

A Decision Game Center

Making a case

by Maj Bruce I. Gudmundsson, USMCR(Ret)

The word “wargaming” covers a great deal of ground. In some instances, it refers to sophisticated exercises; an extreme example of which is provided by the famous MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE exercise of 2002, involving dozens (if not scores) of people, considerable equipment, and a great deal of formal analysis. In others, it describes the sort of challenge posed by a fire team leader who, having sketched a simple tactical situation in the dirt, points to one of his Marines and says, “You’re in charge. What do you do?” In between these two poles, wargaming can bring to mind a tabletop simulation of a historical event, staff officers examining a possible course of action, or an off-duty Marine immersing himself in a digital recreation of a firefight from the Second World War.

Most of the time, the fact that wargaming has so many meanings poses few problems for most people involved with them. Observers quickly determine whether the war game in question is an activity for a pair of hobbyists, a trio of staff officers, or a small army of players, analysts, and support personnel. Similarly, readers of books, articles, and web pages with the word wargaming in the title have no trouble separating works rich in equations and the vernacular of the social sciences from those illustrated with color photos of brightly painted figurines and paintings of Napoleon Bonaparte. There is, however, one organization within which the multitudinous meanings of wargaming might cause confusion. That organization is the United States Marine Corps.

On 16 July 2019, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen David H.

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Berger, promulgated *The Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, a document that weighs in at some 15,817 words. (This count excludes front matter, back matter, and cut-out quotations.) Of these, 1,922 words—a little more than 12 percent of the words in the document—are devoted to a section called “Wargaming.” Notwithstanding their number, these 1,922 words deal exclusively with war games of the larger, more complicated sort. Similarly, the concrete project at the heart of the section—the building of a Wargaming Center on the campus of the Marine Corps University, on board the Marine

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Corps Base at Quantico—also appears to be concerned entirely with the provision of a home for the sort of wargaming that involves a large number of people and a good deal of formal preparation.

The Marine Corps University has, over the years, engaged in a lot of activities that might reasonably be, and, in many instances, have been, described as wargaming. Some of these, like the annual “Nine Innings” exercise at the

Marine Corps Command and Staff College, are relatively large. Others, such as the off-the-shelf board war games played at the Marine Corps War College, involve fewer facilitators, fewer players, and less in the way of time. Of late, moreover, the LtGen Victor H. “Brute” Krulak Center for Innovation and Creativity has hosted a variety of seminar-style exercises, each of which was geared toward the sort of problems and opportunities that the Marine Corps might possibly face in the near future.

Between 2007 and 2017, the Marine Corps University provided a home to an effort, known as the Case Method Project, to promote the use of war games of a different and much simpler type. Inspired by the instructional case studies used at Harvard Business School for nearly a century, these decision-forcing cases asked participants to devise, describe, and defend workable solutions to problems faced by real-world leaders at some point in the past. In the course of that decade, Marines at The Basic School, the School of Infantry, and the College of Enlisted Military Education incorporated these exercises into various programs of instruction. Recently, the Marine Corps Tactics and Operations Group has developed courses that combine decision-forcing cases with low overhead war games of other sorts. Some of these decision games are tactical decision games of the type that the *Marine Corps Gazette* has been publishing since

1989. Others, known as *Kriegspiel* exercises, are two-sided contests that pit players against each other. (The first of the decision game intensive courses to be offered by the Marine Corps Tactics and Operations Group in the Advanced Maneuver Warfare Course made its debut in the fall of 2019.)

The first thing that Marines can do to prevent confusion among these various kinds of war games is to adopt suitable nomenclature, distinguishing between relatively large “war games” and substantially smaller “decision games.” As some overlap would be unavoidable, this dichotomy would be far from absolute. Moreover, if the experience of previous attempts to separate synonyms is any guide, the distinction will often be honored in the breach. Nonetheless, the formal separation of war games from decision games will save many Marines from the time and trouble involved in barking up the wrong tree.

The second thing that we can do is to create a Decision Game Center. In sharp contrast to the Wargaming Center, which will be primarily concerned with the hosting of exercises of larger types, this Decision Game Center would be charged with the promotion of the use of decision-forcing cases, tactical decision games, and *Kriegspiel* exercises throughout the Marine Corps. In other words, while Marines will travel to the Wargaming Center for particular events, the personnel of the Decision Game Center would use a variety of means, electronic and otherwise, to reach out to Marines serving throughout the world.

As much of the work of the Decision Game Center would take place on-line, it might be situated just about anywhere on the planet. Nonetheless, there are benefits to placing it on the main campus of the Marine Corps University. In addition to simplifying support for the

many schools located aboard Marine Corps Base Quantico, such a location would allow the personnel of the Decision Game Center to make use of the unparalleled resources of the Archives Branch of the History Division and the Library of the Marine Corps. Finally, locating the Decision Game Center within a stone’s throw of the Wargaming Center would make it easy for the people in either organization to direct informational inquiries and requests for assistance to the people best able to respond.



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