

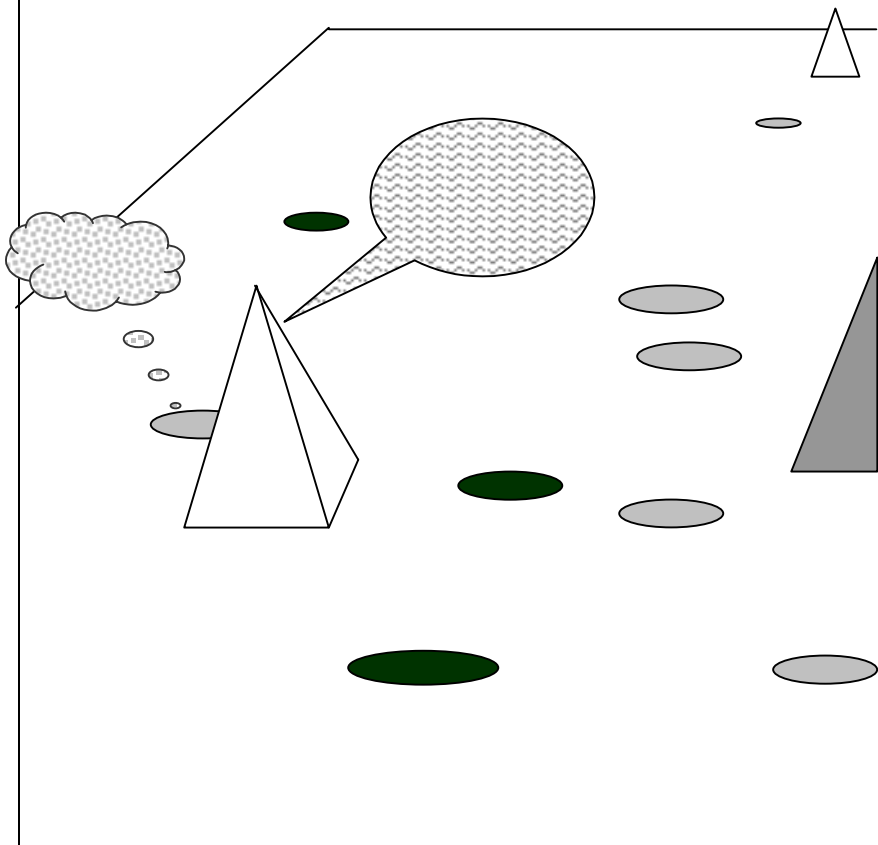
Triangulation

An *Icehouse** Game of Abstracted Politics

By

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Introduction

Triangulation is an abstract game of politics. The players—acting as politicians—take stances, shift convictions, sway voters, and watch as their positions shift beyond the pale, but these actions are all represented abstractly. *Icehouse* pieces represent the stances and positions; beads represent the voters, and the playing surface represents the “political landscape.”

Components

To play this game you will need

- A set of *Icehouse* pyramids.
- Some six-sided dice; ideally, a few big ones and quite a number of smaller ones.
- A six-inch ruler
- Lumpy glass beads of the kind sold in craft stores: 80 clear ones and 20 in each of the colors of the *Icehouse* set: red, green, yellow, and blue. Buttons would do.
- A card table, or any playing surface of about that size. If you play on the floor you can define the playing area in terms of tiles or a rug; playing on a larger table, you can use place mats.
- Somewhere else to put things. If you're using the floor or a large table, then you can put things on the rest of the large table or the floor. If you're playing on a card table, the players will need a way to hold the pieces they're not using. A shoebox works OK.
- It can also help to have a few pennies and some thread.

Setting up the game

At the beginning of the game, assign colors to the players. The clear pieces (20 per player) are poured out all at once on the table. They should be spilled out rather freely: they don't roll very well, so not that many will fall off the table. A good pour will result in something of a concentration of pieces near the middle of the table, but quite a few around the edges, too. Those that fall off are placed near the edge, near where they fell off. These pieces are the “voters,” and—except for a couple of exceptions—they do not move.

