

REVIEW OF UN MISTERIO EN TOLUCA

Title:	Un Misterio en Toluca
Authors:	Walter C. Oliver and Terri J. Nelson.
Distributor:	Heinle & Heinle Publishers
Contact information:	20 Park Plaza Boston, MA 02116 Voice: 800-237-0053 or 617-451-1940 Fax: 617-426-4379 E-mail: reply@heinle.com
Program information:	Dual platform CD-ROM. Student CD contains introduction, vocabulary list, limited grammatical information, guidelines Instructor's CD contains web materials necessary for use.
System requirements:	Macintosh: 8 MB RAM, 9 MB disk space, System 7.0 or higher, 256 color monitor Windows: 486 processor, 8 MB RAM, 9 MB disk space, VGA 256 color monitor, Win 3.0 or Win 95
Additional requirements:	Website with at least 25.4 MB available space Participants must have email and internet access
Price:	Student CD: \$14.95 Instructor CD: free upon adoption No restrictions on repeated use of Instructor CD.
Support:	Toll-free support for problems related to materials themselves. No support for publishing materials to website or for the addition of links.
Target audience:	College classroom learners of Spanish at or above intermediate level

Reviewed by Jennifer Leeman, Georgetown University**OVERVIEW**

Misterio en Toluca (henceforth MeT) is a set of Web-based materials for a role play activity designed for use with intermediate level Spanish courses. In contrast to stand-alone software packages which can be used for individual self-paced study, MeT relies on and requires the participation of at least seven learners. While the instructor's manual emphasizes that the MeT Web site includes "a rich variety of realia and links to information about Spanish speaking countries found on the World Wide Web," the heart of the program is a semi-structured murder mystery in which each participant plays the role of a fictional character in the real Mexican city of Toluca. Participants communicate with each other via e-mail and use the information revealed by their classmates, together with various types of simulated evidence found on the website, to try to determine who killed Dolores Acevedo, found dead at the outset of the activity. The activity is divided into four rounds. At the beginning of each round, participants are provided with more information about their characters and additional evidence is made available on the Web site. The authors estimate that the entire activity takes 10 weeks to complete within the following time frame: one week for the training and exploration, two weeks for each round, and one week for the conclusion.

DESCRIPTION

The Instructor's CD contains the bulk of the MeT program, including the Web-based materials (HTML documents and associated images), e-mail to be sent to participants during the course of the activity (in text and RTF formats), checklists to facilitate smooth management of the mystery, a few student exercises, and the instructor's manual. The Student CD contains only a brief introduction to the mystery, some grammar explanations, a few templates for summarizing information, and instructions for using Eudora and Netscape. Although participants do need an e-mail account and a Web browser, any application will work.

In order to use the program, the Web-based materials must be published on the instructor's own Web site. This requires a basic knowledge of FTP (or access to technical support) and 25.4 MB of available space. In order to limit access to students enrolled in the course, Heinle & Heinle stipulates that all MeT directories must be password-protected, which can usually be arranged through institutional network support services. Materials for each of the four rounds must either be protected by different passwords to be distributed to participants at the beginning of the corresponding round, or published on the Web site at the appropriate time.

At the outset of MeT each participant is assigned a character to play throughout the mystery. Suggestions for character assignments are provided in the instructor's manual. The instructor assumes the role of Inspector Gaudí who is in charge of investigating the murder and is thus an active participant in the role play.

After connecting to the MeT Web site (now residing on the instructor's Web site) and passing the introductory page, users are presented with the main menu (*Indice de materias*) from which they can choose to view a [stylized map of Toluca](#), where the mystery takes place, a general help file with explanations of the pages and icons used on the Web site, a list of topics for which external Web sites can be accessed (e.g., sports, medicine, transportation), or a round-specific page with a map and links to all Web-based evidence available thus far.



