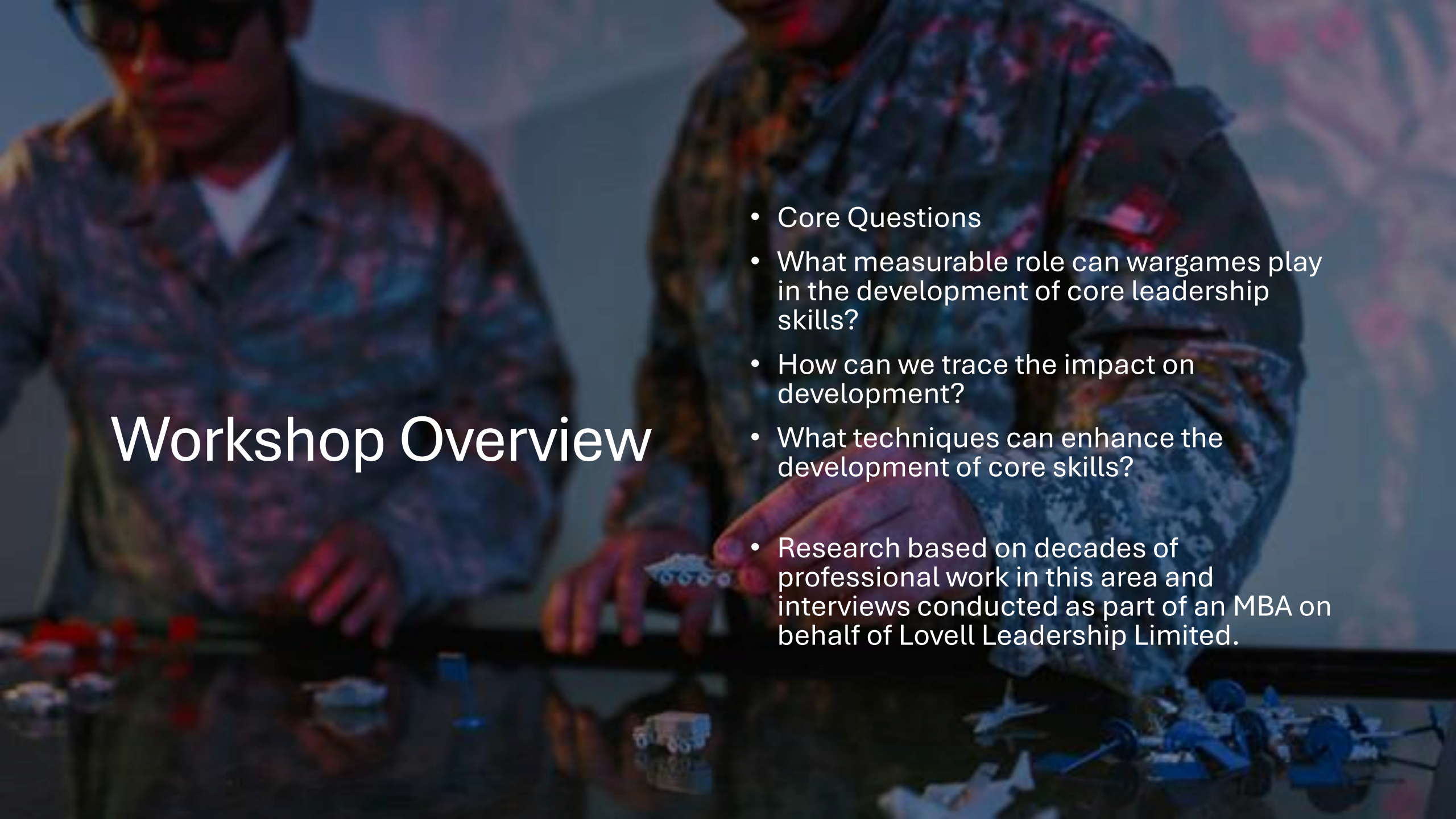




Evaluating and Enhancing the Impact of Wargames on Leadership Development

Robert Grayston, Dr Kristopher Lovell, and Fraser Patrick

A background image showing two individuals in military camouflage uniforms sitting at a table. They are engaged in a hands-on activity, using various colored LEGO bricks to build structures. The person on the left is wearing glasses and looking down at the bricks. The person on the right is also looking down, with their hands positioned over the table. The scene is dimly lit, with a blue and purple color cast, suggesting an indoor setting with specific lighting. The text 'Workshop Overview' is overlaid on the left side of the image.