Colors and an order of play[†] are then randomly assigned, except that the player who poured the beads has to be last.

* See <http://www.wunderland.com/icehouse/Default.html>.

[†] I like the spectral order: Red, Yellow, Green, Blue.

Basic concepts and definitions

These terms are used throughout the rules. A term is italicized in the sentence defining it.

- The players are *politicians*. Each is *associated* with a pyramid color.
- The *Icehouse* pieces are the politicians' *convictions*. They are *stances* when they are standing up, and *positions* when they are *lying* (down). Convictions vary in *strength* according to the size of the piece: *small* = 1, *medium* = 2, *large* = 3. Positions can and do move, i.e., they *shift*; in so doing, they have spin and backpedalling.
- The beads are *voters*. They start out as clear (i.e., *uncommitted*) beads, and can change to colored beads when they *support* particular politicians, *associated* by color. Off the board, the colored beads are in the *voter pool*.
- The playing surface is the *political landscape*. Its perimeter is the *pale* (as in, "beyond the pale.")
- A *camp* is a set of committed voters that are associated with each other by color and all lie within a triangle formed by three stances of that color. (A voter is inside a triangle if its center is inside the triangle. It can help to sight along the line connecting the points of the cornerstones, or to stretch a thread between them.) These stances are the *cornerstones* of the camp. Note that a voter can be in the triangle without being in the camp, being of a different color.
- A politician's *platform* is the space off the board in which s/he holds unused *Icehouse* pieces and voter beads of his or her color. (In most other *Icehouse* games, this would be called a "stash.")

A Basic Procedure—Taking a Poll

A politician picks any conviction, his or her own or another's, a stance or a position. S/he measures the distance to each nearby committed voter, measuring from the *tip* of the conviction to the *top* of the voter bead.[‡] S/he casts a die and if the number on the die is less than the measurement of the distance in inches, then the voter has an *opinion* on the conviction. The politician owning the voter decides whether the opinion is *for* or *against* the conviction, or *neutral*. If a voter who has an opinion is of the same color as the conviction and is within a camp of which the conviction is a cornerstone, then that voter's opinion counts as two. The total number of opinions "for" minus the total "against" is the *support* for the conviction—it might be a negative number. See also the illustration on the following page.

[‡] Note that because positions are lying down whereas stances are standing up, and stronger convictions are taller, it is harder to support or oppose a strong stance than a weak one, and easiest to support or oppose a position. Note also that because the largest number on the die is a 6, only a 6-inch ruler is needed.

Events in a turn

The game is played in turns. A turn consists of a player-turn for each player, taken in rotation.

In his or her player-turn, a player must first

- Shift any and all positions of his or her color, according to their rate of backpedalling.

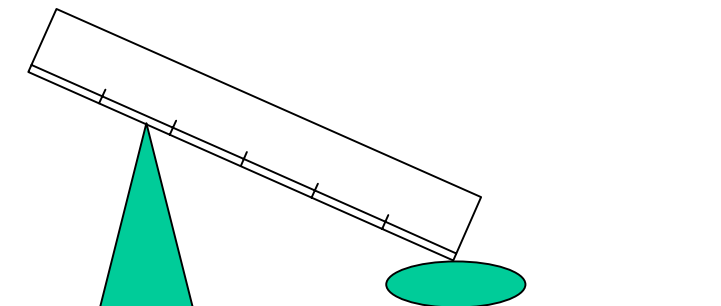
S/he may then do any one of the following. Detailed descriptions are given below.

- Take a new stance.
- Attempt to sway voters.
- Attempt to strengthen a stance.
- Attempt to *topple* another politician's stance, or make one of his or her own *inoperative*, downgrading it into a position and giving it *backpedalling* that will cause it to shift.
- Attempt to alter the backpedalling of a position—this is called "*distorting*" the position if it is that of another politician, and "*nuancing*" it if it is one's own. Reduction of the backpedalling to zero makes the position turn into a stance.

How to win

A player wins when 20 of the voters are his or her color.

Illustration: How to measure when taking a poll.



