Forging Wargamers

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FORGING WARGAMERS
Heated debates on the definition of a wargame continue to this day.¹ Peter P. Perla, one of the giants of professional wargaming and the author of the seminal *The Art of Wargaming*, characterizes wargaming as being composed of four major elements: a synthetic environment, containing an abstraction of conflict, using human decision making, and demonstrating consequences for those human decisions.² In 2016, Perla further defined wargames as “a dynamic representation of conflict or competition in a synthetic environment in which people make decisions and respond to the consequences of those decisions.”³ Admittedly, there exists a variety of definitions of wargaming, but for the purposes of this edited volume, Perla’s definition serves as its foundational touchstone.⁴

The abstraction of human conflict in the form of games is ancient, tracing its roots back to games of antiquity such as Go or Wei Hai, an abstract strategy game played on a 19-by-19-inch

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¹ “What Is a ‘Wargame’?,” *Mentioned in Dispatches* (podcast), Armchair Dragoons, 4 December 2020.
board, or Chaturanga, a predecessor to modern chess from the Indian subcontinent. Yet, from the perspective of the profession of arms, the development of the Kriegsspiel by Georg Leopold von Reisswitz in the early nineteenth century and its continued development by his son, George Heinrich Rudolf Johann von Reisswitz, is the seminal origin point. The Reisswitz’s Kriegsspiel is a landmark moment for professional wargaming for its departure from legacy systems such as chess and its widespread introduction and adoption into the Prussian military. Over time, the use of wargames, as tools of entertainment, education, and analysis, has been prolific. H. G. Wells and Fletcher Pratt, both renowned novelists, designed their own wargames to explore warfare and its contours in the twentieth century. The Second World War featured the predominant use of wargames, ranging from the wargames by the British Royal Navy’s Western Approaches Tactical Unit (WATU) to combat German submarine attacks, to the infamous Japanese wargame prior to the Battle of Midway. Since then, wargames have proliferated and evolved into the robust commercial game industry and a vibrant professional wargaming field focused on analysis and education.

But this begs the question: How does one become a wargamer, whether as a player, sponsor, analyst, or designer? When most professional wargamers are asked how they enter the field of designing or using wargames for the study of conflict, most if not all will sheepishly offer some form of, “I stumbled into it.” This author counts themselves among the

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5 Earlier versions of wargames, such as war chess by Johann C. L. Hellwig, elaborated on the design of chess with additional rules and mechanics such as terrain. Although critical to the development of wargaming, war chess and its variations simply resembled warfare and the Reisswitz’s Kriegsspiel marked the movement toward simulating warfare.


ranks who serendipitously wandered onto the path of the wargamer. Unfortunately, the prevalence of wargamers produced by convenient accidents is not a rarity but a consequence of there being no formal system to produce them. The absence of an established talent pipeline for wargaming—whether as participants, sponsors, analysts, or designers—risks making the wargaming field increasingly small and insular. Within the military, wargaming experience among officers is principally constrained to resident professional military education (PME) and select assignments directly engaged with wargaming as part of the analytical cycle. For the enlisted force, wargaming is tragically a rare commodity largely constrained to enterprising individuals’ use of commercial wargames and tactical decision games (TDGs) for unit-based training.8 The current wargaming enterprise remains piecemeal and disjointed at best; small islands of excellence tangentially connected to one another.

For aspiring designers, there are only a handful of institutions that offer courses in game design for defense professionals. In the military, this includes the Air Force Institute of Technology (AFIT) at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio; U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC) in Leavenworth, Kansas; Marine Corps University (MCU) in Quantico, Virginia; National Defense University (NDU) at Fort Lesley J. McNair in Washington, DC; U.S. Naval War College (NWC) in Newport, Rhode Island; and the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) in Monterey, California. On the civilian side, a handful of universities provide wargaming courses in programs focused on security studies, such as Georgetown University, MIT, Johns Hopkins University, McGill University, and King’s College London. However, most of these are introductory courses for aspiring designers. After students receive their initial induction into wargaming, there are few avenues for continued learning and development. This is best reflected by Caitlyn Leong’s arti-

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“How to Raise a Wargamer,” where she highlights the variety of challenges facing young designers. She poignantly writes, “Beyond the occasional individual mentor, the connection between student-run wargaming organizations and the professional wargaming community is infrequent—if not nonexistent.”

