Role Player: when training stops trying to win and starts working

Published on 06/01/2026

Often, when discussing operational training, it tends to be imagined as a direct confrontation: two opposing sides, with the implicit goal of prevailing. In some tactical contexts, this logic is useful because it trains one to react, decide, and maneuver under pressure. However, when the aim is to build solid and repeatable capabilities over time, something more is needed: **an environment that truly resembles reality.**

Role Players were created to fill this gap. They are not extras or "fake enemies," but personnel trained to play specific roles within a training scenario: civilians, local leaders, non-governmental security forces, media, or complex social groups. Their task is not to prevail over the training unit, but to **maintain the realism of the environment**, introduce human and social frictions, and force those in training to manage the non-linear complexity found in operational reality.

The subject: what Role Players really are

In the United States, the concept of environmental realism has become formal doctrine and structured practice within the main advanced training centers. At the **National Training Center (NTC)** in Fort Irwin, California, and the **Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC)** in Fort Polk, Louisiana, the use of complex scenarios with actors, civilians, and dynamic scripts is an integral part of the rotation of infantry, cavalry, and mechanized brigades, going well beyond the simple “battlefield” and including aspects of population relations and friction management.

Also in Europe, at the base in **Hohenfels, Germany**, there is one of the most sophisticated applications of this concept. Here operates the **Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC)** , a training center that provides a complex and realistic environment for U.S., NATO, and partner forces units, integrating into the training rotations teams of **Role Players called “Civilians on the Battlefield” (COB)**.

The JMRC is part of the **7th Army Training Command (7th ATC)**, the main training organization of the United States Army in Europe. The JMRC does not merely provide a simple physical space: it is designed to create dynamic scenarios in which maneuver, logistics, civil-military interaction, and unconventional crises *coexist*, forcing trained units to make non-linear decisions and engage with a credible simulated population. These Role Players, within the JMRC exercises, can play variable roles over time, such as shopkeepers, local authorities, security forces, conflict-affected citizens, or crisis witnesses: they are not just scenic elements, but **vectors of credible human behavior**, with languages, social norms, interests, and reactions consistent with the simulated context.

The structure and use of professional-level Role Players are thus considered **critical** elements of advanced training in the USA and NATO training areas, because they allow for a range from technical-level team interaction to managing complex dynamics between military units and civilian populations: exactly what many European exercises struggle to replicate on a regular basis.

The current reality: the limit of competitive training

In much of Europe, this practice exists only in partial form and is rarely systematized. There are no shortages of complex exercises or capable units, but often there is a lack of a stable model in which the Role Player is recognized as an **autonomous training tool**, and not as an accessory

element.

The result is that many exercises end up turning into confrontations between units or colleagues who, even unconsciously, try to prove something. The focus shifts from achieving the training objective to the immediate result, and the simulation loses depth. Technical skills emerge, but the management of ambiguity, interaction with civilians, social pressure, or decision-making under stress are rarely truly tested.

The problem is not the lack of tactical realism, but the lack of **human realism**. Operational reality is made up of mistakes, misunderstandings, emotional reactions, external interferences, and social variables. Without Role Players, training risks representing an orderly world that, in practice, does not exist.

The debriefing: where the true training value is born

A mature Role Player system shows its value especially **after** the exercise. The debriefing is not a formality, but the moment when experience turns into learning. The Role Player, experiencing the scenario from within but remaining external to the trained unit, is able to provide observations that rarely emerge in internal analyses.

During my operational career, I became a **CAC (Conduct After Capture)** instructor, an extremely delicate training aimed at survival in captivity and resistance to interrogation. In this type of training, intended for Special Forces and highly selected units, the Role Player is not a support, but **the central element**. It is the only tool that allows a person to react in extreme conditions, without which the training would remain theoretical or reassuring.

The quality of CAC training does not depend on the harshness of the procedures, but on the credibility of the interaction and the debriefing that follows. It is in the debriefing that cognitive biases, automatisms, and vulnerabilities emerge that no manual can predict. Without this step, much of the training value is lost. In the civilian field, in the following years, I was repeatedly called by police and military units to play different roles in exercises and to provide final feedback.

Recurrently, what emerged was the discovery of gaps or automatisms that **had never surfaced in standard exercises**, not due to the units' incapacity, but because the context had never truly tested them.

Role Player: when training stops wanting to win and starts working

Belgian special forces soldiers during the CAC (Conduct After Capture), a course where the Role Player's role is not supportive but represents the central element of the training - Photo Reddit

From theory to practice: how to build a system that works

An effective Role Player program does not arise from improvisation, but from clear planning that answers three fundamental questions: **what do we want to train, what frictions do we want to introduce, and what behaviors do we want to observe**.

