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Wargaming in the Classroom: An Odyssey

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Several years ago, as a new professor at the Marine Corps War College, I spent a huge amount of time putting together the best presentation on Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War ever presented at any war college at any time. After accounting for the 125-page a night reading limit, I had selected the perfect set of readings. These were reinforced by an unbelievably entrancing and informative lecture, and a slideshow employing stunning period visuals. My plan even set aside copious amounts of time for critical thinking, and what I knew would be an intense Socratic dialogue. Finally, in preparation for the expected bombardment of thoughtful student questions, I prepared myself by re-reading Thucydides' master work, as well as over a dozen other historical works on the period.

Then, the big day arrived ... and I failed miserably.

The students had done the readings, listened to my lecture, stared at the slides, asked a few perfunctory questions, and, most of all, watched the clock. A day or two later, I knew that the overwhelming majority of them barely remembered any of my major points. The best I could hope for was that they at least knew that "attacking Syracuse was bad," though I doubted any of them could explain why. In that regard, I find it amusing that at least three war colleges, in the "Questions to Ponder" they hand to the students, ask a variation of the same question:

“Was the attack on Syracuse poor strategy, or good strategy marred by poor execution?” My rejoinder is: “How the #\$%#@ would the students know?”

The truth is that if one just reads selected passages from Thucydides’ work, it is impossible to comprehend the events and complexities of the multi-decade Peloponnesian War. Moreover, as students rarely have the background or context in which to mentally file the readings, they quickly get lost in a plethora of Greek names, locations, and events. War college professors who believe their graduates know anything about Thucydides besides reciting the mantra “fear, honor, interest” are fooling themselves.

What Happened

This year, I changed everything. First, I found some great audio lectures that allowed students to listen to a series of professionally produced talks on Thucydides at home or in the car. This little touch allowed me to “flip” the classroom, as I no longer had to use precious class time explaining the basics. By itself, this hugely increased the potential for a Socratic give and take with the students. To help further encourage such discussions I also broke each seminar into smaller groups that allowed me to mimic the intimacy of “Oxford tutorials.” This made for much longer days for me, but hugely increased student interaction. Moreover, as students had no place to hide, it made a vast difference in their level of preparation and participation. Discussion was further enhanced by the use of maps that showed the geography in terms that made it easy to understand various actions of the warring states.

I still had them read Pericles’ Oration, the Melian Dialogues, and the Mytilene Decrees directly from Thucydides. As for the rest of the war’s great events, the students were given a collection of readings that presented them within the war’s full context, and explained the strategic implications of each event.

As a capstone event I added a wargame. I selected Fran Diaz’s *Polis: Fight for the Hegemony*, because, unlike many games, it has a heavy economic and diplomatic element. After dividing the seminars into teams, I was able to run five simultaneous games.

The results were amazing.

As every team plotted their strategic “ends,” students soon realized that neither side had the resources — “means” — to do everything they wanted. Strategic decisions quickly became a matter of tradeoffs, as the competitors struggled to find the “ways” to secure sufficient “means” to achieve their objectives (“ends”). For the first time, students were able to examine the strategic options of the Peloponnesian War within the strictures that limited the actual participants in that struggle.

Remarkably, four of the five Athenian teams actually attacked Syracuse on Sicily’s east coast! As they were all aware that such a course had led to an Athenian disaster 2,500 years before, I queried them about their decision. Their replies were the same: Each had noted that the Persians were stirring, which meant there was a growing threat to Athens’ supply of wheat from the Black Sea. As there was an abundance of wheat near Syracuse, each Athenian team decided to secure it as a second food source (and simultaneously deny it to Sparta and its allies) in the event the wheat from the Black Sea was lost to them. Along the way, two of the teams secured Pylos so as to raise helot revolts that would damage the Spartan breadbasket. Two of the teams also ended revolts in Corcyra, which secured that island’s fleet for Athenian purposes, and had the practical effect of blockading Corinth. So, it turns out there were a number of good strategic reasons for Athens to attack Syracuse. Who knew? Certainly not any War College graduate over the past few decades.

All of these courses of action were thoroughly discussed by each team, as were Spartan counter moves. For the first time in my six years at the Marine Corps War College, I was convinced that the students actually understood the range of strategies and options Thucydides wrote about. In the following days, I was stopped dozens of times by students who wanted discuss other options they might have employed, and, even better, to compare their decisions to what actually happened. A number of students told me they were still thinking about various options and decisions weeks later. I assure you that no one even spent even a car ride home thinking about my

Thucydides lectures.

