



CASE STUDY:

A Simulation Game for Médecins Sans Frontières

One Team. One Shift. One Purpose.

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), or Doctors Without Borders, is a global humanitarian organisation that provides emergency medical care to people affected by conflict, epidemics, natural disasters, and exclusion from healthcare.

In operating theatres across more than 70 countries, MSF teams perform lifesaving surgery under extraordinary pressure - limited time, scarce resources, and ever-changing conditions.

To prepare staff for these realities, MSF, through the MSF Academy for Healthcare, collaborated with Focus Games Ltd, a specialist developer of educational board games, to create *Surgical Shift* - a simulation-based tabletop game that recreates the intensity, complexity, and teamwork of a real MSF operating theatre (OT).

The game's tagline captures its essence:

“One Team – One Shift – One Purpose: Safe, Skilled Care for Every Patient.”

Introduction: Why This Matters

In humanitarian surgical settings, operating theatres are high-pressure environments where success depends on more than technical skill. Communication, teamwork, and prioritization are critical—but often underdeveloped. Traditional training methods struggle to replicate the complexity of real-world OT dynamics.

The MSF Academy for Healthcare sought an innovative solution to bridge this gap: a simulation-based boardgame that brings the operating theatre to life in a safe, engaging, and portable format.

The Challenge

During the pilot of MSF's OT curriculum, learners showed improvement in technical skills but persistent gaps in transversal competencies:

- Communication and collaboration across disciplines.
- Decision-making under time pressure.
- Escalation of care and resource prioritization.

Existing tools could not fully assess these competencies, and learners needed integrated, realistic experiences to connect theory and practice.



Design and Collaboration

MSF partnered with Focus Games Ltd, an award winning company known for creating evidence-based educational games for health and social care. Together, they co-designed Surgical Shift to reflect real-world operating theatre dynamics while remaining portable, accessible, and easy to facilitate.

The co-design process involved MSF clinicians, educators, and simulation experts, ensuring the game's content authentically represented the realities of field surgery - from triage and resource shortages to post-operative care and debriefing.

The outcome is a bilingual (**English and French**) simulation that can be played anywhere MSF operates.

How It Works

Each session begins with a facilitated briefing, establishing a psychologically safe learning environment. Participants are reminded that simulations are about learning, not judgment – everyone is capable, cares about doing their best, and wants to improve.

Players are divided into small teams (**2-3 people**), taking turns to manage one “shift” in the operating theatre. A facilitator oversees the session, manages timers, and guides reflection.

Gameplay Phases

1. Triage:

Teams receive new patient cards, each representing realistic trauma or emergency cases. They must assess each patient's condition and assign a triage category—**Red (critical)**, **Yellow (urgent)**, or **Green (stable)**.

2. Operate:

Teams allocate staff pawns (surgeons, nurses, anaesthetists) and equipment to the OT. They must answer operating-theatre trivia questions that test their knowledge and decision-making. Incorrect answers trigger complications - adding emotional realism and urgency.

3. Recovery & Discharge:

Patients move to recovery beds, where nurses and resources are reassigned. Teams manage complications and complete recovery challenges to safely discharge patients.

Between rounds, Event Cards introduce unexpected situations - from supply shortages to staff absences - forcing teams to adapt and communicate under pressure.

Each round lasts five minutes, simulating the pace and time pressure of a real surgical environment. Play continues until all teams have completed their shifts.

Learning and Debrief

After gameplay, teams take part in a structured debrief led by the facilitator. Using the PLUS/DELTA and Advocacy-Inquiry methods, participants reflect on:

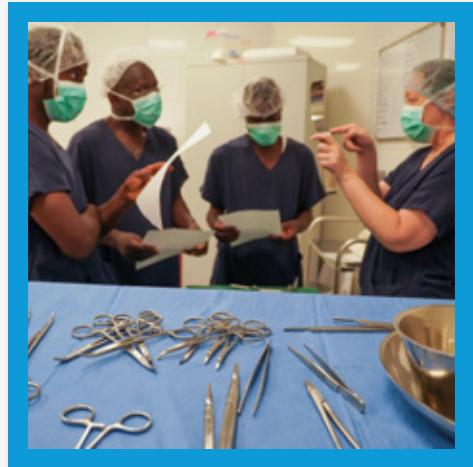
- What went well
- What could be done differently next time
- How team dynamics, communication, and decision-making influenced outcomes

This reflective process is central to the design, transforming the game from competition into collaborative learning. The aim is not to "win" but to improve collective performance and resilience.



Learning Objectives

- Strengthen teamwork and communication in high-pressure environments
- Reinforce triage and prioritisation principles
- Practice decision-making and leadership under time constraints
- Build psychological safety and a culture of reflection
- Translate simulation insights into real-world humanitarian care



Why it's different:

- Portable and bilingual (English/French).
- Requires no digital infrastructure—ideal for resource-limited settings.
- Creates psychological safety while fostering engagement and teamwork.

Expected Outcomes

- Stronger clinical judgment and reasoning.
- Enhanced teamwork and communication under pressure.
- Improved escalation of care and patient safety.
- Observable competence in OT nursing and interprofessional collaboration.

Why Serious Games Work

Research shows that simulation and game-based learning improve critical thinking, problem-solving, and long-term retention. Surgical Shift combines these benefits with MSF's commitment to practical, context-driven education—helping teams prepare for the realities of humanitarian surgery.



Impact and Future Use

Since its introduction, Surgical Shift has been recognised as an innovative training tool that brings realism, reflection, and empathy to simulation-based learning. It allows MSF teams to rehearse decision-making and communication before facing real emergencies - helping to save lives when it matters most.

By partnering with Focus Games, MSF has created a resource that embodies its values: collaboration, adaptability, and continuous improvement.

Through one shared shift on the board, participants experience what unites them in the field:

One Team – One Purpose – Safe, Skilled Care for Every Patient.

Early feedback from facilitators and learners has been overwhelmingly positive:

“Helps us to avoid the tunnel vision of our role, it helps us see outside the OT.”

“The game was fun but intense. It made us think about how we work together.”

“It felt real - fast decisions, teamwork, and adapting under pressure.”

“It helps us to appreciate each other's roles”

“This game really increases dialogue between team members.”

“Great flow!”

Observed benefits:

- Increased confidence in communication and collaboration.
- Improved understanding of surgical flow and resource management.
- Strong engagement—participants described the game as “motivating” and “eye-opening.”

Want to learn more or bring Surgical Shift to your team?

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