

SIGN

A game about being
under
stood.

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A non-verbal live action game for 4-5 players
playable in two hours.

Introduction.

SIGN is a game about being understood.

To be understood, we need to communicate -
and communicating isn't always easy.

Nicaragua in the 1970s had no form of sign language. If you were deaf, you had simple gestures with a trusted few, likely nothing more than a primitive form of pantomime you negotiated with your family to meet basic needs. Even among your closest circle, you had no tools for deep expression and were forced to keep your anxieties and joys bottled within. You would likely never learn to read. You may never even meet another deaf person. In a very real sense, you were alone.

In 1977, something happened. Fifty deaf children from across the country were brought together to an experimental school in Managua. They were tasked with learning lip reading, but by and large they did not. Instead, something far more remarkable grew out of that failed experiment. For the first time, these children were amongst their true peers. Those who could understand them and be their friends. Without a shared language to express themselves, the children did the only thing they could - they created one. In no exaggeration, these children built the foundation of modern Nicaraguan Sign Language, giving voice to the Deaf across an entire country.

In SIGN, we follow a small piece of their journey. Together we will share the frustration and loneliness of not having a language. We'll slowly develop the tools necessary to express what's important to us. We will explore which words we choose to define together, and what that says about ourselves, our deepest desires, and the relationships we build.

Structure.

Before the game begins, choose one player to be the facilitator (we're assuming that's you, dear reader). You're welcome to share responsibilities as both facilitator and player while in the game. Begin by reading the Introduction aloud to the rest of the players. Provide a basic outline of gameplay: after two warmup exercises, the game takes place over three class sessions, three recesses and a final class. Before each class and recess it's your job to make sure the players read the instructions for the relevant section. Do not do this by reading the instructions aloud.

Instead, before each phase, turn to the relevant page (as guided in the facilitator notes) and point for the players to read it. As a facilitator, here is a checklist of game preparations:

- Read the instructions beforehand and have a printed version available for play. It's best to print single sided so separate pages can be read one at a time.
- Make cutouts of character sheets and language cards
- Have an implement to keep track of time
- Make sure players don't have name tags on them before the game starts
- Gather a few items:
 1. Notecards
 2. Writing instruments
 3. A box of "Hello My Name Is" stickers, preferably in Spanish. Place them in easy reach of all players during the game.
 4. A chair for every player
 5. Preferably, a pair of earmuffs for every player to wear throughout the game.

Classes take place sitting in a circle. Recess is held walking around and having freeform interactions. For classes, get as many chairs as there are players and arrange them in a circle so players can see each other. During recess, players should not stay in their chairs unless absolutely necessary. Remind everyone that the door is always open if a player wishes to leave.

You're ready to move on to warm-ups.

Facilitator: Lay the next page face up and point to "Warm Up 1", giving all a chance to read. After everyone is done, arrange them in a circle.

Warm Up 1.

Vocalize

This is a non-verbal larp exploring deafness and the journey to being understood. In anticipation of the silence that you'll soon inhabit, let out a good yell. Listen to the qualities of your voice. Explore its richness, its power, its utility as an instrument of communication. Your instrument. Trade a yell with another player. Listen to their voice. Appreciate how it's different from yours and pick out the qualities they share.

Once everyone has released a few cathartic yells, we'll begin with a warm-up. This exercise is meant to help us acknowledge our voice, how nuanced an instrument it is, and how coupled with language, what a powerful tool it makes for conveying our emotions, desires, and inner thoughts. Sitting in a circle, players will each take turns saying the word "hello" to the group. Each time someone says the word, they'll imbue it with a different overtone or agenda so as to communicate something more about who's speaking and what they're feeling. Think a timid hello, a bubbly hello, a suspicious hello, a hello said to family or a hello said in an interview. Explore the nuances your voice can express with a single word.

Next, bid goodbye to your voice and those of your companions for the rest of the game.

Facilitator: Give around five minutes for the above exercise. Once complete, turn to the "Warm Up 2." page and have the children read that section.

