

Praxis

From Stratego to Strategy: Towards a Wargaming Culture in Switzerland

How to Use Competitive Strategy Exercises to Our Advantage



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Abstract

Dieser Beitrag untersucht die Entwicklung einer Wargaming-Kultur in der Schweiz und unterscheidet Wargaming von Simulationen und Manövern durch seinen Fokus auf menschliche Entscheidungsprozesse. Der Autor analysiert die historische Präsenz von Kriegsspielen in der Schweizer Armee seit dem 19. Jahrhundert sowie die institutionellen Defizite, die

zu einem Verlust der heimischen Expertise führten. Im Zentrum steht die These, dass Wargaming als kulturelle Praxis strategisches Denken, Innovationsfähigkeit und Resilienz in der Verteidigung fördern kann. Abschliessend werden konkrete Empfehlungen zur Etablierung einer nachhaltigen Wargaming-Praxis und Kultur formuliert.

Schlüsselbegriffe Strategie; Kultur; kompetitive Übungen; Wargaming; Kriegsspiel

Keywords strategy, culture; foresight; competitive exercises; wargame



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Introduction

As children, many of us lined up plastic pieces on a checkered board – red versus blue – each hiding its rank, each moving one step at a time. We thought, analyzed, made constant threat assessments and took painful decisions, not knowing we were learning the fundamentals of intelligence, deception, risk-taking, and loss. We didn't call it strategy back then. But we were already acting like strategists, on the smaller scale of course, but looking for a holistic approach to our action in a game called *Stratego*.¹

So, what is the difference between a decision made in a board game like *Stratego* and a unit commander in the field facing a thinking adversary? Well of course, you would say one is a game, and the other one is as cruel as reality can get. War is not a game! But if a board game can teach children strategic intuition and adversarial thinking, imagine what structured, serious wargaming can do for professionals shaping national security. Sometimes, there is the need to break down the overwhelming complexity of reality into its essential parts, to better understand it.

«A wargame is all about: «the people, the decisions they take and the consequences they have to deal with». »

Wargaming: Why Words Matter

People often misuse the term «wargame» either by confusing its definition or by misspelling it as «war game» – this writing is misleading, because it reduces wargaming to «games about war», which is both incorrect and challenges the seriousness of the discipline. The 1983 American movie *WarGames* probably helped to democratize the term, even though the movie deals mainly with the ethical question of the implementation of artificial intelligence in a computer-assisted command & control (C2) system, especially when the use of nuclear weapons is at stake. If this has nothing to do with the topic of this article, then what is a wargame? And what is it not?

A simulation is not a wargame. In its technical definition, a simulation is a method for reproducing one or more models over time, the model being a logical representation (physical, mathematical, etc.) of a system, entity, phenomenon or process. Wargaming differs fundamentally in that it is investigating human decision and not (only) the interaction of different models. A simulation generates quantitative results, which can feed wargaming. But on the other hand, wargaming produces qualitative results. A simulation is reproducible, whereas a wargame is not. Nevertheless, both activities share some elements of common logic, in regard to the simplification of real world conditions towards an abstracted system. They can also work as complementary tools in the game design process, during research or in a hybrid wargame setup.

«In many ways, wargames allow us to think differently about various problems of the military enterprise [...]»

A simulator is not a wargame. The simulator relies on individual, often technical, expertise for its implementation. The pilot of a combat aircraft or a tank driver is trained in its individual tasks, drilled for emergency reactions and evaluated on the basis of the use of a specific weapon system. Although, depending on the scale and number of participants involved, the simulator may come close to an educational wargame, for example during a computer-assisted exercise involving staff planning, it is not the definition of one. Indeed, a wargame doesn't need technology to work, it's all about what's going on in the players' minds. It is inherently more abstract. Whereas a simulator often tries to represent reality as faithfully as possible, a wargame must rely on interpretations, simplifications and hypotheses, to be an effective tool. While a simulator enables one person or a group of people to train and coordinate a set of identified tasks, a wargame is a much more flexible intellectual tool (scale, participants, temporality, and space).

Maneuvers and field exercises are not wargames. The Great Louisiana Maneuvers held by the U.S. Army in 1941, which brought together over 400 000 soldiers organized into 19 divisions, cannot be described as a wargame.

Instead, they were a field exercise in which complete military formations were put through practice, to test soldiers, equipment and new doctrines, particularly mechanized warfare. Major maneuvers have long been part of military organizations, and their primary purpose is to forge the discipline of subordinates in the face of realistic and often restrictive conditions of an engagement (effort, fatigue, weather), as well as to validate certain engagement procedures or certify a military formation for deployment.

