

The Defense Professional's Wargaming Reading List

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Ever since the Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work's 9 February 2015 memorandum entitled "Wargaming and Innovation," there has been an accelerating explosion of interest in reinvigorating and improving wargaming throughout the DoD. Some of the services have more closely hitched their force design and development wagons to the wargaming horse, most notably seen in the 38th Commandant of the Marine Corps's Planning Guidance directive for "effective integration of wargaming into force design, education, and training." And while wargaming has been a part of deliberate planning course of action analysis for some time, many still search for ways of doing it better.

For those interested in acquiring wargaming skills, it's worth asking where one begins. During the Cold War there were few available works on the broad subject of wargaming, most notably Peter Perla's *The Art of Wargaming: A Guide For Professionals and Hobbyists* (1991), and James F. Dunnigan's *The Complete Wargames Handbook: How to Play, Design, and Find Them* (1992). Today, one has many more good books on the subject to choose from. Wargaming as a topic covers a lot of ground and there no one single treatment which suffices. The below list of five books provides diverse starting points for budding wargaming practitioners to read and employ, based on their professional interests.

Innovations in Tactics and Technology. Simon Parkin, *A Game of Birds and Wolves: The Ingenious Young Women Whose Secret Board Game Helped Win World War II* (New York: Litte, Brown and Company, 2020). Given the urgent problems facing Great Britain in beating back the German U-Boat threat in WW II, a medically invalided Royal Navy captain and young members of the Women's Royal Navy Service (WRNS, called "Wrens"), assisted the Western Approaches Tactical Unit (WATU) to develop anti-submarine tactics utilizing a manual wargame played on the floor. The women—none of whom had any at sea experience—challenged the tactical assumptions that merchant

ship convoy escort skippers were making and came up with novel and counter-intuitive solutions that worked when put into practice.

The book details the skepticism of seasoned ship commanders that a game had anything to teach them but soon found that the women's tactical recommendations worked in practice. But the climax of the book is when the incoming new commander of WATU, submariner Admiral Sir Max Horton, wanted to see for himself the effectiveness of wargaming. He played the U-boat commander in five engagements against the two of the WATU team representing the convoy escorts, but he didn't know his opponents were two Wrens. The women sank the Admiral's U-boat in all five wargame sessions. He first thought the game had been rigged against him and was flabbergasted when he was introduced to the Wrens who bested him. Once they explained their tactics and the reasoning behind them, he became an enthusiastic convert to the program.

The WATU Wrens also crafted torpedo evasion techniques for the escorts, based on technical analyses of captured German torpedoes and replicating their performance in the wargame. Additionally, they supported the invention, development, and tactics of the new anti-submarine mortar, Hedgehog, to complement conventional depth charges.

The work is an inspiring case study of how dogged pursuit of creative thinking in the search for military tactical and technical solutions to difficult problems can overcome cultural and bureaucratic obstacles. Parkin's narrative keeps the reader's attention, and one can't help but wonder when this book will be made into a movie or mini-series. Parkin's historical narrative is best recommended to concept development analysts, tactical and technical innovation specialists, and doctrine developers.

For more book reviews:

Tim Borsilli, "Review: Parkin, A Game of Birds and Wolves," PAXSims (website), 4 October 2020, <https://paxsims.wordpress.com/2020/04/10/review-parkin-a-game-of-birds-and-wolves/>.

Richard Overly, "A Game of Birds and Wolves by Simon Parkin review—the 'secret game that won the war'", *The Guardian* (website), 14 December 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/dec/14/game-of-birds-and-wolves-simon-parkin-review>.

Stacie L. Pettyjohn, "Book Review: A Game of Birds and Wolves by Simon Parkin (commentary)," RAND Corporation (website), 30 January, 2020, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2020/01/book-review-a-game-of-birds-and-wolves-by-simon-parkin.html>.

Improving tactical planning and general decision-making. John M. Lillard, *Playing War: Wargaming and U.S. Navy Preparations for World War II* (Potomac Books, 2016).