Warm Up 2.

Hands

If you have earmuffs, put them on. Close your eyes and sit in the silence. This is your new normal. Touch your hands. They are now your voice, your primary instrument for interfacing with the world. All the richness and complexity of your voice is now to be channeled through your hands. Thank them. Look at another player's hands. Recall their voice and channel its character into their hands.

As a second exercise, we'll replay the first warm-up of exchanging hellos, except now players will wave instead of speaking. This is meant to get us comfortable with communicating who we are through our gestures. You should still aim to convey the emotion from your speech as you did in the first time around, now using your hands as your primary tool of expression. Think a timid wave, a bubbly wave, a suspicious wave, ... recall the vocal qualities from the last warm up and repeat them with your hands. Note what is easier or harder to say with gestures instead of speech. Practice communicating emotion with your new interface to the world.

Facilitator: Allocate around five minutes to the above exercise. After it's complete, have the students read the "Before the First Day" and "A Word About Language" pages in silence.

Before the first day

We will follow the true story of a group of children from a country with no formal sign language. Apart from primitive forms of pantomime they used to communicate needs at home, these kids have no prior exposure to sign. Over the course of the game, they will develop the words they need to express themselves and forge friendships.

This is based on the true story of the birth of Nicaraguan sign language, which developed after kids from across the country were brought together to learn lip reading, and instead, fostered an emergent sign language among themselves. We will follow the struggles of these kids as they strive to communicate. We will give them tools to express themselves.

From now on, no speaking.

No writing except when specifically instructed.

A word about language

In the course of the game, you'll be compelled to use and define new sign language just as the Nicaraguan children did. When starting out, everything you'll be doing is improvised pantomime. That's fine -- in fact, pantomimed sign is exactly what Nicaraguan deaf children did with their hearing families. Own the pantomime, since it's all you have to begin with. That being said, this isn't charades. Keep your feet planted and limit your signed movements from the waist up. Focus on your hands as your mouthpiece to the world.

For inspiration in creating new signs, here are a few simple guidelines:

- Draw from your character.
- Draw from the setting.
- Draw from each other.

If "happiness" is the coffee cup in front of you, sign it. If "pain" is the dog your character lost two summers ago, let that inform your sign. If "beauty" is the way another character made you feel, sign the design on their shirt or the thing they did to make you laugh. Be expressive and creative with the signs you introduce. Without grounding a sign in the real world, the symbol is easily forgotten.

In speaking with your hands, you will need to make compromises between what you want to say and what you can make understood. This is important. Every time this happens, be honest with yourself and acknowledge the compromise. Accept the frustration of being unheard and monitor what you need to give up in order to communicate.

To mark this, take one of the stickers provided by the facilitator and attach it to your body in a visible location. This is a compromise badge. It signals to all that you've been unheard.

Facilitator: While the children read, pass out two character cards to each player. When they're done, have them read "The First Class" and sit in the chairs.

First Class: Introductions

You've met a few deaf people in your life, but never this many - it's surreal. For the first time you're with a group of people who are like you. Even more than your parents, these may be the only people who can truly understand what you're going through. If only they understood anything you had to say.

Before the day starts, the facilitator will randomly pass out character cards. Choose one of these and hand back the other. Everyone embodies a Nicaraguan student on their first day at a school for the deaf. Each student brings with them a different background, personality, and truth. Let this create a framework to start from, but it needn't be overly confining. Take ownership of your character and fill in the blanks.

The first day begins with introductions. One by one, each character will introduce themselves to the class by giving their name in sign and a brief description. Their name is then repeated one by one by every other character in the circle. This act is an important one. You'll have a name on your character card, but remember, it's not one you've ever actually heard. For the rest of the game, this is your real name.

Cycle through each character until everyone has had a chance to introduce themselves. Next, look at your character card, and mentally fill in the two blank relationships goals. The chosen players may change throughout the course of the game, but mentally enumerate these relationships. These initial impressions will inform how your friendships develop throughout the experience and will give you a basis for how to approach another player at recess.

