Setting the (Wargame) Stage

Chrome, Fluff, and How the Little Things Matter

Rex Brynen
McGill University

about me

- Professor of Political Science, McGill University
  - Middle East politics
  - peace, stabilization, and humanitarian operations
  - intelligence analysis
  - conflict simulation/wargame design
- Senior Editor, PAXsims (http://www.paxsims.org)
- Previous work with the (Canadian) Department of Foreign Affairs, Intelligence Assessment Secretariat/PCO, NATO ACT, Dstl, World Bank, UN agencies, other government agencies.
my gaming

- complex peace and humanitarian operations
  - highly political and politicized contexts
  - interagency, coalition, host country politics
  - more POL-mil or DImE than than POLI-MIL or DIME
- foreign policy
- peace processes
  - brain-storming
  - second-track
  - technical research
- hobby (war)gamer and designer

definitions

- **Chrome**: “n. A superfluous mechanism added to a game to add a feeling of theme.” (BoardGameGeek glossary)

- **Fluff** “(or **Lore** if you want to be more polite and less demeaning) is gamer slang for the histories and colorful descriptions used for a game or game setting that have no mechanical effect on the game's rules. It is the opposite of Crunch.” (1d4 chan)

- Also “look and feel” (graphic design/software development)
why does it matter?

- Too much fluff and chrome can **detract from game play**.
  - Excessive complexity
  - Overload players
- **BUT** fluff and chrome is **essential to narrative immersion**.
  - Narrative immersion has major effects on game play and hence outputs.

We believe that wargaming’s power and success (as well as its danger) derive from its ability to enable individual participants to transform themselves by making them more open to internalizing their experiences in a game—for good or ill. The particulars of individual wargames are important to their relative success, yet there is an undercurrent of something less tangible than facts or models that affects fundamentally the ability of a wargame to transform its participants.

This article explores that undercurrent. We characterize it in terms of the relationships among wargaming (in its broadest sense), narrative storytelling, and the inner workings of the human brain. We propose the idea that gaming’s transformative power grows out of its particular connections to storytelling; we find in a combination of elements from traditional narrative theory and contemporary neuroscience the germ of our thesis—that gaming, as a story-living experience, engages the human brain, and hence the human being participating in a game, in ways more akin to real-life experience than to reading a novel or watching a video. By creating for its participants a synthetic experience, gaming gives them palpable and powerful insights that help them prepare better for dealing with complex and uncertain situations in the future. We contend that the use of gaming to transform individual participants—in particular, key decision makers—is an important, indeed essential, source of successful organizational and societal adaptation to that uncertain future.

**why wargaming works**

(Perla and McGrady 2011)
the importance of roleplaying

- Game immersion/role-playing generates **superior forecasting of conflict outcomes** compared to unaided judgment—even by experts (Green 2002).

predictive accuracy

- Role-play
- Game theorists
- Unaided judgment

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the importance of roleplaying

- Game immersion/role-playing generates **greater predictive accuracy** than “role thinking” (Green and Armstrong 2011).

predictive accuracy

- Novice role-play
- Expert role-thinking
- Novice role-thinking
- Chance
the importance of framing

What a game looks and sounds like, how players understand the setting and purpose, has fundamental effects on how players actually play the game.

Both versions were identical games of “prisoner’s dilemma” with identical payoffs.

Reframing the game doubled the rate of cooperative behaviours (with no other changes).

The framing of a game may have more effect on player behaviour than their (anticipated) player style.

Little difference between those rated as “likely cooperators” and those rated “likely defectors.”
material vs non-material determinants of behaviour

- There is robust experimental evidence that human beings place considerable value on “fairness” as well as deeply-held normative values.
  - ultimatum game
    - players will reject offers deemed “unfair”
    - emotional state and social distance affects rejection rate
  - “sacred values” and “backfire effects” (Ginges and Atran 2013)

material vs non-material determinants of behaviour

- The less effective the design and facilitation of a game is in building narrative engagement and appropriate affective orientation, the less successful it will be in modelling real-world behaviours.
  - The problem of excessively technocratic game play.
#1 players

- Professional subcultures have substantial effect on game play (possibly greater than national culture).
- Supporting materials (including fluff and chrome) should encourage players to subtly internalize these perspectives, especially if they are playing out of type.
  - This requires consideration of what stereotypes players bring with them to the game.
- It is possible to overdo this.
  - Cartoonish behaviour.

#2 briefing materials

- Excessively long briefing materials don’t get read.
- Excessively short briefing materials fail to inform or immerse.
- Approaches utilized:
  - Use of primary, secondary, and on-call materials.
  - Briefing materials designed to manipulate player attitudes.
  - The value of “oral history” in repetitive games.
  - Encouraging participant contributions.
- The use and abuse of explicit objectives/goals.
- The key is to get players to identify with their actor and its worldview.
#3 physical space

- Flags and fluff help players get into roles.
- Movement through game space should foster real-world patterns of physical interaction and communication.
- Room assignment, desk placement, freedom of movement, communications links, protocol all matter.
- Avoid things which pull players out of their mental game space.
  - Coffee breaks and lunches should be appropriate to the simulation.

#4 fog and friction

- Information and procedures should be designed to encourage the sorts of feelings and psychological pressures of the actual operational environment.
  - Imperfect information, audio-visual feeds, injects, distractors.
#5 physical design

- Fonts matter.
- Graphics matter,
  - The DIRE STRAITS problem.
- Physical materials matter.
  - If game materials look like you are about to help run an experiment, players are more likely to play as a detached outsiders.
  - If game materials look like the real thing, players are more likely to play in-role.

references


Liberman, V, Samuels, S., and Ross, L. The name of the game: predictive power of reputations versus situational labels in determining prisoner’s dilemma game moves. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 30(9)


questions?
discussion?
ideas?