

## The Craft of Wargaming: A Detailed Planning Guide for Defense Planners and Analysts

Donald J. Thieme  
*The U.S. Naval War College*

Jeff Appleget

Robert Burks

Fred Cameron

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Thieme, Donald J.; Appleget, Jeff; Burks, Robert; and Cameron, Fred () "The Craft of Wargaming: A Detailed Planning Guide for Defense Planners and Analysts," *Naval War College Review*. Vol. 75: No. 1, Article 14.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol75/iss1/14>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

outside—including some with no prior interaction with or connections to the White House or other parts of the Washington bureaucracy—influenced national-policy decision-making.

The narrative tracks one idea's origins from a student science fair to a rejected academic paper to a White House briefing, with the concept ultimately becoming the foundation for a key component in the nation's response to COVID. The point of the story is that, in a crisis, policy makers are in search of and often open to good ideas wherever they might arise. Yet, as Lewis's story also makes clear, good ideas are likely to be listened to only if they are framed in a way that addresses the problem that policy makers are facing and at the time they are searching for a solution; in influencing policy decision-making, timing can be everything.

Finally, Lewis's narrative makes clear that high-stakes policy decision-making and advising are not for the faint of heart or play-it-safe-style bureaucrats and careerists. The personal cost of having policy influence can be high at times, particularly when stakes are elevated and lives are on the line. As Lewis notes at one point in his retelling, "A system was groping toward a solution, but the solution required someone in it to be brave, and the system didn't reward bravery" (p. 226). Yet when personal ambition is weighed against the public welfare, there are some who will act decisively on behalf of the latter. We all can be grateful that such people exist.

Anyone wanting to understand better how and why government at any level works well—or not at all—in responding to major crises will find this account of the run-up

to the COVID crisis both inspiring and frustrating. But ultimately the time will be well spent.

KATHLEEN A. WALSH



*The Craft of Wargaming: A Detailed Planning Guide for Defense Planners and Analysts*, by Jeff Appleget, Robert Burks, and Fred Cameron. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2020. 376 pages. \$39.95.

*The Craft of Wargaming* is a superb book on how "art" and "science" can interact to enrich the craft of war gaming. The three authors detail how a range of disciplines shape the wargaming profession, process, and product. Here theory meets application by exploring how different case studies, exercises, and varied approaches inform analytical war gaming and its applicability to the planning process.

War games alone can neither prevent nor predict war, but they provide a bloodless (though not inexpensive) platform to inform hard choices, confront contemporary challenges, and ensure that leaders at all levels are prepared when competition transitions to conflict and combat. The authors build on extant literature with lessons observed to provide the opportunity for students and practitioners alike to understand, employ, and exploit war gaming better. *The Craft of Wargaming* is informed both by these experiences of working with students to execute their own war games and by working with sponsors considering complex challenges related to both potential near-future conflict and far-horizon force design.

The book is designed to help readers better understand a six-phase approach: to (1) teach, (2) apply, (3) do, (4) learn, (5) repeat, and (6) improve. This is

executed in a fifteen-chapter, 209-page main text supplemented with 123 pages of appendix material. Even those who consider themselves wargaming pros should resist the temptation to skip over the first section, covering the field's foundations. For example, there are subtle differences between how the Naval Postgraduate School and other organizations approach war games.

The book's second section covers the fundamentals of both teaching students and executing war games for sponsors. For students, the expected outcome is to be able to apply wargaming principles and processes to help senior leaders define, confront, assess, and understand complex problem sets. For wargame sponsors, the expected outcome is that both the recipient (sponsor) and the provider (wargame team) understand what war games can do—and, importantly, cannot do—within extant time and resource constraints.

The third part of the book is labeled "Planning and Management." This is misleading, because it goes beyond merely providing a checklist-derived overview and deserves thorough investigation and careful consideration. The most important subsets of this section are "Course of Action Wargaming," an important addendum on experiential and educational war games, and a terrific tabulation of best-versus-worst examples of "do this, not that." This section reminds the reader that war games do not just happen; rather, they are the result of a deliberate process of problem framing, research, design, execution, and analysis. Each of those steps demands careful construction. For those working in a planning or operations environment, this "Course of Action Wargaming" chapter should be especially useful. Outside of those

conducted by specialized organizations that can bring the full weight of wargame professionals to bear on a specific key problem, most war games in fact will take place at geographic combatant commands and service headquarters.