Facilitator: Try to keep the above to less than 15 minutes. When time is up, gather the children and point them to read the next section: "The First Recess. Smalltalk"

First Recess: Smalltalk

Recess arrives and with it comes the first opportunity to interact with fellow students in the schoolyard. This is freeform, and each student should have a conversation with every other student, centered around smalltalk. Let this interaction be informed by the first impressions and relationship goals you've defined.

If you had a gut reaction about someone, do your best to communicate it during this phase. Each interaction should have at least one contribution from each side, getting the other student's reaction to the original phrase. Most of all, follow what feels natural to you in the moment.

Remember to mark compromises with a sticker.

Facilitator: Keep the above to 10 minutes. When time is up, lay out all language cards face up on a table so they're visible to all children. Gather the children and point them to read *The Second Class*. Once they're done, have them sit in the circle for the next class.

Second Class: Tools

The second class is about tools. It's a first step toward true agency and building deeper relationships.

You've had a chance to meet other students, now we can start defining words that will help you communicate what's important to you. From the language cards laid out before you, pick one. Pick a card that helps express something meaningful. The words you have aren't totally under your control, but they're a step toward something more.

We will sit in a circle and take turns introducing words. On their turn a student holds out their word and introduces a sign for that language item. One by one, each student repeats the sign for the item and the card is placed on a table face up. The process continues until every character has had a chance to introduce a language element. You now collectively own all the language you've defined, which will sit on the table for the rest of the game.

Remember, words should be tied to either something you know, have seen, or that came out of an interaction during recess. Try to avoid gestures for words without motivation as they're easy to forget.

Facilitator: Try to keep the above to 10 minutes. When they're done, gather the children and point them to read the "The Second Recess".

Second Recess: Bonds

This recess is about trying to form bonds. You've made smalltalk and established some impression of the others. You're all Others together now. At once, you're excited and scared; you've found people who may be able to connect with you on a deeper level.

We now have a recess freeform session. During this phase, take turns talking with each student once again. This time, begin opening-up and telling your truth to someone you trust. Steer conversation toward your truth, but only as it's appropriate for the relationship. Remember the words you've just collectively defined -- use the words the children have created in whatever way feels most fitting in the moment.

This will be frustrating experience. You don't have the words to say what you need say. When you get to a point of frustration, don't shy away from it. Acknowledge it with a compromise marker. Once you've settled from this concession, continue on in conversation.

Facilitator: When time is up, lay out enough notecards and writing implements for all players on the table. Gather the children and point them to read "The Third Class". Once they're done, sit them in a circle again with the cards they've defined in hand.

Third Class: Control

This class is about taking control of your language. We'll repeat the content of the previous class, except now you'll be driving what words are defined. Write down two words that are critical for you on different index cards. Pick words that help express your truth and that can bridge some of the compromises you've made along the way. This is your moment for complete agency in how you communicate and a signal for how the language you've collectively defined could develop going forward.

On your turn, hold out your index cards and establish a sign for that language item. One by one, each character repeats the sign for the item and the card is placed on the table face up. The process continues until every character has had a chance to introduce two language elements. You collectively own all the language you've defined.

Third Recess: Friends

You now have more command over language than you've ever had. This is your moment to use it. We have another freeform session. During this phase, speak your truth as plainly as you can or want, to whoever you trust with it.

Say all you need to say.

Facilitator: Keep the above to 15 minutes. When time is up, gather the children and point them to read "The Final Class". For one final time, arrange them in a circle.

Final Class: Reactions

In the final class, we'll reconcile how far we've come in the journey to feeling understood and explore the dynamics of the relationships we've built along the way. Each person in turn will be put in the spotlight. Every other player will take turns answering the following questions about this character in sign.

- Describe the spotlight character.
- How does the spotlight character make you feel?

Facilitator: When the above is over, remove your earmuffs if you have them and motion for others to do the same. Turn to the final page and read it aloud to the children.