Workshop Overview

- Core Questions
- What measurable role can wargames play in the development of core leadership skills?
- How can we trace the impact on development?
- What techniques can enhance the development of core skills?
- Research based on decades of professional work in this area and interviews conducted as part of an MBA on behalf of Lovell Leadership Limited.

What is leadership?

- Definitions range from charismatic leadership to transactional to authoritarian (Conger, 1993)
- Kotter argues leadership is “aligning people to new directions and then inspiring them to make it happen” (1990)
- Northouse: “Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (2025)

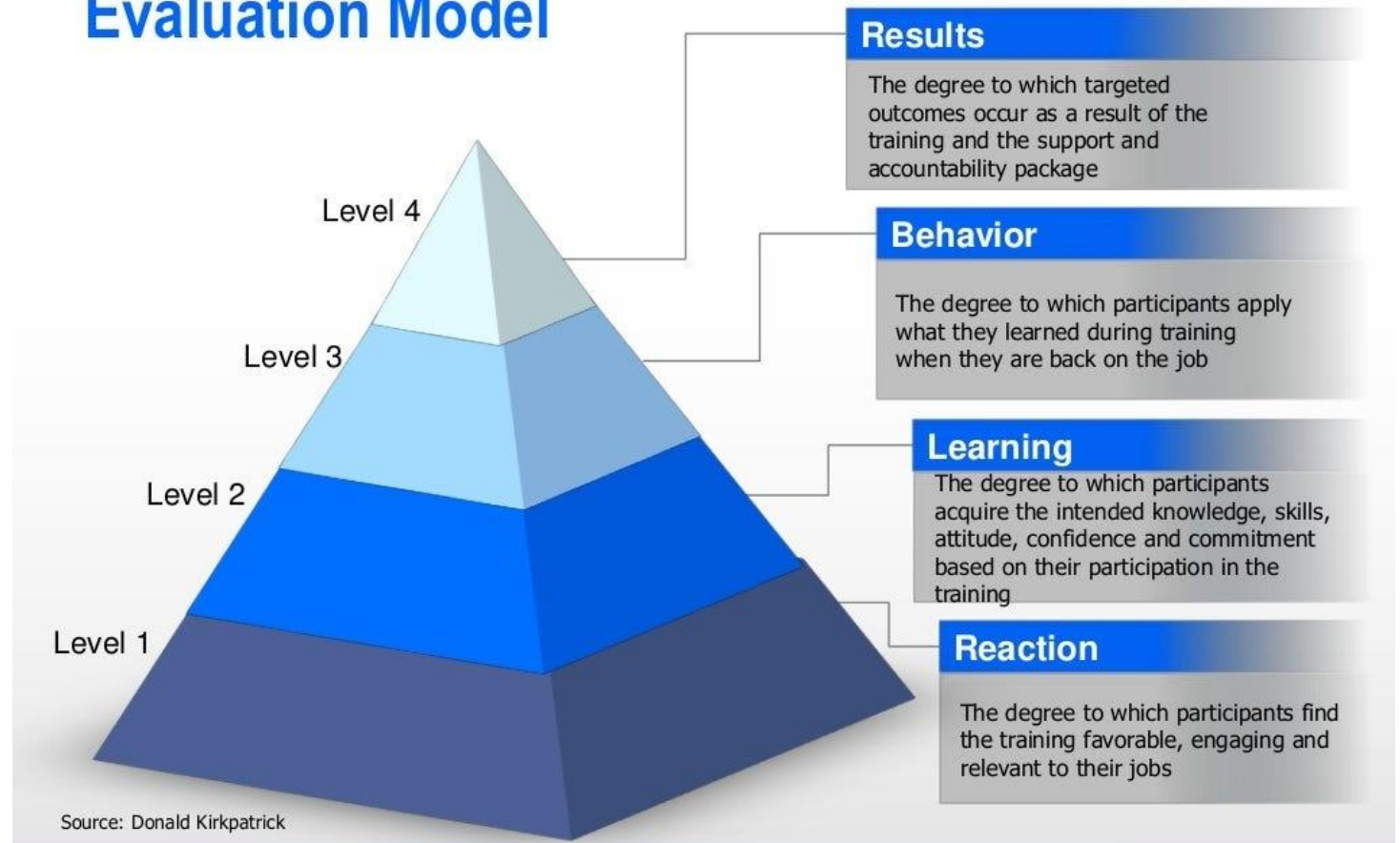
Measuring Impact

- Impact of leadership training is debated. Often anecdotal evidence of impact of leadership training
 - Pousette and Grill (2025) note that there is an “inadequate scientific basis”
 - Leadership interventions risk 'wasting a large amount of time and money (Martin et al, 2021)

Kirkpatrick Model

- Reaction
- Learning
- Behaviour
- Results

Overview of Kirkpatrick's Four-Level Training Evaluation Model



Experiential Learning

- Kolb (2014) argues that experiential learning is effective because it bridges personal development, education and work.
- Reflection is key yet underutilised in professional and recreational games?



Role-Play and Leadership

- Tabletop role-playing games, including Dungeons and Dragons, have also been identified as a potential avenue of leadership development as successful teams of players need to collaboratively deal with leadership challenges (Lasley, 2022).
- Life-Action Role-Playing games (LARPs) have been examined by Hartyándi and Bilsen (2024)
- Van Velsor et al (2010) argue that simulations are more effective than traditional lectures

