

Historical Wargames

The usual way of teaching history, giving long reading assignments and hoping students will somehow gain understanding does not work well for many people. As Professor James Lacey, states, a lot of the background information is missing, so when students study a certain conflict they struggle to place the information in the right context.¹ He goes on to describe how he designed his courses at the Marine Corps War College to ensure his students really understand what happened and the factors that influenced important historical decisions.

There are a few wargames that lend themselves especially well to understanding history from the point of view of the people in power:

[Polis: Fight for the Hegemony](#)

Polis is more of a classic board game and not so much a wargame. It is the game that James Lacey chose at the Marine Corps War College to teach the history of the Peloponnesian War. Polis lends itself very well to historical study because it has a heavy diplomatic and economic component. The Peloponnesian War was a struggle for power, and economic means were a strong component of that struggle. In this way, players and students of history can understand the context in which decisions were made instead of merely reading about what happened.

More Polis info: <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/69779/polis-fight-hegemony>

[Secret Hitler](#)

Secret Hitler is a card driven game in which players learn how a small, well-organized group of extremists can take power and change a country's trajectory. The players are randomly divided into liberals and fascists, with liberals always having a majority. One of the fascists is Secret Hitler, the leader of the fascists. As a next step, everybody closes their eyes and the fascists are allowed to open their eyes and see who is on their side. Secret Hitler has his eyes closed, too, but he reveals himself to the fascists. Now the group of players vote for a myriad of new laws and regularly elect a new Chancellor. The votes are done in secret. The challenge for the liberals is to guess who the fascists are and prevent them from enacting fascist laws and electing Secret Hitler. Secret Hitler lets players immerse themselves in the atmosphere of doubt and mistrust that dominated the period and played a role in the Nazis' rise to power.

More Secret Hitler info: [here http://secrethitler.com/](http://secrethitler.com/)

[Holdfast: Eastfront](#)

Holdfast: Eastfront (H:E) is a relatively new "block game," in which wooden blocks represent army-level units. H:E rules are short, easy to learn, and to the point. The game can be quickly set up and played. The blocks are labeled only on one side, creating a fog of war effect; players know where their opponent has troops, but not the type of troops until he conducts a recon-in-force. There is a supply system that glosses over some details, but still helps teach the role of logistics in WWII. Although H:E is a simple game, nothing compared to the behemoths that dominate the wargaming world, it does a great job of simulating operational action on the East Front. You get a feel for the challenges Germany faced, mainly having to

¹ <https://warontherocks.com/2016/04/wargaming-in-the-classroom-an-odyssey/> WotR ARTICLE

destroy the Red Army before it can mobilize, as well as the problems the Russians had, having to delay Germany as long as possible until crucial reinforcements could arrive.

More H:E info: <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/211813/holdfast-eastfront-1941-45>

Battle for Moscow

Battle for Moscow (BfM) is an introductory wargame in a small package with easy to learn rules. It models the final stages of Operation TYPHOON, the German push for Moscow. The players command German or Russian armies and face unique challenges. The German player must create breakthroughs and quickly push through to take Moscow, with the autumn muds looming. The Russian player must prevent the Germans from creating or exploiting breakthroughs and delay him as long as possible until the Germans are exhausted and Russian reinforcements arrive.

More BfM info: <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/49276/battle-moscow-second-edition>

Tactical Wargames

Tactics is the lowest level of military operations, the art of winning battles. Tactics can be described as advanced geometry coupled with chemistry and medicine. The scope of tactics can reach from mere fire teams up to whole battalions. Here are three games that can be a great aid in practicing and improving tactical understanding.

Combat Commander: Europe

Combat Commander: Europe (CC:E) is a card-driven board game simulating squad-level combat on the Western Front after the Allied landings in WWII. Units are squads, weapons crews, and special personalities (leaders). CC:E is a great addition to tactical decision games (TDGs) and sand table exercises for infantry (though not vehicles). It gives the same top-down view and lends itself just as well for practicing tactics and decision making without the drawbacks of sand table exercises, including a lack of real-time feedback. With CC:E tacticians can practice decision making and evaluate results in a simulated environment. Furthermore, the card-driven nature of CC:E adds an element of chaos lacking in many other wargames. Radios can stop working, weapons jam, or squad leaders may be too overwhelmed receive commands. This is well simulated in CC:E; players have to anticipate and mitigate these unforeseen possibilities.