I repeated the same basic formula for the Civil War (using [GMT's *For the People*](#)), but added staff rides to Gettysburg and Antietam to the educational mix. For the First World War, I used another GMT game, [Paths of Glory](#), but also added an exercise of my own design to replicate 1914's July Crisis. Prior to this, the students had discussed the July Crisis, and walked away shaking their heads at the astounding stupidity of European leaders who so blindly stumbled into war. When, however, they were placed within the context of the situation, they soon discovered just how easy it is to stumble into an unwanted war. I have run this exercise six times now, and it has never taken longer than four hours for the armies to march.

For the Second World War, in addition to the readings, lectures, and discussions, I added a video documentary, and, of course, another wargame. This time I used GMT's [Triumph and Tragedy](#), because, like *Polis*, it is heavy on the economic and diplomatic aspects of strategy. I also, once again, employed another exercise that I designed. For this exercise, I broke the students into British and American teams, and placed them within the context of 1943's Casablanca Conference. Their task was to set the strategic priorities for the next 18 to 24 months. It is one thing to discuss this war in a classroom, and quite another to have to plan it out for yourself, and then compare your results to what the Combined Chiefs presented to FDR and Churchill.

As the academic year draws to a close, I continue to employ wargames, including several geopolitical simulations created by National Defense University's [Center for Applied Strategic Learning](#) (CASL). The results, so far, have exceeded all of my expectations. For six or more hours at a sitting, classes remain focused on the strategic choices before them, as they try to best an enemy as quick-thinking and adaptive as they are. Every turn presents strategic options and dilemmas that have to be rapidly discussed and decided on. As there are never enough resources, time and again hard choices have to be made. Every war college administrator can wax eloquently about their school's mission to enhance their students' critical thinking skills. But they then subject those same students to a year of mind-numbing classroom seminars that rarely, if ever, allow them to practice those skills that each college claims as its *raison de`etre*. Well, wargaming, in addition to helping students comprehend the subject material, also allows them an unparalleled opportunity to repeatedly practice decisive critical thinking. Moreover, it does so in a way where the effects of both good and bad decisions are almost immediately apparent.

At the end of each wargame, students walked away with a new appreciation of the historical circumstances of the period and the events they had read about and discussed in class. And even though all wargames are an abstract of actual events, I am sure that no student exposed to historical gaming will ever again read about the Peloponnesian War without thinking about Sicily's wheat, the crucial importance of holding the Isthmus of Corinth, or what could have been done with a bit more Persian silver in the coffers of one side or the other's treasury. Similarly, the next time one of this year's students reads about Lee and Grant in 1864, they will also be thinking about how the truly decisive actions took place out west. For, as it was during the actual conflict, in every game the students played, Grant's role was to pin down the Army of Northern Virginia, while the western armies ripped out the economic heart of the Confederacy.

In fact, I was astounded at the number of students who approached me after the Civil War exercise to mention that despite having studied the Civil War before, this was the first time they realized that the war was won in the west. I could go on for another few thousand words discussing other revelations students experienced through gaming and simulations, but the key point is that these experiential learning experiences linger in students' minds for a very long time. I once asked my seminars how many of them had discussed the games and their results with their spouses. Every hand went up. I am quite sure that very few of them ever discussed one of my lectures with their spouses.

Because I thought the class would enjoy it, I also had them play the classic game — [Diplomacy](#). I did this although I had no true learning objective, and excused myself by telling the students that not everything at the War College had to be serious. In the event, they did learn a couple of very important lessons. For one: "Nations have no friends, only interests." And for another, they learned just how hard it is to conduct long-term strategic planning in a "low information environment, where you can trust no one." After the game, one student, who had been stabbed in the back by several supposed allies, jokingly complained that he regretted that it took him seven

months to finally have the true character of his peers revealed.



Planning Sparta's advance

Making it Happen

So how is it done?

First, professors need time. Unlike most war colleges, the Marine War College has only two seminars, and when it comes to teaching strategy, I own both of them. I set my schedule and, once it is blessed by the director, I go forth and execute. If I need an entire day to run a simulation or wargame, I place it in the schedule. This is difficult for professors at other institutions, as their seminars have to advance in lock-step with two dozen other seminars. Still, games can be modified for time constraints. Moreover, on which stone is it written that students have to be sent home as soon as a seminar period ends?

