Using (War)games to Enhance Strategic Insight

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• Gaming techniques can be used to generate insight into strategic challenges in a broad range of issue areas.
  • conventional and hybrid military threats
  • defence investments, science and technology, future force structure
  • counterterrorism and domestic security
  • peace and stabilization operations
  • emergency preparedness and HADR operations
  • biosecurity
  • diplomacy
  • economic and trade policy

Build a broader strategic gaming capability.
What does (war)gaming offer?

- Wargaming offers several potential benefits:
  - Gaming involves thinking about problems in different ways.
  - Gaming involves interactive and adversarial decision-making, often under conditions of imperfect information.
  - Gaming can address cooperation and coordination challenges (combined arms, multidomain, interagency, coalition).
  - Gaming can be used crowdsource ideas and innovative approaches.
  - Gaming is less costly than making real-world mistakes.

(War)gaming is not a “magic wand.”

Generating foresight

- Research suggests that “gaming” a situation produces a superior forecast compared to simply “thinking about it.”

![Image credit: Tom Mouat](https://www.tommouat.com)
Generating foresight

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- This is not to say that a single strategic game reveals the future—it remains a highly imperfect technique of prediction (and prediction is hard in any case).
- However, a (well-designed and well-facilitated) game aids in understanding stakeholder perspectives and anticipating responses.
- Such a game encourages players to “show their work” when thinking about future trends
- It thus explores a possible future, while stimulating a much broader discussion of how a future might come to be.
Stimulating insight

- Role-playing is more effective than role-thinking.
- Gaming works best if built on narrative engagement and immersion.¹

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- Wisdom of crowds: the interplay and aggregation of participant insights can outperform the judgment of single individuals.
  - Deriving wisdom from crowds (rather than madness from mobs²) depends heavily on participant selection, participant interaction, opinion aggregation.


Stimulating insight

- Strategic gaming works as a form of intellectual cross-training, forcing analysts and decision-makers to think about a familiar problem from new perspectives and in new ways.
- It is an adjunct to other methods, as part of a mixed-methods approach of policy challenges.
  - If game findings diverge from other analyses, it suggests a need for further study.
  - If game findings converge with other analyses, it provides a greater degree of confidence.

This is important. Successful wargaming is art of a “cycle of research” (Perla)
Stimulating insight

- Games can be useful exercises in hubris management.
- It is better for a policy to fail in a simulated environment than a real one.
  - financial cost
  - human cost
  - political cost

Building teams and agility

- One under-estimated value of strategic gaming is the way in which it can strengthen the functioning of (especially inter-disciplinary and inter-agency) teams.
  - This effect can last long after the game is over.
- Gaming exercises agility and enhances the ability to deal with policy challenges.
  - Given the limits of forecasting, enhancing institutional agility and policy responsiveness is the next best thing.
Game design considerations

- **Clarify the question**: What is the purpose of the game? How does it relate to other aspects of the policy development process?
- **Consider follow-up and follow-on**.

Game design considerations

- **Consider the audience**: Expertise? Seniority? Availability? Sensitivities? Confidentiality?
- **Consider constraints and resources**: Design time, design budget, participants, game duration, game iterations, personnel, facilities, and IT required.

Smaller countries face particular wargaming constraints, compared to the much larger resources of the US (and UK). However, there may be advantages too.
Game design considerations

- **Consider the roles**: What actors/stake-holders need to be in the game to adequately explore the policy issue?
- **Consider the scenario**: What game situation will present players with the key dilemmas and choices?
- **Determine necessary in-game constraints and resources**: All decisions involve allocating and optimizing limited resources (time, money, institutional capacity, political capital, etc.).
Game design considerations

- Only now do you consider the game system.
  - Scenario discussion/seminar game?
  - Matrix game?
  - Card or board game?
  - Digital game?*
  - Adjudication method (rigid vs free).

- Dunnigan’s rules:
  - KEEP IT SIMPLE
  - PLAGIARIZE

- Engage the community.
  - There is lots of free advice to be had! (DRDC, GAC, CJWC, AAFC, Connections North/PAXsims, etc.)

- Build data capture and analysis into the game design.
- Anticipate and prepare for points of failure.

Caveats and warnings

- Games are childish.
- Don’t oversell the process.
- “Gamewashing:” clients or sponsors in search of validation,¹ or analysts who tend to pre-determined conclusions.
- Beware hierarchy, group think, and homogeneity.
- Have a strategy for managing the nay-sayers.
- Good ideas do not sell themselves.
- Leadership matters.

Head of UN agency briefing senior officials.

Associate Deputy Minister assuming the role of an angry stakeholder.

Diplomatic “observers”

Discussion
References


Other Resources

- Connections UK website (presentations): http://www.professionalwargaming.co.uk
- Geoffrey Engelstein and Isaac Shalev, Building Blocks of Tabletop Game Design (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2020).