Detailed descriptions of the actions

Shift positions: At the beginning of the player's turn each of his or her positions is shifted once (for an exception, see the very end of this rule), by sliding the position in the direction opposite to that in which it points. Slide it the number of inches that show on its *backpedalling dice* (see below). If, as a result of shifting, a position goes *beyond the pale*, it is removed from play and returned to its owner's platform. Any voters that a shifting position would touch *distance themselves* just enough to let it pass. Any stance that it touches turns into a position, pointing in the same direction, and the position that was being moved stops and stands up, becoming a stance. The new position gets the old position's backpedalling dice. If one position runs into another, they each stop, stand up, and turn into stances. If a player has more than one position, s/he determines the order in which they shift, and may legitimately engineer collisions between his or her own positions.

Take a new stance: Take a small Icehouse piece from his or her platform and stand it up on the political landscape anywhere that it will fit without disturbing any convictions or voters that are already there.

Attempt to strengthen a stance: To make the attempt, the politician selects a stance and takes a poll as described above. If the resulting amount of support is positive, the selected stance is strengthened, from small to medium, or from medium to large. The new stance must be centered where the old one was, and no voters or convictions can be moved in placing it; if that's impossible, the stance cannot be strengthened.

Attempt to sway voters: Voters can be swayed from uncommitted (clear color) to the player's color, or from another player's color to uncommitted. To be swayed, the voter must be inside a triangle formed by three of the attempting player's stances. To attempt to sway a voter, the politician adds up the strengths of these three stances and casts a die: if it is less or equal to the sum of the strengths of the stances minus the number of successful sways so far this player-turn, the voter is swayed. A politician can continue to attempt to sway voters until the first failure to sway a voter, whereupon his or her player-turn ends.

Downgrade a stance to a position: The politician picks a stance to downgrade, and takes a poll on it. S/he then adds the strength of the stance and the support (which might be negative). If the result is less than zero, then the stance is laid on its side and becomes a position. Center it on where it had been centered when it was a stance. Voters can, if necessary, distance themselves from the position by the least amount

necessary for it to fit on the table. Place one or more dice near the position, turned so that their sum is the margin by which the stance was toppled. These are the *backpedalling dice*.⁵ The direction in which the position is pointing should be chosen carefully, because the position will later shift in that direction, as described above. As a practical matter in playing, it can help to state, e.g., "this position is aimed at that medium stance of Blue's," or "this position is aimed at this penny that I'm putting over here on the pale," to make it easier to shift the position consistently later on.

Attempt to alter the backpedalling of a position: Take a poll on the position. The resulting amount of support can be used in either of two ways, each depending on the fact that the position is already shifting:

- Putting on *spin*. The position can be rotated one clock position (30 degrees--the angle made by the vertex of an *Icehouse* piece lying on the table, so you can use another piece to measure) left for each for each point of support (right if the support came out negative). This alters the position's direction of shift. The backpedalling dice remain unchanged.
- Hastening or slowing the rate of shift. The support (which might be negative) is added to the number showing on the backpedalling dice. If zero or a negative number results, the backpedalling dice are removed and the position is stood up, becoming a stance once again. If a positive number results, adjust the backpedalling dice so as to display it--add or remove backpedalling dice as needed.

Politicking

Players may freely make (and break) deals.

Designer's Notes

Many games of politics already exist, so one may wonder why I felt the need to design another. My goal was to fill a niche not presently occupied. So let me summarize my reactions to existing games of politics.

The venerable *Diplomacy* strikes me as wrong-headed in what it puts into the rules and what it doesn't. The rules consist of a simplistic, grand-strategic, simultaneous-move wargame depicting the situation in Europe at the beginning of the XXth century. It is not highly detailed, and it is not

⁵ Note that the number shown on the backpedalling dice is really negative: it is the (negative) support received by the position in the poll, and it governs the backwards motion of the position while shifting

intended to be, because the focus is supposed to be on the players' wheeling and dealing, creating alliances, reneging on agreements, etc. Yet the game provides no reasonable basis for these activities, because it is zero-sum. The players' promises are therefore made to be broken, and everybody knows it. The game thus fails to simulate real-world diplomacy, in which the absence of zero-sumness—expressed in terms of averting calamity, or attaining “the greatest good for the greatest number”—is at least ostensibly the point of departure. The designers would better have simply instructed the players to argue about what kind of pizza to order. From the standpoint of political science, *Diplomacy* can be rescued by forbidding any type of communication among the players other than through the movement of their fleets and armies: played in this way, the game is a study in “tacit bargaining.” Someday somebody should invent *Diplomacey*, using the *Icehouse* pieces on the *Diplomacy* board.