«By embracing the notion of wargaming culture, defense organizations can improve decision-making, increase operational readiness, and foster a culture of innovation and resilience.»

Through differentiation, as highlighted above, we can get closer to what a wargame is. But as you probably understand by the time, there is no universally valid definition of a wargame. To understand it, you should understand its main constituents. A wargame is all about: *«the people, the decisions they take and the consequences they have to deal with»*.

The truth is that a *wargame*, in its modern definition, is much closer to a *serious game*. It spreads a message, it educates and it collects data.² As suggested by Aggie Hirst, wargaming is, short of being clearly defined, at the crossroads between games, simulations and exercises.³ It doesn't provide a final answer to a problem, but it helps to ask the right questions. This is because the source of wargaming lies in the human decision-making process, which informs our behavior. The aim is to put the participants in a state of sub-consciousness in which they will take close-to-real decisions, while knowing that they are in a safe-to-fail environment. The decisions produce consequences, and the consequences influence future decisions, while being analyzed for what they are: a depiction of war and the underlying theory of combat we believe in.



Figure 1: The Classic Game of Stratego. While overly simplistic compared to real world strategy, it conveys nonetheless the fundamentals of intelligence, deception, risk-taking, and loss. (Source: ©Wikipedia)

Wargaming: It, Works if You Know What to Expect

One basic equation of strategy teaches the importance of knowing what the *ends* are to plan for the right *means* and *ways* to achieve it. Wargaming as a method is subject to the same limitations. It is always important to start a wargaming project with a clear purpose in mind:

1. Are you trying to explore human decision-making under specific conditions, with certain means, to explore different doctrines unfolding? Then you probably need to construct an analytical wargame.
2. Do you want to teach certain techniques and procedures through a means of experiential learning? It would be recommended to use an educational wargame to convey your ideas.
3. Is your goal to explore undefined problematics and allow for maximum creativity, building on the collective intelligence of a group of experts? In that case, the use of an exploration wargame should be envisioned.

The fact is, we must be aware of a major limitation in the vast world of game design: games can only generate the knowledge for which they have been designed for. One way to understand it, following the work of Elizabeth Bartels and her investigation

of the philosophies of science in research, is to acknowledge that wargaming is less a science than it is an art, just like war, and therefore that its iterative nature defines the concept. It means that wargaming is part of a continuous cycle of definition, trial, evaluation and consequence management. It is much more about the artistic fusion of different elements like conflict and play, than it is about the answer-oriented rigorous and finite nature of scientific research. Effective wargaming creates a space in which the fundamental notions of strategy and competition can be experienced and influenced by human decision-making in different forms.⁴

«The adoption of Prussian-style wargaming in Switzerland occurred primarily through the network of Swiss officers' associations (Offiziersgesellschaften) active across the country.»

Let's use History as an example to illustrate this difference. Most of the time it is understood as a fixed narration: a sequence of time periods, in different places, involving chosen personalities and stories which affected the course of later events. This is called linear storytelling – the accent lies on the chronology and the events that actually took place, and not «what if's». Nevertheless, History is never written in advance, and so every actor always has the control over his decisions. Through non-linear storytelling, it is possible to put the reader (or wargamer) back in charge: he can act, react, and interact. Suddenly, everything becomes possible again.

Wargame results do not predict specific sequences of actions, but instead prompt deeper questions about the people, decisions, and consequences behind plausible outcomes. Asking questions is paramount to our understanding of the world surrounding us. While there are many ways to think about a problem, David Sumpter argues that there are only four ways of thinking, and many variations among them: statistical thinking (evidence-based), interactive thinking (pattern-based), chaotic thinking (intuition-based) and complex thinking (system-based).⁵

Wargaming uses therefore all the categories of thinking styles listed above and each game, depending on its focus, will find a different equilibrium between them. In many ways, wargames allow us to think differently about various problems of the military enterprise, from commanding troops in the field and rehearsing a battle plan to make sure we visualize the intention of the commander to the construction of a new force model for the future.