Figure 1. Indice de materias



Figure 2. Stylized map of Toluca

By clicking on a building, learners can view photographs of actual locations in Toluca and other cities in Mexico, accompanied by brief cultural explanations (e.g., participants are informed that bus travel is more common in Mexico than train travel) and sometimes by a list of suggested topics for discussion or research. In addition, some buildings have an associated section entitled "Explore the World" (Explorar el mundo) with a few links to related external Web sites. For example, clicking on the restaurant's "Explore the World" option brings up links to external Web sites with information about Latin American and Spanish cuisines.

At the beginning of each round, participants go to the corresponding page and read the new evidence, beginning with a simulated article from the fictional *Sol de Toluca* newspaper which informs them of recent plot developments.



Figure 3. Fictional newspaper, El Sol de Toluca

The newspaper articles have links to all available evidence (with new information clearly marked), and the first page for each round has an updated map of Toluca on which locations also contain links to evidence found there. Such evidence consists of a variety of written documents, including police reports, an autopsy, a will, a daily planner, and a [prescription for medication](#). These are often image files, and in all cases an attempt has been made to simulate the format and discursive style of real-life equivalents.



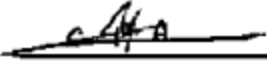
 Consuelo Beltrán Arriaga, MD Receta Médica <small>Licencia: 28 2 2938569-3/9 1 2 01</small>		
214 Calle Benito Juárez Colonia Sánchez, Toluca Teléfono: 26-46-77		Consultorio en Medicina General Mañanas: 0900 1100 Tardes: 1400 1900
Paciente: <u>Rosalba Iglesias de Altamirano</u>		
<p>1) Metaprozac (100 50gr): Una cápsula cada 4 horas en caso de tensión nerviosa.</p> <p>2) Prefis (500 100gr): una pastilla antes de acostarse en caso de insomnio.</p> <p>3) Anscorbal (100 25gr): una cápsula antes de desayunarse.</p>		
 <hr/> Consuelo Beltrán A., MD		
Nº Receta: Y3789-47e Fichero: I-376		Fecha: 3 agosto 96 Verificación: sí

Figure 4. Example of evidence, a prescription for medicine

Participants use the information from the Web site as well as clues that only they have access to (individually distributed by the instructor at the outset of each round) to query other characters via a distribution list or listserv so that all participants receive all such queries and responses about their relationship with the victim, alibis, and motives. Although the Web materials, character descriptions, and major plot elements are predetermined by the program, participants are encouraged to be creative in their development of the character.

The authors envision that e-mail interaction will take place outside of class, with students sending between 10 and 30 messages in each of the four rounds. However, they suggest that instructors supplement this written interaction with in-class speaking and listening activities such as simulated interrogations or news reports. Although not discussed by the authors, much of the interaction designed to be carried out by e-mail could also be done orally in class. After the completion of the fourth round, participants are expected to create a final project summarizing the facts of the case. Recommended projects include a videotaped news report, a newspaper that includes original articles about the case, and a written accusation of a character with supporting arguments.

EVALUATION

One particularly innovative aspect of MeT is that although all evidence and characters are simulated, the interaction among participants is real in the sense that they communicate as they see fit, rather than simply choosing from a list of predetermined options as in the case of many simulations (e.g.,

Montevidisco by Larson & Bush, 1997). Within the general confines of the plot, learners can create their own meanings, and they must participate in two-way information exchanges with other learners. Such interactions, in which all participants have information which must be shared with others, are believed to promote second language acquisition (Pica, Kanagy, & Falodun, 1993). Moreover, interaction with real people (albeit people who are also playing roles) may be more motivating for learners than simulated interaction with virtual interlocutors (e.g., Learn to Speak Spanish 7.0). In addition, the collaborative nature of MeT may promote camaraderie among students and facilitate the integration of computer-based work with in-class activities.

