. We took a while to discuss whether to declare a conflict about the soldiers spotting the enemy and decided to do so. How far the enemy would get and how good a position the IDF soldiers would be at that point was at stake. Spielberg won that conflict so they spotted the (potential) enemy early on.

Sergeant Baruch ordered the machine gun crew to be ready and grabbed a light rocket gun. In game terms we declared another conflict where Matti tried to make the enemy visible. At the same time Simo declared that Spielberg would try to smash the whiskey bottle that the sergeant had brought in the tower and make it look like an accident. I told Matti that he could try to have Baruch see through this, but Matti decided that the sergeant's mind would be elsewhere, so the plan worked and the whiskey bottle was in shards.

The first contact with the enemy continued for a couple of conflicts more. The players decided that the characters would open fire at the first possible instant. This proved to be the correct course of action as the enemy responded fire

immediately. The enemy was heavily underhanded and the conflict was over quickly. In the end Sgt. Brauch asked for artillery fire and got his request accepted by the artillery officer. After the player characters had taken care of most of the intruders the artillery fire took care of the rest.

None of the players used up any of their traumas in the conflict. This didn't surprise me as I had designed the first conflict to be an easy introduction to combat in Shell Shock. I myself had a bit of vague knowledge of how to determine how many dice the enemy would use in different conflicts. Most of this was due to not exactly knowing when to pile up dice of each opponent to one roll and when to divide. In principle I could have thought the enemy's actions each by each and see which of the players' actions they opposed by instead I ended up choosing a suitable size dice pool quite broad-mindedly.

When the group had defended the border successfully, they were notified that they would be relieved of their duty momentarily. They were also told that their next assignment was to scout the border area in front of the outpost in the morning. This would give them a chance to see just who and what they were up against in the night.

Sgt. Baruch ordered some weed from his contact in the supply company. Simo decided that Cpl. Spielberg was tired of Baruch's shady dealings and said that Spielberg would tell on him to the lieutenant. I decided that convincing the lieutenant to take action would be a social conflict. Simo decided not to press the matter. For me, any outcome would have been ok, including this. I'll be sure to give Cpl. Spielberg chances to try this again as well as chances for Sgt. Baruch to shock Spielberg more. So, if the players like to address this further it'll be up to them. For me it's just the stuff this kind of game thrives on.

In the last scene the group searched the area and found bodies of three Hamas warriors. One of them had a home-made bomb with him. They also heard news on the radio and television in the night and in the morning. Not surprisingly, they had made the headlines themselves. (And this incident was in fact part of the actual history, reported here in one small chapter). In the news it was also predicted that this incident along with Hamas missile attacks the following night could possibly sever the on-going cease-fire talks.

## Conclusion

The session was a success and that was in no small part due to Shell Shock. The character creation focused the players together towards the themes of this game. It also helped to create a dynamic in the group, both between the player characters and between player characters and the supporting cast. The characters grew a lot during the session. To depict this, here's my short portrayal of the group led by Sgt. Baruch at the end of the session (compare it to the one in the character creation section):

## Group 2 of the Eureka squad:

- Sgt. Baruch ("Kischke") - indifferent, cynic, deviant intellectual from a wealthy family (Matti)
- Corporal Spielberg - authority respecting religious pacifist (Simo)

- Private (machine gunner) Lewandowski ("501") - a believer in the conflict, a slacker and a video game addict (Laku)
- Private Raanan (machine gun loader) - frightful but eager soldier
- Private Hershel (radio operator) - M.Sc., geek, avoids social conflicts
- Private Schmidt - indifferent slacker
- Private Humboldt - your garden variety nationalist
- Private Epstein - approves of hard discipline and demands others get it too (justice too)

The squad leader ltn. Ben-Reuven has been left in the background but he's certainly not a hands-on leader.

So, we had a great time. The only problem was my inability to decide on a good system to decide how much dice the enemy would have in each conflict. Other potential problem in the future could be that the players don't use their traumas but at the moment I'm not worried about it. The first session was Easy Street and there's plenty of shit to throw on the poor grunts' faces in Gaza. We'll see in the next session.