The author's career spans 15 years as an officer in the U.S. Navy, service as an operations analyst, and over two decades of experience in wargaming, modeling, and simulation at the time of this book's publication. The work looks at the U.S. Navy War College educational experience as a whole, but the Navy Fleet Problem wargaming techniques take center stage. Education—learning to deal with the unexpected (some would say learning to learn)—was certainly a major goal. So too was training, such as practicing how to plan movements to contact, communicating pre-battle plans, and issuing orders clearly once committed to a fleet action.

Beyond these benefits, the wargames had much to say about the viability of the strategies serving as the backdrop to the fleet problem scenarios and were productive venues for experimentation of naval operating concepts. Repeating the wargame scenarios from year to year oriented a growing body of naval leaders to the limits of the current strategies and what might be done to overcome them, even as they trained how to plan and conduct fleet actions. The author makes a compelling argument that these fleet problem wargames did not enable War College students to predict how the war in the Pacific would develop (contradicting Nimitz's contention that nothing in the war was a surprise save for the kamikaze threat). Instead, they provided enough vicarious experience for these students to facilitate their effective exercise of agency under fire in naval campaigns and battles. Lillard's historical analysis is strongly recommended for commanders, planning staffs, and professional military education instructors.

For more book reviews:

Matthew Caffrey, "Book Review," *Technology and Culture*, Volume 55, Number 2 (April 2018), 482-3, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/697246>.

Phillip G. Pattee, "Book Review--Playing War: Wargaming and U.S. Navy Preparations for World War II," Naval Historical Foundation (website), 14 December 2016, <https://navyhistory.org/2016/12/book-review-playing-war-wargaming/>.

John Scott Logel, "Playing War: Wargaming and U.S. Navy Preparations for World War II (Review)," Naval War College Review, Volume 69, Number 3 (Summer), Article 13, 152-4, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol69/iss3/13>.

Wargaming Support to War Studies Education. Philp Sabin, *Simulating War: Studying Conflict Through Simulation Games* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012). The author was a celebrated professor of in the Department of War Studies at King's College in London, specializing in the history of ancient warfare. His earlier book, *Lost Battles*, earned praise for its innovative use of wargaming methods to investigate and learn more about ancient tactics in battles than merely reading about it could uncover. This work, while of value to students of military history and war theory, is primarily aimed at professional educators and argues for wargaming methods as a particularly effective teaching tool.

For those under the impression that wargames are too complicated and/or take too much time to play in a classroom setting, Sabin includes ready-made small wargames in the book that can be reproduced, quickly assembled, and easily learned. Tested and refined in his classroom deployments, he explains his choices of historical actions and how he used the games in teaching. Three of the games deal with larger scale fighting: one on Hannibal's and Rome's strategic military options in the Second Punic War, one on the early 1944 Soviet offensive to eliminate the German salient on the Dnepr River, and the last one on Allied strategic bombing during the final day raids of "The Big Week" in 1944. The remaining three cover WW II tactical engagements; one on air-to-air combat, one on city fighting, and one on infantry combat in the countryside. The author also describes a couple of smaller wargames used to teach basic Clausewitzian ideas that the reader can try out.

Sabin makes a strong case in his book that using wargames to teach military history and theory does not require specialized skills, just preparation and practice. He is also successful in making a case for homegrown game designs for class that are tightly tailored to meet the desired learning outcomes instead of trying to adapt the teaching objectives to already existing commercial titles. Sabin's wargaming opus is highly recommended for professional military education and civilian war studies professors.

For more book reviews:

Jeremy Black, "Book Review," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Volume 36, Issue 5, 752-3, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01402390.2013.825432>.

Rex Brynen "Review: Sabin, Simulating War," *PAXSims* (Blog), 24 March 2012, [Review: Sabin, Simulating War | PAXsims https://paxsims.wordpress.com/2012/03/24/review-sabin-simulating-war/](https://paxsims.wordpress.com/2012/03/24/review-sabin-simulating-war/).

