

# Wargaming: Now more than ever . . .

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Imagine a conflict in which war-winning plans, logistics, operational concepts and most of the tactics had been worked out in advance. In this war, how and where to attack the opponent had been theorized, analyzed and rehearsed by existing officers and crews, to the point the navy knew what new equipment it needed to build because it already had worked out how to use it. This did not mean that the winner didn't get surprised on occasion, for war automatically means exposing one's own forces to the rules of chance, but wargames saved time and money.

The victors in this war not only foresaw most of what their opponent could do; it wasn't imaginary. The United States won the 1941 to 1945 campaign against Japan in 44 months. That conflict was not always successful and by no means bloodless—between them, [the World War II U.S. Navy and Marine Corps lost more than 62,000 dead in the Pacific Theatre alone](#). Their losses would have been far worse, however, if the Marine Corps and Navy had not repeatedly wargamed the fight against Japan, practicing how to wage war across the planet's largest ocean. By teaching the Fleet how to plan a fight, wargaming saved time and lives.

From tabletop wargames at the Naval War College, to single-ship drills afloat and Fleet Problems at sea using two-thirds of the pre-1940 Fleet at once, wargames educated and trained the sea services' leaders and operators. Despite their name, these weren't for fun. (At the same time the mathematics of "[game theory](#)" also arose, setting generally applicable practices now used in economics, political science and biology.) The Navy wargames' purpose was to define strategic places to attack, figure out the logistics needed, and employ forces operationally and tactically to maximize U.S. strength as it advanced on Japan. Crucially, these games continued at Newport throughout World War II. [As Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz noted 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.

Wargames also helped quickly dismiss some experimental and pricey pre-war Navy ideas, such as [using dirigibles for long-range reconnaissance](#). All these choices took place without paying the cost in combat.

These points were context for the annual [Connections wargaming meeting](#), held at the National Defense University late last month. Its speakers and participants included the Chief of Staff to the Deputy Secretary of Defense, as well as academics from Defense, international scholars and both U.S. and foreign military officers. Those attending had the chance to test a variety of wargames, including the classic 19th-century German *Kriegsspiel*, a tabletop maritime anti-

access scenario, a humanitarian relief simulation and a representation of the Syrian Civil War. With the theme “Reinvigorating Wargaming for Innovation,” sessions naturally paralleled Navy Department goals to solve problems without throwing massive amounts of cash at them.

One session at Connections, “Fostering Creativity in a Culture of Compliance,” made several points showing how the Department of the Navy stepped away from wargaming to solve problems after 2001. Exercises have become ways to certify sea service forces’ readiness, not to experiment. Aircraft pilots must be able to fly safely, ships’ VBSS teams need to practice boarding operations, submariners have to rehearse firing Tomahawk missiles, and Marines must be certified for non-combatant evacuations. Imagination, however, takes a back seat during such drills. Experimental decision-driven wargames, drawing upon future scenarios or using past campaigns, develop commanders’ good sense in the face of ambiguous facts: they teach judgment.

Even popular culture has employed this idea in wargaming. In the *Star Trek* movie franchise, the [Kobayashi Maru](#) scenario tests *and also builds* the judgment of commanders.

I’m not saying our naval leaders lack common sense. But there’s a slightly-hidden trick within innovation: technical competence is not the only way to make innovation occur. Just refining expertise—the technical, repetitive drills of the previous paragraph—can limit thinking. Instead, innovation is about creativity, about taking unexpected ideas and turning them into something useful to change existing practices. As pointed out in a closing Connections session, a good wargame will create a revealing, sometimes startling story in the minds of participants. For example, what if a free play wargame came to the point where the U.S. commander had to choose between losing a war or radically escalating it to win? Wouldn’t such a story focus the minds of every service member in the room, asking them to figure out new ways to win?

This is more than simply repeating the line “the enemy gets a vote.” Instead, we should take our cues from the early Naval War College wargamer, William McCarty Little:

Now the great secret of its power lies in the existence of the enemy, a live, vigorous enemy in the next room waiting feverishly to take advantage of any of our mistakes, ever ready to puncture any visionary scheme, to haul us down to earth.

LT McCarty Little wrote [those words](#) about the Naval War College of 1887, and they apply today. Wargaming is about testing and discarding ideas.

What McCarty Little sought was to teach naval leaders to make wise decisions. As a junior officer he had seen the German *Kriegsspiel*, and he wanted U.S. commanders, and their subordinates, to learn their profession without shooting taking place, and without career consequences. Giving the chance to experiment, make mistakes, discard inapt ideas, and recalculate risks, repeatedly, is the essence of wargaming. As McCarty Little [later put it](#) “While we can give an entire forenoon, if necessary, to work out and analyze a five minute critical movement, we can, on the other hand, dispose of a day, or week, or a month in less than an

hour.” Such actions, and the time, money and lives they saved, are from where Admiral Nimitz’s success stemmed.

Wargames make use of the Navy and Marine Corps’s most precious asset—thinking—and create the chance to do so. All that such thinking needs is for local commanders to have some independence to solve problems (meaning a small budget disposable for wargaming) and the virtual reality of a computer or a tabletop wargame. Repetitively confronting difficult problems allows them to work out solutions, after they have disposed of less effective ideas.

Historically, the Department of the Navy has wargamed this way. Marine Corps Commandant Charles C. Krulak sent the same message as the one advocated here in his [April 1997 order “Military Thinking and Decision Making Exercises.”](#) Freeing up operational commanders to use their time, and small amounts of money, for wargaming is what the Department desperately needs to do. The alternative, reinforced by the program of record and rehearsing to operate in the same way, will be to learn lessons in action, potentially at the cost of more blood spilled. In its place, wargaming is a relatively small investment which will pay off over the long term.

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