More CC:E info: <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/21050/combat-commander-europe>

Tactical Combat Series

The Tactical Combat Series (TCS) by MMP consists of several games set during WWII. Playable unit size is platoon, and the player is a battalion-level or regimental commander. TCS is not exactly competitive; the rules put a lot of trust in the players to take the correct action even if it leads to their disadvantage. The emphasis of the TCS system is on modeling command dynamics. Players create plans according to a set of rules, and friendly units have to

follow the spirit of those orders until new ones arrive. TCS simulates command delay and models differences between different command styles. For example, the Germans practice mission command, lending more flexibility when things don't go as planned; alternately, the Soviets do not, and therefore have to adhere to the letter of their orders. TCS teaches more about different command styles, emphasizes proper planning, and incorporates orders delay, forcing the player to account for these variables when planning and issuing orders.

More TCS info:

<http://www.multimanpublishing.com/Products/tabid/58/CategoryID/13/Default.aspx>

Combat Mission: Black Sea

Combat Mission: Black Sea (CM:BS) is the ultimate computer-based tactical learning tool. Designed by Battlefront, it is set during a fictional modern war between NATO and Russia in Ukraine. Missions range from platoon-sized engagements to battalion operations. CM:BS simulates ground war, so player-controlled units are infantry squads, infantry weapons teams, ground-based vehicles, and on-map mortars, as well as off-map artillery and aircraft for close air support. CM:BS does have weaknesses. Players have to micromanage every unit, and distributed scenarios are utterly unrealistic; even so, it is a powerful tool for tactical learning. It simulates fog of war very well, teaches how to use units in a scouting role, teaches to utilize basic infantry and combined arms tactics, and lets the player practice quick decision making and intuitive decision making. The impact of different technologies is also a factor. For example, players can compare Russian BMPs to US Strykers. In my judgement, CM:BS is the single-best "game" on applied tactics, hands down.

More CM:BS info:

http://www.battlefront.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=335&Itemid=579

Operational Wargames

Operations are the binding link between tactical engagements and overarching strategic plans. Operational art is the purview of military staffs that conduct extensive planning. There are a lot of gears in the machine: air assets, ground forces, trucks, logistical facilities, artillery assets, etc. that must be coordinated to achieve success. Operational level wargames lead to three important insights:

- Practice in operational planning
- Understanding of the planning process and higher HQ intent and reasoning
- Understanding of advantages and limitations of operations and operational planning

Here are three wargames for self-study and learning at the operational wargames.

Gulf Strike

Gulf Strike (GS) is my favorite operational level wargame. It is set in Persian Gulf and features several historic and hypothetical scenarios like the Iran-Iraq War, the First Gulf War, a hypothetical Russian invasion of Iran, and a US-Russian showdown in the Indian Ocean. What makes GS unique is the heavy emphasis on planning. Air missions have to be planned,

accounting for available aircraft and national and local capacity. Supply depots have to be planned to supply frontline units. Heavy emphasis on logistics and planning makes GS special.²

More GS info: <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/2076/gulf-strike>

Command Ops 2

Command Ops 2 (CO2) is a computer wargame set in World War 2. The basic module of Command Ops 2 with three scenarios can be downloaded for free on Steam or **[HERE <https://store.inlpublishing.com/command-ops-2-core-engine>]**. Command Ops focuses on operational-level ground operations in the different theaters of World War 2. What makes CO2 so special and different than many other computer wargames is the AI and the focus on mission command: the player gives basic orders, the AI figures out a way to execute them. Unlike many other computer wargames, for example, CM:BS, there is no micromanagement of units. In fact, players are discouraged from doing so. For example, in a scenario where the player is a battalion commander, he is encouraged to give orders only to his subordinate companies. The game AI figures out the best way to comply with the player's orders and takes care of the rest. No need to manage squads and weapons teams. Oh, you can if you want to, but you don't have to. This frees up mental capacity and gives you the opportunity to focus on planning your operations.

