

WAR



by Colonel Jean-Michel Millet
French Army
Former Head of the
Transformation Delivery Division
NATO Joint Warfare Centre

GAMING

THE UGLY, THE GOOD, THE BETTER



WARGAMING IS NOT NEW. ITS RESURGENCE IN NATO IS A RESULT OF MANY FACTORS, BUT THE PRIMARY FACTOR IS PERHAPS THE INCREASING COMPLEXITY OF WAR IN A MULTI-DOMAIN ENVIRONMENT, WHICH REQUIRES MORE COGNITIVE EFFORT FROM STAFF AND COMMANDERS TO ANTICIPATE THE CONSEQUENCES OF DECISION-MAKING.

IN NATO, WARGAMING is in fashion. Almost every month, a NATO headquarters or nation announces either an initiative to set up a wargaming centre or expresses its requirements in this domain to other organizations. This increasing interest in wargaming is largely a good thing. It is a realization of the need to find pragmatic solutions to increasingly complex operational issues, and a corollary of the fact that the threat of large-scale wars against peer or near-peer adversaries is back and require serious analysis. However, the very fact that "wargaming" is becoming shorthand for almost every kind of training exercise or brainstorming gives rise to some serious issues that could potentially overtake the (many) benefits of wargaming as a staff tool. This article outlines the pitfalls of misusing wargaming (*the Ugly*), the contrasting good steps to initiate a wargaming effort (*the Good*) and, finally, the best ways to achieve actionable output from a given wargame (*the Better*).

The Ugly: How to Ensure a Wargaming Project Will Fail

Wargames are very diverse in nature, depending primarily on the context, method and expected results. One of the worst first steps for any organization is to make an unspecified request for wargaming a problem or a potential solution, usually under unreasonable time constraints. Most of the time, this request stems from the need to check that a potential

solution is workable. In that case, more often than not, wargaming is understood as a kind of elaborate brainstorming, or to use a phrase coined by wargame designers: a BOGSAT.¹ In that case, there is little commitment from the headquarters on the topic that is to become a wargame and, as can be expected, the result will usually be underwhelming in terms of the apparent effort to create a reasonable product.

The opposite is even worse: There are many cases where a request for a wargame comes from a very committed organization, who mostly wants to use a wargaming step to vindicate a decision already made or course of action already chosen, but which needs the official "polish" of a wargame as a seal of approval. This, of course, can lead to catastrophic operational results by stifling critical thinking — a key element of the dialectic approach that is integral to wargaming.

There are other variants or aggravating factors. One variant is to expect valid results to a complex problem by utilizing a "wargame in a box".² For the sake of saving time and financial resources in design and development, an organization may take the easier route of using a pre-existing wargame. While this can work for general educational purposes, it rarely works for a specific problem set requiring a specific wargame design. This risk often stems from a lack of interest, wargaming culture, or sponsorship in a given organization, leading to wargaming being seen as a "nice-to-have", or a ticket-punching step in a larger process.

To avoid the worst pitfalls of wargaming, as mentioned above, an organization or commander must decide 1) why they need a wargame, 2) what their expectations for the output are, and 3) whether they are ready to accept the conclusion and sponsor a given effort — or, in other words, they must decide when *not* to use wargames to support decision-making.

The Good: Ways to Set Things Right

"As a general rule, a successful wargame requires two conditions. First, we and our client must be able to identify a clear objective or, in military parlance, a concept of operations. Second, it is crucial that there be key groups with different equities — interests that are at real or imagined odds with one another, based on arguments over strategic or tactical plans, or institutional culture."³

There are many good ways to start a wargaming project on footing that, while it will not ensure the validity of the wargaming conclusions, will at least prevent the main risks. The first step is to work on a broad problem statement internally. This will clarify whether wargaming is the right tool, which type of wargame is to be adapted, and if the time and resources available support this option. Taking the time to consider all this will certainly help to prevent the "ugly" pitfalls defined above. For instance,



based on the working definition of wargaming, if the problem statement does not really define a dialectic dimension ("Who are the adversaries involved?"), wargaming techniques may not be applicable. This internal exercise in problem statement will go a long way in supporting the dialogue with the wargame designer and the wargame development.

The next step is to structure a wargaming support team, led by the wargaming sponsor. As underlined above, one cannot completely outsource a wargame; one does so under the penalty of mediocre results. Most probably, a given organization will have to outsource the design of a wargame and/or its development and analysis. This might create tensions (hopefully creative), especially if the results of a given wargame do not support planned options. This is where the leadership of an internal sponsor comes into play, and this sponsor needs to be supported internally by a team so that the development and output of the wargame is not perceived as foreign to the headquarters or organization.

Much of the value of a wargame resides in the process, sometimes more so than in the output itself. In the design dialogue, the sponsor and the associated team develop a deeper understanding of the problem at hand, in order to help the designer, create game mechanics (type of game, rules, and so on) that will

set conditions for getting the best output of the game. Further development will help clarify the critical elements and their interactions that need to be analysed.

Finally, the issue of adjudication/umpiring of the wargame and its analysis should be addressed at an early stage and not as an afterthought. Using a "trusted agent", an accepted authority with experience as an adjudicator, will go a long way to save the wargame from being disrupted by unsavory results, especially if the trusted agent is involved early in the process. Taken collectively, these pieces of advice support the development of an internal "wargaming culture" that is conducive to the best results.

The Better: Getting the Most Out of a Wargame

Wargaming is a tool in the toolbox of cognitive development and decision-making in complex environments. As mentioned above, it may or may not be the right tool in specific situations or under certain constraints. However, using wargames on a regular basis in an organization also has transformative effects that go beyond the uses of the tool itself. To get the most out of wargaming, and short of creating an internal wargaming branch, a given organization or headquarters must train a "wargame-

aware" team, or cadre. While there may not be "wargame experts" in all headquarters, there is a growing number of officers, non-commissioned officers and civilians who play commercial wargames or who have been exposed to wargaming at some point of their career. These staff members may represent, with the support of external wargaming resources and training, the core of this wargame-savvy team.

The experience of training this cadre at the Joint Warfare Centre (JWC) was very rewarding for those individuals who like being involved in high-level decision wargames. Furthermore, practicing wargames develops organizational qualities that are key elements of cognitive superiority in the current environment. Supporting a wargame design develops creative thinking and critical thinking as well as analytical skills in creating dialectic challenges (recreating duels with a thinking enemy) in a complex environment.

Being involved in the analytical part of wargaming also helps in developing an acceptance of failure as a potential result, forcing organizations to understand the reasons for failure in order to improve. Presenting the analysis of a failing party in each phase of a wargame supports a creative dialogue and generates experience in decision-making — something that can only be learned through practice.

Wargaming is not new. Its resurgence in NATO is a result of many factors, but the primary factor is perhaps the increasing complexity of war in a multi-domain environment, which requires more cognitive effort from staff and commanders to anticipate the consequences of decision-making. By creating a culture of creative and critical thinking, wargaming holds the potential to reinforce fundamental factors of the Alliance's superiority. ✦

BELOW: The JWC's first large-scale wargaming event, JETS 3.0, conducted at NATO Joint Support and Enabling Command, November 17, 2022. Photo by JWC PAO



ENDNOTES

- 1 BOGSAT is a derisive acronym of wargame designers for "Bunch of Guys (and Gals) Sitting Around a Table" and code for a pseudo-wargame, with no rules and usually very poor output.
- 2 That is a "generic" wargame with mechanics and objectives previously designed to tackle a different operational problem.
- 3 Mark Herman, *Wargaming for Leaders*, p.12, New York, McGraw Hill, 2008