Prisoners' Dilemma has been the topic of a great deal of study at the hands of political scientists, but I don't think anybody would simply play it for fun. Compared to *Diplomacy*, it at least has the virtue that the interaction it seeks to study is contained within the rules of the game, rather than being left exterior to them. Yet its focus is narrow, a fact that has not stopped *Prisoners' Dilemma* from becoming, in some circles, nearly synonymous with game theory on the one hand and a metaphor for reality on the other.**

John Nash's game *So Long Sucker*†† was designed to be somewhat more general. It has four players rather than just two, and variants for greater numbers of players should be possible. Like *Diplomacy*, it is supposed to be a game of generalized wheeling and dealing among the players, and it is zero sum. But, unconstrained by the trappings of a simulation, Nash was able to devise a fiendishly simple game of deal-making and -breaking. Some have gathered that he devised it with the intent of making it maximally destructive to the friendships of its players, and that he may have succeeded.

My goal in *Triangulation* was to capture an aspect of politics other than wheeling and dealing—the formation, and reformulation, of political stances. I focussed on electoral politics, which *is* arguably zero-sum, because my game was bound to be zero-sum. It occurred to me that there are a great many spatial metaphors in politics: “the political landscape,” “the fringe,” “the center,” and so on. Mark Penn's coined term,

** *Prisoners' Dilemma*, by William Poundstone, is one example.

†† This game is mentioned by Poundstone, and also in Sylvia Nasar's biography of Nash, *A Beautiful Mind* (now a major motion picture). Anatol Rapoport devotes a chapter of *N-Person Game Theory*, now back in print (Dover) at long last, to it.

“triangulation” seemed especially interesting. It denotes the practice of adopting so nuanced a set of convictions that you can draw a favorable comparison between yourself and anybody else, from any point of view. It also suggests that the one-dimensional political landscape depicted by the terminology “right” and “left” is too simplistic; clearly triangles can only be created in a space of at least two dimensions.

At that point in my thinking, the use of the *Icehouse* set came to mind.

As I was designing the game, I found that I was using the spatial metaphors as touchstones in my design of the game: if an idea furthered the goal of creating a game whose terminology matched the spatial metaphors used to describe politics, I would try to keep it. Of course, the use of particular terminology in an abstract game invites the criticism that the game has nothing in common with its topic except terminology—“Why don't you just play *Checkers* and call it *Triangulation*?” The answer is that the parts of the game, and the strategy of playing it, do in fact relate to each other in ways similar to the relationships among the entities after which they are named. It can be an interesting exercise for the player to spot these, e.g., to think of examples of what is being simulated when a position collides with a stance and replaces it, sending the former stance on its way as the new position.

I had expected that, as in the real world, there would be a strong incentive to adopt extreme stances; this seems to be the case.

Triangulation breaks new ground in the *Icehouse* game family by its use of measurement in inches, a concept derived from miniatures wargaming.††

Nanofiction^{§§}

Dispiriting Inspiration

Cornerstones set a new standard for disillusioning political novels. Characters' convictions, even those of the heroine, shifted whenever necessary to sway more voters. “How do you think of these things?” asked the TV interviewer. “Um, they just come to me,” lied the novelist, guiltily picturing the card table littered with beads and pointy playing pieces.

†† See, for example, Joseph Merschauer, *How to Play Wargames in Miniature*, or the classic by H.G. Wells, *Little Wars*.

§§ A genre of ironic 55-word stories, associated with *Icehouse*.