Wargaming fosters innovation by challenging our perspectives and enabling change. It strengthens intellectual flexibility in a remarkably efficient and cost-effective manner. As an example, Paul Vebber outlines five forms of innovation that exploratory wargames (like Matrix Games) can teach:

- Innovation of type (introduction of a new thing).
- Innovation of form (modification of an existing thing creating a new appeal).
- Innovation of process (introduction of new methods).
- Innovation of effectiveness (modification of an existing thing having an impact on the system).
- Innovation of principle (fundamental change in thinking).⁶

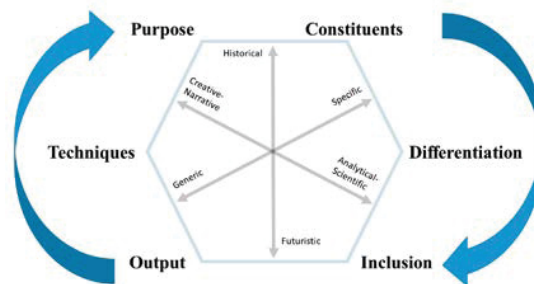


Figure 2: The Hexagonal Framework. While its definition remains heavily debated it is possible to define a wargame through its (1) constituents, its (2) differences with other disciplines, the (3) wider implications of the discipline, its (4) output, the underlying (5) techniques it can use and finally its (6) purpose. The arrows at the center represent elements of game design that help to further categorize its nature. (Source:©Nicolas Penseyres)

What Does Wargaming Culture Look Like?

Wargaming has experienced a big return among European countries and NATO member states in the

«Decades of institutional neglect – particularly the absence of dedicated research, doctrinal integration, and pedagogical continuity – have resulted in a near-total erosion of indigenous wargaming expertise.»

last ten years.⁷ But we must admit that most of the research and expertise-development takes place in Great Britain and the United States. It is not surprising in many ways, you could argue that a Sea Power, unlike a Land Power, has a greater incentive to develop its wargaming capabilities to invest its money effectively on the seas. In fact, as soon as the British Navy and the U.S. Navy adopted wargaming at the end of the nineteenth century, they started to play future wars to better prepare for them. The U.S. Naval War College is the most remarkable institution that emerged from this time period and remains a center of expertise for wargaming to this day.

In many ways, all this institutional knowledge has been generated over time, taking into account contemporary dynamics and experiences of past conflicts. A nation in arms develops its own approach to warfare and strategic competition, a type of culture scholars started to call «strategic culture» in the 1980s. First-generation strategic culture theorists, such as Colin Gray, defined strategic culture as «socially transmitted ideas, attitudes and traditions, habits of mind and preferred methods of operation that are more or less specific to a particular geographically based security community that has a necessarily unique historical experience.»⁸

This definition is rather deterministic and was originally intended to explain a specific strategic behavior. Therefore, a wider approach suggests focusing on a set of ideas «patterned across a population (by which is meant simply a number of people) and that [are] related to strategy (defined broadly as matters pertaining to organized violence).»⁹ In fact, arguing that strategic culture is not static, but evolves over time is the best way to explain its narrative construction.¹⁰ Definitions aside, the true value of the concept lies in its effectiveness to explain why states with similar capabilities or facing similar threats may adopt different strategic postures, offering a deeper understanding of the cognitive and cultural dimensions of international security.

Of course, it would require a deeper dive to describe properly Switzerland's strategic culture. Though, we can say confidently that it both exists and that it took different shapes over centuries. Along with the many military theorists that Switzerland produced over time, Swiss strategic culture shows recurrent patterns: an orientation towards Land Powers, a foundational concept of permanent and armed neutrality, a strong legal and conceptual division between peace & war, the practice of meticulous planning and coordination – that allowed to prepare a fast and effective mobilization in times of peace and the best possible use of the terrain in times of conflict – a continuous preparation for potential threats on various “fronts” (North, East, South, West) and as a result, a relative absence of political freedom of action combined to a strong planning focus oriented towards the potential of any adversary, rather than on its intentions. Obviously, it's not a static concept and it needs to be actively developed.¹¹



Figure 3: Wargaming Multidomain Operations. Complex systems and doctrines can be effectively analyzed and studied through the medium of wargaming. (Source: ©infowargame)

Wargaming, when analyzed through the lens of strategic culture, emerges as far more than a tool: it is a cultural practice that both reflects and shapes the cognitive frameworks, assumptions, and behavioral norms that define how a population understands competition and decision-making. It allows for the construction of a rich and fertile ground for discussion in the field of defense:

1. **As a Socializing Mechanism:** One of the core functions of wargaming culture is to socialize members of a population – officers, policymakers, analysts – into shared ways of thinking about war and peace. It transmits core values like strategic thinking, decision under uncertainty, coordination and creativity.
2. **As an Accelerator for Innovation:** Wargaming provides a safe-to-fail environment for experimentation and the simulation of novel threats (hybrid, AI, space etc.). In this way, wargaming helps to overcome static organizational structures and opens space for strategic innovation.
3. **As a Tool to Strengthen Resilience:** Far from being a reserved topic for military and political elites, wargaming needs to be expanded beyond to include academics, engineers, and civil society, to democratize strategic discourse and as an effect to strengthen resilience across society.
4. **As a Mean for Self-Reflection:** We need to understand what we know and what we don't, to question the validity of our mental models, and to uncover hidden assumptions while fostering intellectual humility. Wargaming renders self-reflection necessary.