Epilogue.

(To be read by the Facilitator)

And thus ends our final class. You may now speak and hear again, though these children never would. Now, we leave them behind with their new friends, a little less afraid than when we first joined them.

Facilitator: We hope you had a good time! Thanks for running the game!

Name: Claribel Téllez / Alfonso Hegg

Background: Reckless and brash, you always managed to find a way to get you and your little brother into trouble. With Emilio at your side, you explored every nook and cranny of your small town and the surrounding forest. You snuck away while your parents worked in a local coffee plantation, and found no end of trouble to get into. He served as your mouth to the world and is the only one who ever came close to truly understanding who you are. You've never been able to tell Emilio how much he means to you, but you hope he knows it. Though your family is quite poor, your adventures and troublemaking are good distraction from the struggles of daily life.

Personality Traits: Outgoing, brash, adventurous

Truth: I'm afraid Emilio will forget about me while I'm away.

Relationship Goals:

I want to explore the schoolhouse with _____
I want to make _____ face something they're afraid of

Name: Rosario Alegría / Joaquín Cortés

Background: You live for others. Your mother was often sick and it was you who helped your grandmother care for her. Your father left long ago, so you've taken many responsibilities on yourself. You cleaned and even cooked basic items for your family as a very young child, and found you had a knack for it. Your proudest dish was a special sponge cake you made in secret for your mother's birthday. Both your mother and grandmother cried when you brought it out from the kitchen. After this success, you decided you wanted to be a chef when you're older. When you heard you would be sent away you were furious, but acquiesced to your mother's wishes. You miss your mother, grandmother and parakeets.

Personality Traits: Introverted, caring, emotional

Truth: I'm afraid my grandmother won't be able to take care of my mother.

Relationship Goals:

I want to help _____ do something they love
I want to convince _____ it isn't as bad as it seems

Name: Yolanda Murillo / José Santos Pasos

Background: You loved your grandfather - but the thing you remember most are his ears. He would sit you on his knee and over and over again, he would produce coin after coin from behind his ears as you watched in delight and amazement. Since then, you've relished making others laugh. It's your way of being heard, without it, you may as well be invisible. You've always wanted siblings, but you're the only child - and your parents are gone, anyway. You live with your grandmother, Maria. You've never had friends your own age, but not for lack of trying. Recently you've taken up juggling and hope that will bridge the gap.

Personality Traits: Gregarious, joking, swift

Truth: I'm afraid people will stop thinking I'm funny

Relationship Goals:

I want to make _____ laugh
I want to learn a new trick from _____

Name: Maria Romero Blanco / Luis Enrique Mejía Zelaya

Background: You fit into your big brother's clothes, despite the fact that he's a year older. You're tall and lanky, and find most joy when you're in full exertion - lifting something heavy, running as fast as you can, jumping farther than you ever have before. You'll be in the Olympics one day, you just haven't decided in what event yet. Still, it's been a long time since you've had a new pair of shoes, and with your parents out of work, it'll be longer still. One nice part of your parents being laid-off is the free time -- you now play twice as much soccer together as a family. Your father is the coach of your local team. It can be hard coordinating maneuvers without hearing your father's lectures, but you've figured out a set of gestures to discuss soccer strategy. It's the only real subject you can talk about with him.

Personality Traits: Strong, brash, big

Truth: I'm afraid I won't be the strongest person in the school

Relationship Goals:

I want to impress _____ with my strength
I want to have _____ ask for my help

Name: Sofía Meneses / Ricardo López

Background: People hurt. They scowl, wave their arms and hands and seem to think that by repeating the same thing with grander gestures they'll get their point across. At first, you tried to please them, but now, you run away. Whiskers, your gentle tabby, would never make the faces at you that they do. She knows you can't hear her, but she doesn't care. You miss her dearly, more than your parents. All you can hope is that she's well taken care of while you're away.