The trials and tribulations of educating and cultivating a wargaming expertise is a regularly recurring topic and persistent complaint from the community. In 2018, the author wrote that the defense enterprise needed to foster wargaming across the ranks, leveraging a myriad of wargames and tools. This included the use of digital platforms like Steam and designing custom educational wargames to foster familiarity and appreciation for wargaming as a tool. Elizabeth Bartels of Rand offered a two-track solution for wargaming education, tailoring wargaming experiences either to those seeking to become specialists or designers, or those seeking to learn how to leverage wargames, such as sponsors, project managers, and analysts. In contrast, Jeff Appleget, Jeff Kline, and Robert Burks argue the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) should aim to develop and revitalize wargaming expertise within its uniformed ranks. Given the dominance of external organizations in wargaming, such as federally funded research and development centers (FFRDCs) and defense contractors, they argue that this reliance outsources “the intellectual underpinnings of the nation’s defense strategy, officer professional development, and the department’s acquisition process.” Likewise, the 2019 Connections Wargaming Conference, an annual professional conference for wargaming, featured a workshop focused on the next generation of wargamers, both civilian and uniformed

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servicemembers. Unsurprisingly, the discussion was hotly contested on what comprised the best steps forward. Due to the elusive nature of a solution, the question of how to raise the next generation of wargamers remains a perennial topic of debate for the Connections Conference.

The question of developing wargaming expertise is not a sterile academic inquiry, but a pressing imperative with potentially dire consequences. The wargaming community is rapidly approaching an inflection point, where titans of the field are steadily retiring, and the subsequent generation is struggling to fill the void. Meanwhile, even within the Department of Defense (DOD), wargaming remains hampered by misconceptions, prejudices, and a lack of understanding of wargaming’s utility and limitations. In “Getting the Story Right About Wargaming,” Ed McGrady, a distinguished wargamer and former director of wargaming at CNA, stated, “There is a widespread misunderstanding of what wargaming is and a reluctance to accept both the power and limitations of wargames.”\textsuperscript{13} This has led to the misuse and abuse of wargames, ranging from mischaracterizations born from ignorance to malign misapplications of wargaming.\textsuperscript{14}

Thus, the issues and recommendations highlighted by the authors of this edited volume are timely for the continued development of the wargaming field. The authors explore a wide array of issues, broadly defined within three major themes: cultivating wargamers, applying wargaming for education, and educating external stakeholders on the value of wargaming. Natalia Wojtowicz, Kyleanne Hunter, Timothy Smith, and Major Paul Kearney address various aspects of developing wargamers and wargaming literacy. Meanwhile, Lieutenant Colonel Scott Jenkinson, Group Captain Jo Brick, Major Ian Brown, and Captain Benjamin Herbold explore how wargaming can be ap-


plied for PME. Lastly, Jeff Appleget, Robert Burke, Brandon Valeriano, Ben Jensen, and Brooke Taylor explore how better to inform and engage external stakeholders in wargaming, ranging from Congress to social scientists.

Admittedly, this volume is far from perfect and as editor, I wished I had more time to supplement this collection of works with additional perspectives and voices. Despite my best efforts, this volume is DOD-centric, Anglo-American, and predominantly male—indicative of the poor diversity within the wider wargaming field. Although the demographic of the field is changing, ever so marginally and slowly, there remains a tremendous amount of work to be done. Thus, beyond adding to the wargaming literature, this volume seeks to spur wider discussion about the future of the wargaming field. If you find your voice is excluded from these pages, understand that it is not born from malice, but reflective of a perpetual incomplete work. Consider its shortcomings as a call to arms to write yourselves into the literature of the wargaming community. And when future generations examine this work, the author hopes they look on this volume and its authors kindly and find all worthy shoulders to stand on, despite our shortcomings.

Sebastian J. Bae

Editor and Working Group Chair

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