« Ultimately, a robust wargaming culture does not emerge from isolated events, but rather from an active network of committed practitioners »

So, in a professional defense environment, wargames provide an opportunity to prepare for unforeseen contingencies across all domains and activities (force development, planning, training, operations), all while developing the cognitive flexibility to adapt to ever-evolving threats. By embracing the notion of wargaming culture, defense organizations can improve decision-making, increase operational readiness, and foster a culture of innovation and resilience.

Why Switzerland is Not Quite There Yet

Wargaming has been present in Switzerland since at least the second half of the nineteenth century, emerging within a broader European context marked by the widespread dissemination of Prussian military doctrine. This diffusion was significantly reinforced by Prussia's decisive victory over France in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870/71, which elevated the prestige of its military institutions and practices. A key development in the evolution of wargaming during this period was the simplification of the traditionally complex, rule-intensive *Kriegsspiel* – a transformation largely attributed to the contributions of Prussian General Julius von Verdy du Vernois and his conceptualization of *freies Kriegsspiel* («free wargame»). This variant emphasized umpired, free-form adjudication over rigid procedures, thereby increasing its pedagogical utility and accessibility.¹²

The adoption of Prussian-style wargaming in Switzerland occurred primarily through the network of Swiss officers' associations (*Offiziersgesellschaften*) active across the country. These organizations played a central role in promoting military education and professional development. However, the institutional integration of wargaming sparked debate regarding administrative responsibility: whether it should fall under the authority of the Federal Military Department or remain a task for decentralized military associations. Historical evidence suggests that a de facto consensus emerged in favor of the latter, allowing the associations to retain primary responsibility for organizing and disseminating wargaming practices.¹³

The presence of wargaming within Swiss military institutions at the turn of the twentieth century is attested by contemporary sources, including the writings of German Major Constantin von Altrock. Wargaming, particularly in the form of *Kriegsspiel*, was practiced systematically during this period, with annual exercises conducted by the Swiss Armed Forces General Staff as well as in various field units. However, despite its institutional presence, no standardized doctrine or formal guidelines regulated the conduct, objectives, or limitations of these exercises. The theoretical foundation of Swiss wargaming remained largely dependent on foreign literature, predominantly imported from Germany, which

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reflected the enduring influence of Prussian military thought at the time.¹⁴

Nonetheless, evidence suggests that certain cantonal sections of officers engaged actively with *Kriegsspiel*. A notable example is the Neuchâtel-city section, which conducted no fewer than four wargames during the winter of 1886-1887 – approximately one per month – demonstrating a sustained commitment.¹⁵ Contemporary military periodicals, such as the *Revue militaire suisse* and the *Allgemeine Schweizerische Militärzeitschrift*, further confirm the widespread adoption of *Kriegsspiel* across urban and larger cantonal sections, indicating its integration into the broader framework of military development.¹⁶

The subject had thus gained recognition not only among junior officers but also within the higher echelons of command. This is exemplified by the lecture delivered by Brigadier General Scherz on February 8th, 1892, in Bern, titled «*Die Bedeutung des Kriegsspiels für unsere Armee*» («The Significance of *Kriegsspiel* for Our Army»), which underscored the perceived value of wargaming as a tool for military preparation.¹⁷ Yet, despite such acknowledgment, the Swiss Armed Forces did not pursue systematic research or critical evaluation of wargaming as a method of operational analysis. As a result, Swiss understanding of its potential remained constrained by imported models and failed to evolve independently.

In particular, Switzerland overlooked the exploratory and analytical dimensions of wargaming – a shortcoming especially evident when compared to developments in the United States and Great Britain. In those countries, from the early twentieth century onward, military institutions began to use wargames not merely for tactical instruction but as instruments of strategic foresight and innovation. This conceptual gap ultimately contributed to a divergent trajectory in military modernization at the beginning of the Cold War: Switzerland prioritized computerization

and quantitative modeling, and as a consequence neglected wargaming as a forum for critical thought, creative problem-solving and decision-making under uncertainty. But this is a story for another time.