Designing and running research/analytical professional wargames. Col. Jeff Appleget, Col. Robert Burks, and Fred Cameron, *The Craft of Wargaming: A Detailed Planning Guide For Defense Planners and Analysts* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2020). This book is a step-by-step authoritative reference on turning vague research objectives intended to explore thorny defense issues into a successful analytical wargame. Unlike educational and training games aiming to teach the participants through wargame play, research/analytical wargames conversely intend for subject matter expert participants to teach the research analysts how and why decisions are made under pressure.

One of the best features of the work are practical exercises and solutions provided to illustrate each step of the process; these are of great service in helping to translate the authors' advice into executable action. One of the appendices is titled the "wargame gateway exam" and is a good refresher of the major points made in the text. Another provides eight brief case studies of successful wargames to inspire emulation.

If there was one book that one might consider "the bible" for issue exploration style research wargames, this would be it. Graham Longley-Brown's *Successful Professional Wargames: A Practitioner's Handbook* (History of Wargaming Project, 2023) is a worthy complement to *The Craft of Wargaming*, but is not a substitute. The process Appleget and his colleagues describe in the book is strongly recommended for military service and Department of Defense analysts and wargamers, as well as their supporting military and civilian think tank personnel.

For more book reviews:

Javier Chagoya, "How-to Book on the Craft of Wargaming Hits the Streets," Naval Post-graduate School (Website), 24 September 2020, <https://nps.edu/-/how-to-book-on-the-craft-of-wargaming-hits-the-streets>.

Tim Migaki, "Book Review: The Craft of Wargaming by Jeff Appleget, Robert Burks, and Fred Cameron," Fair Winds & Following Seas (Blog), 8 August 2021, <https://thetidesofhistory.com/2021/08/08/book-review-the-craft-of-wargaming-by-jeff-appleget-robert-burks-and-fred-cameron/>.

Natalia Wojtowicz, "Reviewing The Craft of Wargaming," The Strategy Bridge (Website), 1 March 2021, <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2021/3/1/reviewing-the-craft-of-wargaming>.

Advanced wargame theory and practice in the US military. Aggie Hirst, *Politics Of Play: Wargaming With the US Military* (UK: Oxford University Press, 2024). This book is arguably the most significant work on military wargaming yet published as it tackles its underpinning philosophical assumptions and value systems. Even before the book's introduction, the warning signpost is there with a quotation from Jean Baudrillard's *Simulations* (1983): "[I]t is reality itself that disappears utterly in the game of reality." If wargaming is meant to replicate the salient features of reality in supporting decision-making, this warning suggests too much is implicitly expected by wargaming sponsors and players. Hirst argues for a more nuanced and reflective critical examination of wargaming's goals and methods to better understand its strengths and weaknesses when applied as a method to learn about the real world.

An important point she makes is that, while education and training wargames are understood within the wargaming community of practice to be completely the opposite of research/analysis wargames, they all confront players with "constraints, directives, and processes" that affect them in similar ways. The gaming sessions encouraging player immersion and decision-making "flow" creates subjective experiences which are usually unexamined and not explicitly critiqued. To use Baudrillard's ideas, the war found in the immersive wargame experience appears to its players to be more real than the real world that it can only imperfectly simulate. Instead of players playing the wargame, it's more that the wargame is playing its players!

While this is a dense and often academic book, Hirst's insights are a must for wargaming proponents, designers, military educators and trainers so that they better understand and articulate the limitations of wargaming in practice.

Author Book Talks/Promotions:

Aggie Hirst, "Dr. Aggie Hirst – The Politics of Play: Wargaming in the US Military," YouTube.com, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IF3I9WWMp7I>.

Aggie Hirst, "Politics of Play: Wargaming with the US Military w/ Aggie Hirst," Georgetown University Wargaming Society (webinar), 16 May 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-PvMhMNMQM>.