The fact that MeT requires group participation and that the e-mail interaction is largely open-ended, also has some disadvantages in comparison with software designed for individual use. For one, learners cannot work at their own pace but instead must keep up with, or wait for, the rest of the group. In addition, while participants may engage in negotiation of meaning as a result of the need to share information (Long, 1996), there is no systematic feedback built into the program, as there often is in programs with limited student output. Thus the instructor and/or other participants must provide all evaluation and feedback for student production.

Furthermore, the unvarying comprehension-based components of MeT (i.e., online evidence and cultural materials) are not accompanied by any on-line help or elaboration features. While some grammar explanations, vocabulary lists, and a general help file are included, there are no direct links to these features from relevant sections. A more effective use of hypermedia would provide contextualized help and would allow users to click on a word or sentence for lexical or grammatical annotations or other supporting materials (Lomicka, 1998; Roby, 1999).

Nonetheless, the task-based nature of the entire activity, in which the overall goal is to solve the mystery, does offer a concrete means by which to incorporate email-based communication into the curriculum. While there is much discussion about the benefits of utilizing email to increase second language interaction and written production outside of class (e.g., González-Bueno, 1998), instructors are often hard-pressed to find appropriate means of promoting such interaction. Even when e-mail discussion lists are established, learners and instructors may not know what to communicate about. By providing a need to share information in each round, MeT offers a meaningful context for interaction as well as concrete topics to discuss. SLA researchers could also utilize this prefabricated context as the basis for communicative language use by L2 speakers of Spanish in order to avoid having to design all their own research materials. Possible studies for which MeT would be useful include comparisons of the quantity and quality of feedback and negotiation in oral versus email interaction, explorations of the effects of various types of feedback on L2 development, and investigations of the use of past tense verbs in Spanish.

Just as the role play combines real interaction with fictional characters and documents, other components of MeT demonstrate an attempt to integrate the simulation within the real world. Locations in Toluca have photographs of actual buildings, and many include links to Web sites publicly available on the Internet. The authors have clearly made an attempt to include only more stable sites; however, even these may become outdated. Instructors are encouraged to add additional links to the MeT Web pages within the supplied guidelines. Unfortunately, there are no concrete suggestions for how to use the links provided, and the cultural commentaries (some in English, some in Spanish) are extremely brief. For example, the Frida Kahlo Museum (not really located in Toluca) does not contain any information about the painter or any links to any images of her art (e.g., <http://www.cascade.net/kahlo.html>, <http://members.aol.com/fridanet/kahlo.htm>, <http://www.artsednet.getty.edu/ArtsEdNet/Resources/Maps/kahlo.html>). Similarly, suggested topics for discussion and research are not accompanied by links to resources containing relevant information.

Although the Web site is completely functional (i.e., all links work properly), some technical aspects of MeT leave room for improvement. Navigation can be cumbersome: there is no button on the main

navigation bar to return to the main menu, not all icons are clear, and external links cannot be accessed directly from the page on which they are summarized; users must instead visit the specific buildings associated with each topic. In addition, there are numerous typographical errors (in both Spanish and English) as well as some grammatical errors. Finally, on the Student CD, participants are informed that Toluca is in Spain instead of Mexico.

SUMMARY

MeT offers instructors a structured means by which to incorporate e-mail-based interaction into Spanish courses. The lack of specific content- or form-focused activities, explanations, and feedback means that instructors will likely want to create their own supplements to the program. In addition, if instructors are to evaluate student participation and be active participants in the role play, they will have to spend a considerable amount of time reading MeT-related e-mail. Nonetheless, the amount of work required is considerably less than would be the case were a similar activity to be created from scratch. Similarly, while cultural commentaries and suggested ways to use external links are sparse, the use of MeT does provide a context for the incorporation of additional materials and discussions. For instructors willing and able to supplement the materials furnished, MeT provides a fun, on-going activity for students at or above the intermediate level. Moreover, the emphasis on group interaction, in contrast with software programs that are designed for individual use, makes *Un Misterio en Toluca* attractive for use with language classes.

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ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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