For Switzerland, the recovery and development of a robust wargaming culture cannot rely solely on imported models or computer-assisted simulations. Decades of institutional neglect – particularly the absence of dedicated research, doctrinal integration, and pedagogical continuity – have resulted in a near-total erosion of indigenous wargaming expertise. As a result, Switzerland now faces the necessity of rebuilding this expertise from scratch. This process must begin with a critical re-engagement with its own military history and intellectual heritage. A thorough investigation into the historical use of *Kriegsspiel* in Swiss officers' associations, General Staff exercises, and military publications would not only recover lost practices but also reveal how Swiss military thought once grappled with operational uncertainty and command decision-making. Such historical inquiry should be paired with a theoretical reassessment of existing frameworks. In that regard, Colonel Daniel Reichel's theory on military history offers a uniquely Swiss conceptual entry point into the study of combat dynamics.¹⁸

Only by understanding its past and reclaiming its own military theory can Switzerland develop a sustainable, intellectually rigorous wargaming practice capable of enhancing education, analysis and strategic foresight for this century.

Cultivating the Culture: How to Get There?

The institutionalization of wargaming demands the cultivation of a strong wargaming culture. This culture is best sustained not through top-down decisions alone, but through decentralized initiatives and

reinforced networks among professionals, academics and hobbyists.

In the armed forces, experience recommends revising the training schedules to incorporate phased, role-specific exercises – structured around facilitated wargames for non-commissioned officers and officers separately. However, successful implementation depends on two key enablers: first, the provision of simple, standardized, and structured training aids to compensate for limited access to wargaming specialists; and second, the systematic instruction of tactical leaders in the theoretical and doctrinal foundations of wargaming, essential to a shared understanding in that matter. Both could be achieved through an early exposure to wargaming and game design.¹⁹

Ultimately, a robust wargaming culture does not emerge from isolated events, but rather from an active network of committed practitioners. By fostering trust, shared purpose, and continuous dialogue, a strong community of practice (CoP) can emerge – a CoP is characterized by a shared domain of interest, a community of practitioners and a collective practice.²⁰ Because wargaming is not an end in itself, but a methodological tool for probing complex realities. It must be integrated within a broader, interdisciplinary research cycle – combined with other methods and theoretical frameworks – to enhance analytical rigor, foster critical reflection, and advance understanding of strategic decision-making in uncertain and dynamic environments.²¹

Conclusion: Playing the Long Game

Since 2022, the *Centre d'Histoire et de Prospective Militaires* (CHPM) in Pully has been running a wargaming working group made up of passionate individuals, under the banner of #infowargame. The project aims to provide a platform for exchange between professionals, academics and wargaming specialists, both in theory and, above all, in practice. Since 2026, they also offer a *Certificate in Wargaming*, unique in Switzerland. This community of practice gathers for an international event once a year during *Wargame Connections Suisse*.²²

On the institutional level, an informal network of practitioners emerged in 2024 within the Department

of Defense, Civil Protection and Sports (DDPS) under the name of *Serious Games Network Defence* (SGND). In parallel to this development, the Swiss Armed Forces and many of its commands, schools and organizations develop their own ways to make use and sense of wargaming. Overall, there is a positive move towards a growing community of practice and the need to sustain a durable and efficient network of practitioners.

These developments are paramount in strengthening the defense capabilities of the Swiss Armed Forces and its readiness as a whole, for the sake of «Playing the Long Game». In Stratego, the Spy can defeat the Marshal, but only if the opponent doesn't see it coming. In real world strategy, the greatest risks are not the known threats, but the ones we fail to imagine. Wargaming helps to spot the Black Swan.²³ So, let us not wait for the first move to start thinking several steps ahead. The game is on, and it's time to play. ♦



Figure 4: Wargaming is also Peacegaming. Competitive strategy exercises allow the players to make sense of a number of different situations in crisis-management. Here an example of a Matrix Game about the wars of the 1990's in ex-Yugoslavia. (Source: @infowargame)

Endnoten

1 Stratego is a very successful game, it is even the most successful board game in modern times. The name was registered in the year 1942 by Jacques Johan Mogendorff in the Netherlands and the game was edited by Jumbo from 1947 onwards. Nonetheless, the game system is based on previous French designs of the beginning of the twentieth century – you could go back as far as military chess and its various past forms.

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