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Gaming the System: Obstacles to Reinvigorating Defense Wargaming



How should the United States prepare for a future characterized by the rise of new adversaries, rapid change, and declining defense budgets? [Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work](#) and [Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Paul Selva](#) have pointed to wargaming, which famously helped the United States to prepare for the Second World War. They argue that wargames offer the Department of Defense a relatively inexpensive but powerful way to explore possible future conflicts, test ideas, and ultimately identify ways to prevail. Accordingly, the Pentagon is seeking to employ wargames more broadly — and to use game results more directly to influence its strategy, policy and programs.

These are laudable goals. Nevertheless, creating, orchestrating, and observing recent games across the Department of Defense — and [conferring](#) with the broader gaming [community](#) — has made us aware of a number of potential challenges. These are important to keep in mind for a reinvigorated wargaming enterprise to succeed.

Bonanza or Bust

A failure to appreciate the strengths, weaknesses, and limitations of wargames and wargamers could lead to a situation in which “bad games drive out good ones.” This is not a new concern. As wargaming expert Peter Perla

has observed, wargames have often been “oversold” and “abused,” and wargaming as a method has suffered as a result. Given the current zeitgeist, this could become a problem again.

Many in the defense wargaming community know how to craft effective games, appreciate their value, and understand what games can and cannot do. But the present enthusiasm for wargames is encouraging individuals and organizations with minimal wargaming experience to enter the field. Although this could bring new ideas and approaches into the fold, it also heightens the risk that inexperienced designers will produce [games that are not as well-designed or -executed](#) — or that wargames might be used when they are not the most appropriate analytic tool for a given question.

Gaming is not always the best way to approach a problem, and rarely should it be the only approach used. Games are not a substitute for models or computer simulations, with which they are often lumped together and confused. Models and simulations can be used to run hundreds or even thousands of iterations and to develop precise answers to very specific questions. By contrast, games are not replicable in the strict sense. Although multiple iterations of a scenario can be run using the same input data, even the same set of players might act differently each time. Of course, it is this very unpredictability and the creativity of participants that allow games to generate new ideas. Games, therefore, are best used to develop insights rather than provide answers. Moreover, gaming is complementary to other methods of analysis (including models, simulations, and historical research) and most effective when it is part of a broader [cycle of research](#).

Supply and Demand

The growing demand for wargames also might outstrip the wargaming community’s capacity to successfully execute *good* games. This mismatch between supply and demand could negatively impact the quality of wargames and contribute to a potential backlash against gaming. The professional wargaming community may have already reached a point where the demand for games is exceeding the current supply of experienced game designers, skilled players, and other subject-matter experts vital to conducting first-rate games. As the number of wargames has swelled, the increased operational tempo also has the potential to stress organizations that are now being asked to run many small games each year instead of one large annual or biannual exercise, taxing short-handed staffs (especially if those small games need to be executed simultaneously or in quick succession).

Lacking sufficient time to develop and test new games, organizations may be forced to reuse existing game designs, even if other approaches are better suited to the job at hand. This may not be a problem for games in which the main objective is educating players. But when games are supposed to be a force for innovation, this recycling approach to wargaming could eventually result in exercises that yield fewer novel insights.

Failure *is* an Option

To facilitate the dissemination of information about wargames, the Department of Defense has created [a wargaming repository](#) that will house the results of all completed games as well as information about planned exercises. Additionally, a [Defense Wargaming Alignment Group](#) is being created to ensure that senior leader priorities shape wargames while the insights from wargames inform senior leaders. These are important initiatives. But like all good initiatives, the Pentagon needs to be mindful of the unintended consequences that could emerge.

One of the main virtues of wargames is that they offer a low-risk and “[intellectually liberating](#)” environment. Yet the current effort to catalog, scrutinize, and utilize game results might inadvertently undermine this environment by raising the stakes of each game. This, in turn, could have two effects.

First, players might become more reluctant to criticize current plans, policies, and programs. For wargames to succeed, participants need to set aside parochial interests and try their best to identify, assess, and solve problems, even if their insights challenge the status quo. Increased oversight of the wargaming enterprise — and greater dependence on wargame findings to shape budgets in a time of resource scarcity — could actually make games more conservative when the intent may be exactly the opposite.

Second, organizers might exaggerate their findings to demonstrate that games are indeed the driver of innovation that many assume. Yet not all wargames uncover new insights, no matter how well-designed and well-executed they might be. Thus organizers and their sponsors need to adopt a “[venture capital](#)” model and understand that the failure to identify new solutions is not itself a failure of the game.

How can the Pentagon encourage “outside-the-box” thinking while conveying that not all games need to find “the next big thing?” One important step would be to encourage senior leaders to participate in wargames. While it is difficult for high-ranking uniformed and civilian officials to take time away from their demanding schedules, there is no substitute for the immersive experience of gameplay as a way to learn about a problem. Not only can it enable senior leaders to appreciate the severity of new problems and the need for novel approaches, but it also affords them the opportunity to lead by example and show a willingness to entertain options that diverge from current policies and plans. Ultimately, demonstrating a commitment to innovation from the top down may be the best way to foster it from the bottom up.

Another important step would be to fund games as part of a series rather than as one-off events. Doing so would provide multiple opportunities to explore a problem, alleviating some of the pressure to generate big new ideas in any single event. Multiple games involving different sets of participants could also increase the confidence in any findings that are uncovered.

Reinvigorating wargaming in the defense community offers great potential value given the complex strategic situation that the United States faces today. Nevertheless, the wargaming community needs to be aware of the challenges that could impede the rejuvenation of gaming and take steps to mitigate them. In particular, the Department of Defense should educate sponsors and consumers about when and how it is appropriate to use wargames, set realistic expectations for how many games can be run each year, and build an appropriate amount of risk acceptance into its gaming enterprise. All of this is critical to a strong wargaming enterprise that can develop innovative and sound solutions to future security challenges.

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