The first element is the separation of roles. **The Role Player must not be part of the unit being trained**, nor try to demonstrate superiority. They must maintain consistency and credibility, not "win" the scenario.

The second element is the training of the Role Player themselves. A theater actor is not needed, but a person who knows the operational context and can react in a plausible and continuous way.

The third element is the centrality of the training objective. Each scenario should arise from a preliminary audit: leadership, decision-making, civilian management, proportional use of force. Without a clear objective, the Role Player becomes noise; with a defined objective, they become a surgical tool.

A mature system must also be scalable. Complex villages or dozens of extras are not always needed: often a few well-trained Role Players are enough to introduce decisive frictions.

Role Player: when training stops wanting to win and starts working

Canadian soldier at the SERE course of the Air Operations Survival branch during a practical activity conducted by an instructor - Photo Government of Canada

Costs and training return: why it's not an expense

It is inevitable to also address the issue of **costs**. A credible Role Player system requires human resources, training, and organization. At first glance, it may seem like an increase in expenses compared to traditional training.

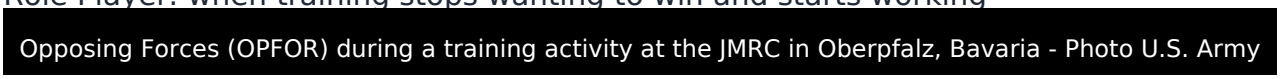
However, looking at the problem with an audit logic, the picture changes. Even a single standard exercise, with the use of personnel, vehicles, fuel, ammunition, and logistics, can

quickly reach very high costs, with often limited training return.

A well-designed exercise with Role Players instead concentrates the cost on **few high-value activities**, quickly revealing gaps, biases, and structural problems that would otherwise require months of repeated activities to identify. Once these critical issues are identified, units can direct subsequent training towards targeted, shorter, and less expensive activities, but much more effective.

In this sense, the apparent increase in initial costs is compensated, and often surpassed, by a **net saving** of time, resources, and material wear in the medium term. The Role Player thus becomes an **efficiency multiplier**, not an accessory expense item.

Role Player: when training stops wanting to win and starts working



Opposing Forces (OPFOR) during a training activity at the JMRC in Oberpfalz, Bavaria - Photo U.S. Army

Conclusion

The point, in the end, is simple: **training is truly effective when it manages to get as close as possible to the complexity of reality**. And reality, by its nature, is rarely linear: it is made up of people, ambiguities, unforeseen events, social pressures, and decisions made with incomplete information.

In this sense, **Role Players** are not “theater”, but a multiplier of realism. A structured component that reproduces the human factor allows for training what often determines the outcome of a mission: the ability to understand the context, communicate, manage frictions, and maintain control even when the scenario changes.

As in any good audit, the problem is clear and the solution exists. The approach remains to be chosen: to maintain more controlled simulations, or to push towards scenarios more aligned with the complexity that will likely present itself in the field.

Sources – Role Player and training centers

United States

1. **National Training Center (NTC) – Fort Irwin**

- U.S. Army official site

  https://www.army.mil/ntc

  (describes the use of simulated villages, OPFOR, and Civilians on the Battlefield)

2. **Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) – Fort Johnson (formerly Fort Polk)**
   - U.S. Army official site

     https://www.army.mil/jrtc

     (training rotations with complex scenarios, simulated population, and role players)

3. **Civilians on the Battlefield (COB) Program – U.S. Army**
   - U.S. Army Training Doctrine

     https://armypubs.army.mil

     (doctrinal documentation on the integration of simulated civilians in training scenarios)

4. **Federal Law Enforcement Training Centers (FLETC) – Role Players**
   - U.S. Department of Homeland Security

     https://www.fletc.gov/role-players

     (structured use of role players for federal law enforcement training)

Europe / Germany

5. **Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC) – Hohenfels, Germany**
   - 7th Army Training Command (US Army Europe)

     https://www.7atc.army.mil/JMRC/

     (NATO multinational training center with systematic use of role players)

6. **7th Army Training Command (7th ATC)**
   - U.S. Army Europe and Africa

     https://www.europeafrica.army.mil/7ATC/

     (parent structure managing Hohenfels and other European training centers)

7. **Civilians on the Battlefield – JMRC**

- US Army Europe news release

  https://www.europeafrica.army.mil/Newsroom/

  (official articles on the use of European citizens as role players)

Doctrinal insights

8. **U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC)**
   - https://www.tradoc.army.mil

     (doctrine on realistic training, decision-making, and scenario-based training)

9. **NATO – Training and Exercise Policy**
   - https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49201.htm

     (references to the complexity of training scenarios and the civilian dimension)