The other major issue is the complexity of the games, and the difficulty of having students learn them. As a start point, I had the students read the rules before class, and when there was a video tutorial online they also watched that. Still, for non-wargamers, the learning curve is steep. To help overcome it, I was often able to get a few student volunteers to run through the game before the class met, and then I spread those students out amongst the various games. I was also assisted by a couple of persons within Marine Corps University who took the time to learn the various games. The biggest assist, however, came from volunteers within the local civilian wargaming community. I discovered a couple of wargaming clubs in the area, and several of their members answered my pleas for help. These gamers, all experts on the various simulations' mechanics, volunteered their time and were instrumental in keeping the games running smoothly. Over time, I expect to drag enough of my colleagues into gaming that there will always be a pool of proficient wargamers at my disposal.



Looking for new WWI strategic options

What I Got Wrong

The biggest mistake I made this year was not allotting time for proper after action reviews (AAR). I will fix this for next year. This is something I had previously considered, but had not acted upon it until I got the following in a post-game student e-mail:

The war game was again very good. A few recommendations: 1) either before the game begins or soon after it starts allow the teams 30 minutes to formulate a strategy. How are they going to win the game? and 2) debrief the class after the game. Take about 30 minutes and go over what was a team's strategy? how did they come up with that strategy? did it work? why or why not? did they adjust their strategy? why?

The other mistake I made was on the practical exercises, where I critiqued student solutions. Trust me, no one likes having their answers critiqued, least of all Type A colonels. In the future, I plan to spend a lot more time asking students how they arrived at their solutions.

Where I am Going

I probably will not add any additional gaming events in the next academic year, although I am refining my game selection. Moreover, I am examining each selected game to see where I can make changes that will enhance the strategic aspects of the decision-making process. I will also continue refining the simulations of my own design, and hope to prepare them for export to other war colleges. I also hope to gather more subject matter experts to attend each game. I think there are major gains to be had by having experts (other professors) on various conflicts sitting with one or two games each. As the students play the game, these professors can simultaneously discuss the actual strategic options, and events of the conflict under study. I also hope to enlist more gaming experts to help the students with game mechanics, as well as play more simultaneous games so that I can reduce team size to 2–3 persons.



Forget Richmond — I want to fight in the west

The biggest initiative I plan next year is to employ gaming beyond helping me teach history, strategy, and theory, and apply it toward examining the battlefield problems the U.S. military may face in the future. There was a time when the war colleges were renowned as centers of forward strategic thinking, innovation, and analysis. I believe it is time to regain that reputation, and that wargames and simulations are the best road to getting there: just as they were when the Navy worked out World War II's Plan Orange on Newport's gaming tables (and floors).

Using a combination of wargames and simulations produced by commercial companies (GMTs *Next War* series), coupled with those actually employed by the Department of Defense and the Army's Training and Doctrine Command, I plan to take a "select" group of students and have them wargame future battlefield environments. My intent is to let students fight out hundreds of iterations of potential conflicts for the full ten months they are in class. We may not create the next Plan Orange, but we will move the ball forward. Moreover, I expect to do this with outside partners who will be waiting for the results, and who may even direct the group toward areas they wish them to examine.



Finally, I note that the Army War College still runs Jim Thorpe Days, where other war colleges send folks to compete in a series of athletic events. Maybe it is time for the war colleges to sponsor some intellectual contests between them. One way to do so would be to sponsor a series of *mano a mano* intellectual contests fought on gameboards and across tabletops. It may seem geekish, but this is really the kind of thing war colleges were created for, and it has the added benefit of being injury-free (other than mental sprains).



Looking Ahead

Last December at *War on the Rocks*, Deputy Secretary of Defense Bob Work and Gen. Paul Selva discussed [using wargaming to energize the war colleges](#) to think "about how we would fight differently in future conflicts." They even went so far as to broach the idea of building the war colleges' curriculums around wargaming. I would not blame you for being leery of such a radical rethinking of the war colleges' approach to education. My own experience, however, demonstrates that there are numerous places where gaming can fundamentally transform the classroom when it comes to teaching strategy, history, and theory. In fact, wargames provide the most cost-effective means of bringing "experiential learning" into the classroom. There is nothing else I have done or have seen any other professor do that creates anything near the level of student participation that wargames and simulations do.

I cannot see any reason why such games and simulations cannot be employed to improve virtually every aspect of war college education. This is especially true when we consider how the colleges are failing to prepare their students for the complex future ahead of them. I humbly offer the beginnings of a roadmap for professors who want to hugely improve how students learn and think about past centuries of warfare. What is needed now is a collection of games and simulations that will help them think about war in the 21st century. Creating those games might be the easy part. The hard part will be breaking the mentality that has set in amongst the war college professorate that things are fine as they are.

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