More CO2 info: <https://store.inlpublishing.com/command-ops-2-core-engine>

Harpoon 4

Harpoon 4 is THE most sophisticated and realistic naval boardgame that exists. Designed by Larry Bond, it was used by Tom Clancy to wargame naval engagements in *Hunt for Red October* and *Red Storm Rising*. It is also in use with navies worldwide. Harpoon 4 comes with a thick rulebook and a number of reference books with many more pages. You need at least three people to set up a game, two players, and one umpire. In fact, the umpire is the only one who needs to know the rules, he is responsible for all the “under the hood” technical aspects. The players are supposed to immerse themselves and “become” the naval commanders they are portraying. Just reading the rulebook and references, I learned a lot about modern naval operations and the operational environment. It is a monster to learn and play, but very rewarding as it provides a unique perspective, especially for people with an Army background. There is also a computer version (available **[HERE <http://www.matrixgames.com/products/392/details/Larry.Bonds.Harpoon.-Ultimate.Edition>]**) which allows solo-play, where the computer takes on the role of the umpire.

More Harpoon 4 info: <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/11432/harpoon-4>

Command Modern Air/Naval Operations

Command Modern Air/Naval Operations (CMANO) is the Harpoon 4 equivalent for the computer game world. It is a massive simulation of air and naval warfare. It is highly complex, gives the player a lot of freedom, and strives to be as realistic as any commercially

² According to *Zones of Control* by James F. Dunnigan, scholar of military analysis through wargaming, the US used GS before the invasion of Iraq in the 90s.

available computer game can be. The player can simulate scenarios from 1945 to today, from small litoral engagements, anti-piracy missions, to force-on-force carrier strike group combat. Micromanagement is still a danger, but the emphasis is heavily on planning operations. The easy-to-use scenario editor is a powerful tool to set up scenarios for learning and exploration of tactical and operational concepts. The publisher Matrix Games offers a cool feature with *Command Live* [http://www.matrixgames.com/CLIVE_DLCs], where they offer small, affordable add-on scenarios based on current events.

More CMANO info: http://www.warfaresims.com/?page_id=1101

Strategic Wargames

Strategic understanding often falls short when conducting professional training. Unfortunately, it seems to be the least important aspect of warfare for officers, since field grade officers are busy with tactics, staff officers are concerned with operational art, and most will not progress to general officer. Still, it is an important part of the conduct of war and strategic knowledge leads to a better understanding of national-level intent, international relations, and the implications for military operations. The following list is not exhaustive, but it represents the essence of strategy games.

Diplomacy

It's the spring of 1901, you are the leader of one of the great powers. Prepare for war! Diplomacy is a game with very simple rules and a huge following; supposedly, even President Kennedy and Henry Kissinger played this game. Much of the action takes place off the table, as players make agreements and forge alliances. The mechanics are simple, but the learning factor is huge. Diplomacy is the ultimate game of negotiation, teaching players that nations do not have friends, only interests, and any trust has to be earned.

More Diplomacy info: <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/483/diplomacy>

Rise and Decline of the Third Reich

Rise and Decline of the Third Reich (or Third Reich, TR) is the WWII grand strategy game. It is big and complicated. Players assume the role of Axis and Allied power leaders, responsible for military operations, as well as supply, diplomacy, and other things. TR has a lot of "crome," meaning lots of tiny special rules that are supposed to give the game a unique WWII feeling and setting, but also complicate the playing system.

More TR info: <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/1563/rise-and-decline-third-reich>

Twilight Imperium

Twilight Imperium (TI) is one of the most successful and highly acclaimed board games of all time. Now in its 4th edition, it is still going strong. Set in a sci-fi universe where space travel has become commonplace, 3-6 players choose from a myriad of species with unique characteristics, desires, and needs. The rules are pretty simple and can be learned quickly, and the sci-fi universe divorces the game from current biases and assumptions that one might have about real-world settings, giving players the unique possibility to focus solely on strategy. The

game's objective is simple: lead your species to victory and become the new ruler of the known universe. But achieving this requires skills in diplomacy, warfare, and strategy. TI has a system of strategic objectives and victory points that focuses beyond warfare. Players are assigned *unique* objectives (public and secret), *common* objectives, and gain victory points by fulfilling each. This is a great tool replicating the dynamics of decision making in a space empire. Players cannot blast their way to victory as in so many other "strategy" games, but have to really plot out their course and use all tools available to the leader of a nation.

More TI info: <https://www.fantasyflightgames.com/en/products/twilight-imperium-fourth-edition/>