*The Craft of Wargaming* also cautions the reader to ensure that intelligence functions are part and parcel of the war game—something that will not happen if that function is relegated to playing the "red" (adversary) side. A far more effective technique is to have a stand-alone red organization, then take personnel from the operational function and assign them the role of the adversarial commander—who is incentivized, and permitted, to win.

The book's fourth section is an extensive set of appendices, replete with opportunities for further pursuit of the art and science of effective war gaming. Readers more experienced in war games may wish to read chapters 1 and 2, then proceed directly to the appendices. These six appendices, comprising one-third of the book, contain a war game in the fictional country of Zefra, complete with an exercise brief, scenario, and guidance on how to execute this matrix game. Matrix games are at once both exquisitely simple and laden with insights that lead to further exploration and learning. Through this example, the authors bring out several different approaches to matrix gaming that will be quite useful to planners who are in a rush to create a "good enough" war game based on vague or contradictory commander's wargaming guidance. This, in turn, enables planners to have an informed discussion with commanders to help them frame the problem better while suggesting multiple approaches to structuring war games for greater effect. Also included in these appendices

are useful practical exercise solutions, a wargaming “gateway exam,” and an insightful set of eight wargame case studies.

Overall, this is an excellent primer on the science and art of war games: what they are, what they are not, and what they can provide—when properly designed and executed. Please read, mark up, refer to often, and aggressively employ *The Craft of Wargaming*, and thereby build better commanders, leaders, planners, and staffs.

DONALD J. THIEME



*How Carriers Fought: Carrier Operations in World War II*, by Lars Celander. Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2020. 281 pages. \$22.95.

Lars Celander is passionate about aircraft carriers. He loves writing about aircraft carriers; he loves explaining how aircraft carriers work; he loves thinking about aircraft carriers and posing sometimes esoteric questions about aircraft carriers. As a result, reading *How Carriers Fought* is a bit like being at a party and bumping into a guest who cannot wait to share his most enthusiastic passion. As the conversation continues, you may be impressed by the speaker’s passion, knowledge, and insights, but eventually the talk turns to arcane debates and hypotheticals. In the end you may walk away feeling enlightened, or you may feel that you now know rather more about the topic than you ever wanted.

Celander’s book takes a comprehensive look at most aspects of carrier warfare in World War II. He does not focus exclusively on U.S. carriers and their Japanese counterparts, although not surprisingly the carrier battles of the Pacific dominate the discussions.

However, if a nation put a carrier to sea, that carrier is at least mentioned.

Part 1 of the book is devoted to carrier operations. Technical issues and developments—for example, fighter direction, arresting gear, and ship-to-plane communications—are examined. There even is a paragraph devoted to the humble flight-deck tractor, which, as U.S. aircraft grew heavier, became more and more important to flight-deck operations. Operational and tactical concepts such as defense in depth using fighter combat air patrol and the anti-aircraft capabilities of escorting ships are looked at in some detail.

Some of the explanations Celander provides will be exceptionally useful to the lay reader. As an example, the vital question of cycle times is explained in some depth. This includes a description of why crash barriers were essential to allowing some navies to conduct simultaneous takeoffs and landings.

Operations and battles are the key ingredients of part 2. The author begins with the early missions of scouting and raiding, then looks at the Battles of the Coral Sea, Midway, the Eastern Solomons, the Santa Cruz Islands, and the Philippine Sea; Leyte Gulf is the last examined. This section also includes a look at Operation PEDESTAL, in which a Royal Navy, multicarrier force escorted a convoy across the Mediterranean to Malta in August 1942. Although Celander claims he takes a new look at these conflicts, it is unlikely that knowledgeable readers will find anything that is truly original or new. This is not to say that the accounts are not useful or illuminating, for there are interesting facts, such as the difficulties U.S. dive-bombers had with their bombsights and windshields fogging up.