Personality Traits: Scared, protective, emotional

Truth: I'm afraid Whiskers thinks I've left her

Relationship Goals:

I want to be friends with _____, they wouldn't let me down

I want to tell _____ a story about my cat

Name: Katia Perez / Miguel Obando y Mayorga

Background: You make things -- always have! As a toddler, it was in a sandbox - as a youngster with building blocks and now, with whatever you can find around the village. The project you were most proud of was when you gathered all the cardboard in the village with your sister Sofia. Together, you built a lean-to fort against the side of your family's house. It was massive with multiple sleeping rooms and a large living area. Truly an engineering feat. Until the rain melted it away, you and Sofia lived in the fort - and your parents gladly brought you food - just happy to see you two having fun together. It was the look of awe on Sofia's face that you most remember, the wonder you had brought into her at that moment. You hope that by coming back with language, you can surprise her once again.

Personality Traits: Protective, creative, builder

Truth: I want to be an architect one day

Relationship Goals:

I want _____ to help me with my project

I want to tell _____ about something I made

Name: Lila T. Abaunza / Emilio Álvarez Montalván

Background: Smart and determined, you came from a well-educated family in the capital. The only child of two professors, your earliest memories were of playing peek-a-boo with the university students and doodling in your mother's philosophy textbooks. Your father, a mathematician, made great efforts to teach you how to count, spending an hour with you each day doing number drills. You would try so hard to please him. Despite being a little old for it, your favorite game is still Study Hall, where you give imaginary impassioned lectures to your stuffed lamb, Tiko.

Personality Traits: Bookish, thoughtful, and at times bossy.

Truth: I'm afraid I won't be the smartest kid at school and I'll disappoint my parents.

Relationship Goals:

I want to teach _____ how to count.
I want to earn the respect of _____ for my cleverness.

Name: Barbara Abaunza / Oswaldo Montalván

Background: They just don't know you yet. But they will soon. Everyone in the district knew who you were. You started with your younger siblings - a ragtag crew to do your bidding, whether it be to fetch you snacks, massage your back, or just run around for your amusement. But as it went on, you recruited more into your game. By the time you left, your gang of misfits had grown and you had branched out, using them to run errands for adults in exchange for candy. Leaving that all behind has been a challenge, but you're not worried. You've done it before and you'll do it again.

Personality Traits: Natural leader, confident, brave

Truth: I'm afraid I won't be popular

Relationship Goals:

I want to recruit _____ to help me do someone a favor
I want _____ and _____ to follow me around the schoolyard

Name: Violeta Carrera / Javier Castillo

Background: People don't forget your smile. Seeing such blind hope bursting forth from such a small package, especially one that has lived as you have, isn't easy to brush off. Life is challenging at times, but as long as you can remember your mother's smile, you always can find it within yourself to don a brave face, and hopefully surface some joy in others as well. You miss your mother dearly - it's been a year since her passing, but you know she would have never wanted you to be sad about it. So you remember her beautiful face and smile, and do all you can to continue her legacy in the world.

Personality Traits: Cheerful, nurturing, caring

Truth: I'm afraid one day I'll lose hope

Relationship Goals:

I want to make _____ laugh
I want to comfort _____ about something they're afraid of

Name: Dora María Chamorro / Manuel Ortega Sunyer

Background: First they sat you down and made you behave, but all you had to do was outlast their stubbornness. Then they locked you in your room, but then all that remained was to pry open the window. Now, they've sent you off, hoping that if they only had words they could get into your brain. To control you. But you know better than that. You'll learn to communicate, and with your newfound friends, you can beat them at their own game.

Personality Traits: Rebellious, headstrong, outgoing

Truth: I'm afraid one day I'll be like my parents

Relationship Goals:

I want _____ to wear their hair like a rebel
I want to help _____ stand up to something

THINK

FEEL

FEAR

HOPE

BECOME

LOVE

HATE

MAKE

LONELY

BEAUTIFUL

POOR

FAMILY

PARENT

SIBLING

FRIEND

DEAF