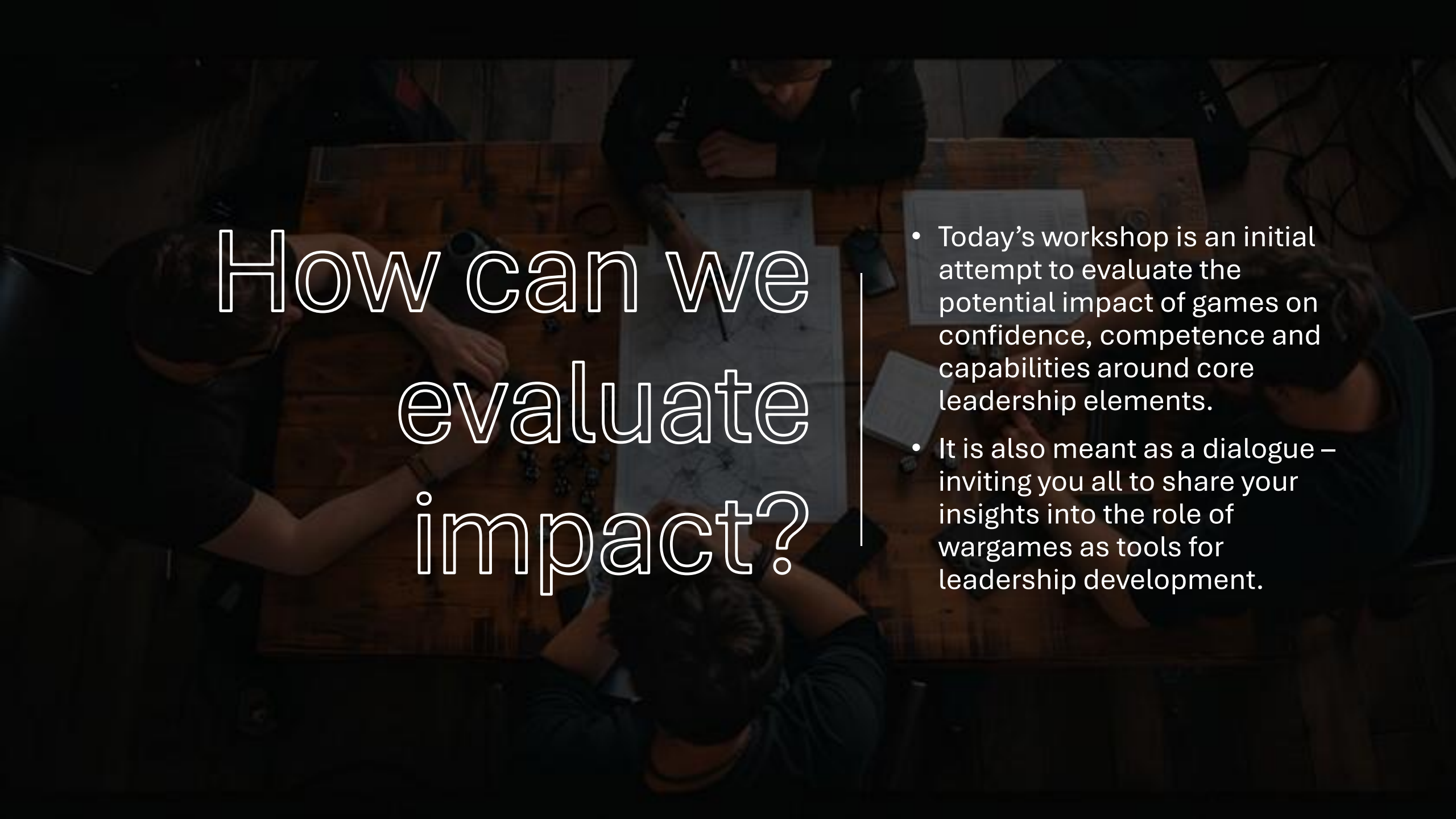
Evidence Gap

- Analysis of the impact tends to focus on learning rather than behaviour (Coffey, Miller & Feuerstein 2011; Ip and Linser, 2001; Shellman and Turan, 2007).
- Focus is on Level 1-2
- Few, if any, focus on measuring the impact on *behaviour*
 - That is: can we evaluate and measure the impact that gaming interventions have on how participants implement leadership?
- Are games having a measurable impact on leadership skills?
 - And what leadership skills are being developed the most? And which are not?



Attitudes to Impact

- Participants often lamented that they lacked the time or resources to fully measure impact
 - Requires long-term relationship with clients.
 - Seen as upselling
- ‘Well, luckily, that's generally not my job. I generally only measure satisfaction’ (Participant 5). Best left to the client?

A group of people are sitting around a large wooden table, working on a project. They are looking at papers and using tools like pens and markers. The scene is dimly lit, with the focus on the table and the people's hands. The text 'How can we evaluate impact?' is overlaid on the left side of the image.

How can we evaluate impact?

- Today's workshop is an initial attempt to evaluate the potential impact of games on confidence, competence and capabilities around core leadership elements.
- It is also meant as a dialogue – inviting you all to share your insights into the role of wargames as tools for leadership development.

ROLE Framework



RATE



OPERATE



LEARN



EVALUATE

Participant Information Sheet

- Copies of the PIS are available online and on paper.
- If you are interested in supporting the project, please complete the pre-survey before the game and the post-survey afterwards
- This will be used to trace the impact of the game on people's levels of confidence.

A Show Of Force

- Research project is looking at the effectiveness of role playing
- Invitation to take part in research
 - Copies of the PIS are available online and on paper.
 - If you are interested in supporting the project, please complete the pre-survey before the game and the post-survey afterwards
 - This will be used to trace the impact of the game on people's levels of confidence.

