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War games are a great way to learn about history and warfare on all levels in a simple, low-cost, easy to setup environment. This article and the attached listing present a few war games, placed into four categories that I've found extremely useful for self-study.

Professional military education is a continuous process that doesn't end at command. When you stop learning, you stop being relevant. A leader's limited time and the high demands of this profession make it hard to find opportunities to learn on the job. The junior officer or NCO looking to improve his tactical skills has to do it on their own time. Another problem is *how* we make decisions. Formalized military decision-making is designed for staff work, is time consuming, and ill-suited for the tactical environment.[\[1\]](#)

War games are a great tool to hone intuitive decision making. The Prussians started using war games in the 19th c. to prepare for conflicts against the Danish, Austrians, French, and Allied Powers in WWI. The UK Western Approaches Tactical Unit (WATU) used war games

to counter German submarine operations in the Atlantic and protect convoys.[\[2\]](#) The US Navy used war games to plan the Pacific campaign in WWII.[\[3\]](#)

These organizations had the benefit of time, space, and resources in their simulations. The same benefits are often unavailable to the motivated officer or NCO who wants to study and practice in his free time. Fortunately, the civilian market offers a myriad of computer and board games that serve this very purpose. Indeed, commercially available war games often do a better job of simulating war than those designed by the military.[\[4\]](#)

Commercial war games are cost-efficient compared to military equivalents. Most war games cost between 80-250€ (\$30-\$300 in US Stores). Considering they provide insight, learning, professional development, and entertainment potentially for years, this is inexpensive. They are also convenient, with most games fitting into a small box. They can be quickly set up and left during breaks. Finally, they can be applied in a very specialized way, to simulate different levels of war and different situations, teaching tailored lessons every use.

### **Computer vs. Tabletop Games**

The greatest discriminator for war games is between computer-based and tabletop-based games. Both fulfill a different purpose and can be complementary. Computer war games are great at simulating the fog of war and the command environment that a military leader faces. Computer games' weakness is a tendency for micromanagement and too much detail.

Tabletop war games, on the other hand, are good for studying situations in-depth and top-down. This allows for a greater focus on behaviors and outcomes, emphasizing the human dimension of war just as much as the technological aspect. Board games also require us to learn a system of rules, providing the gamer insights into war and competition from the start.

### **Playing Through War**

War games can be used to simulate different levels of war: tactics, operational art, and strategy. War games are a great way to learn about history by *doing* rather than just *reading*. That's a unique experience, as players come to understand *why* things happened the way they did by facing the same dilemmas as the decision makers of the period.

[The attached primer](#) examines several war games useful for self-study, organized by area of learning (e.g. history, tactics, operational art, or strategy). Ideally, these games are best against an experienced human opponent, but are playable alone as well. These games have helped me learn about the conduct of war and provide understanding of how events transpired and why leaders made the decisions they did.

Improved knowledge of the complexities of war will lead to enhanced understanding of history and current events, and serve as a warning that bloody, complex war is best left to the board game, and avoided in the real world.

Let me know what you think of the games I chose. Are there other games you've played that helped you learn and improve your own decision making?

[CLICK HERE TO DOWNLOAD ILHAN'S LIST OF SUGGESTED WAR GAMES FOR THE STRATEGIC, OPERATIONAL, AND TACTICAL LEVELS OF WAR](#)

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[1] In the paper [How We Decide

[http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/usmc/schmitt\\_how\\_we\\_decide.pdf%5D](http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/usmc/schmitt_how_we_decide.pdf%5D) Major John F. Schmitt (USMC) states "the Corps' focus on analytical decisionmaking in its schools leaves Marines ill-prepared for leading in the real world." He argues that decisionmakers use the analytical approach (formal MDMP) less than 10% of the time and trust their gut for the

rest. He concludes “the Marine Corps must start to develop intuitive decision making skills among its leaders.”

[2] WATU performed well and could serve as an example for any military on how to conduct proper study of tactics and then translate it into actionable lessons learned,

[<https://paxsims.files.wordpress.com/2017/12/2017-12-10-watu-mors.pdf>]

[3] Admiral Nimitz commented in 1960, “During the war, the war with Japan had been re-enacted in the game rooms here by so many people and in so many different ways that nothing that happened during the war was a surprise—absolutely nothing except the kamikaze tactics towards the end of the war; we had not visualized those.”

[4] As researcher Philip Sabin notes in his book *Simulating War*

<https://www.amazon.com/Simulating-War-Studying-Conflict-Simulation-ebook/dp/B00LUUAENW>

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