Leadership Development Pre-Survey





Post Game Reflection

Leadership Development Post-
Survey



Practitioner Insights

Participant 1	Games designer and facilitator. Local Resilience Forums. Wargaming.
Participant 2	Defence and National Security. Professional Military Education Games
Participant 3	Academic (Games Design and Digital Storytelling)
Participant 4	Fire Chief, Innovation, Intelligence, and Games
Participant 5	Academic. Games for staff and student development.
Participant 6	Academic. Wargames and History
Participant 7	Academic, simulations, game design and facilitator.
Participant 8	Academic, wargaming
Participant 9	Director of Games Company
Participant 10	Senior Consultant

Themes	Description	Times coded in transcripts
Reflection is key for learning transfer	Debriefing, follow-up, iterative use, and workplace embedding are repeatedly described as necessary to make learning “stick”.	27
Safety and ethics require consideration, not avoidance	Interviewees emphasise psychological safety, trigger awareness, consent tools, and carefully bounded pressure rather than realism at any cost.	23
Design quality underpins success	Interviewees stress research, clarity of purpose, tailoring, preparation, and alignment to client or organisational needs.	22
RPGs as experiential	Participants repeatedly describe value in taking on roles, gaining immersion, and rehearsing responses in a low-consequence (safe-to-fail) setting.	21
Facilitation shapes the learning environment	Facilitation is treated as central to group management, boundaries, credibility, fairness, and participant engagement before and during play.	20
Communication and empathy as leadership outcomes	Communication is the most consistently identified leadership capability, often paired with empathy, hierarchy, and negotiation (soft skills).	18
Light mechanics support learning	Chance, competition, and rewards are acceptable and can further immersion, but heavy use of game mechanics (including dice rolls) are problematic, arbitrary or generate friction.	15
Organisational context shapes design	Commissioning, buy-in, client clarity, affordability, and organisational alignment influence whether RPG-based learning is feasible and valued. Games are only the start of the learning transfer	15

Safe to Fail Environment

- Across the interviews conducted, the ability of games to offer a 'safe to fail' environment
 - Ability to try new ideas out with limited risk
 - "it doesn't cost millions of pounds, and nobody dies. That is an ideal place for people to be able to make calls and try out strategies. Which in real life they might just be very hesitant, cautious, anxious to, to do, and I think that's a real strength of role-playing games..." (Participant 1)
- Productive failure different from Kobayashi Maru scenarios
 - Can lead to shame, embarrassment and 'disaffected employees' (Participant 4)



Diagnostic versus Developmental

- Development - "Clearly, I think communication is such a big part of leadership that is that is so often overlooked and I think about, you know, every bad leader I've ever worked under was really a bad communicator... And role-playing games really draw out good communication". (Participant 6)
- "I think that's the most important for me, is having the students see that "the map is not the territory." That's the key thing for me... What is truth for you is not true for someone else and there are many truths in every situation... Role playing in your head is what will help you gain empathy because effectively that's what empathy is, isn't it? It's role-playing another person" (Participant 3)
- Diagnostic - "The point of role playing as a tool in any sort of corporate scenario is not to train an instinct into people. That doesn't work. Um, what it is, is to observe how they react to stimuli... That's what role playing is good for. It's no good for training instinct. To do that, you have to, specifically, train by rotary, by whatever. Any other method of training, no problem at all, but [an RPG] it's not a training tool. It's a reaction observation tool" (Participant 9)

Authenticity

- ‘Realism is a factor in exercising that can be very, very important, but it's just one tool. And on occasions, it can be destructive. I have seen realism in exercise and simulation rip people out of the simulation... What they're actually doing is looking at an amazing scenario with a great backdrop and thinking “wow, that must have taken ages to set up” and they're not doing anything at all associated with the actual exercise.’ (Participant 7)
- ‘You're never going to be able to put people in a situation really where they haven't slept for 3 nights, they are getting shelled, they haven't got enough coffee supplies, friends are being injured, all this kind of thing. And I'm not sure you'd want to ever do that. I think from an academic perspective and the sort of ethical restrictions on that, unless there's a very, very, very good reason why you absolutely need to fully replicate those kind of stress conditions. I don't think it's worth doing.’ (Participant 8)



Thoughts and Comments

