

# Board Wargaming Is Time Well Invested

Hands-on practice in critical thinking

by Christopher Cummins

**T**his is the beginning of a series devoted to getting started in board wargaming. Over the next several issues, Joseph Miranda and I will introduce you to games specifically intended as starting points. We will look at wargaming basics and explain what the components are and how they represent military forces, the battlefield, and how their interaction models simulate battles and campaigns. Along the way we will explain some of the nuances of wargames, game play, and wargame design. We hope to encourage the reader to utilize board wargames as a regular part of their military education and training. It is a fun and educational way to increase critical thinking and drive home lessons about principles of war, operational planning, and maintaining flexibility.

Let me touch on some factors that make board wargaming superior to other forms of wargaming:

First, board wargames are played on a table. We, as humans, are conditioned to gather around a table to converse, consume, and share. A board game is something we naturally gather around to play and share. Whether we play head-to-head, team against team, or observe or comment on play, board games are inviting.

Second, board wargames are intended to be played by two or more players. Not only are we socially programmed, there is no better opponent than another human player. They formulate their own operations plans and carry them out. Their play changes from game to game and situation to situation. They adapt to each other's play and so the challenge grows. Every game provides an opportunity for discussion of the

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**>>Mr. Miranda has designed over 400 games, mostly of the board variety but has been on the team for several computer game designs. He has worked mainly with Decision Games but has also done contract work for the Center for Naval Analysis and the U.S. Air Force Office of Scientific Research. Mr. Miranda is a former U.S. Army officer and has been a featured speaker at numerous modeling and simulations conferences.**



**Bleeding Kansas board game at the Recruits convention near Kansas City, September 2019.**  
(Photo by Callie Cummins.)

game, the battle, or campaign it models, what the challenges were for the combatants historically, how the two sides performed historically, and how the players perceive the sides could have done better.

Even when the game is designed with a system to play one side, most single-player games are easily adapted by dividing the forces involved between players. The best part of single-player wargames is they invite a discussion about what course of action would be best. These discussions often lead to a deeper dive into the history of the conflict, specifics of military operations, risk analysis, and other subjects.

Third, a board wargame comes with physical components. In most wargames, you can see the whole map laid out on your gaming table. You can study the map by itself for a better understanding of terrain. You can trace the historical action across the game map and better understand why battles and campaigns unfolded the way they did (e.g. channeled along roads or clear terrain, or blocked by rivers, mountains, or swamps). Combined with the game's Terrain Effects Chart, you can conduct your own terrain analysis to see where movement is rapid or slow, and what terrain benefits the defender or the attacker. A board wargame also comes with playing pieces that usually form an order of battle. A comparison of the playing pieces provides an analysis of which units are faster or slower, stronger or weaker, and what units provide bonuses or special abilities. Finally, almost every board wargame comes with a rules booklet explaining the play of the game. A careful read of the rules often reveals how the wargame designer is modeling important factors and events in game play.

In the end, the time invested in playing board wargames enhances understanding of military history, operations, how to plan for battles and campaigns, and gives a wealth of examples—good and bad—in how to put it all into practice. Best of all, you can practice all you want, try different approaches, and gain an understanding of what works, what does not work, and why.

In the next few issues, we will introduce you to wargames that are perfect

for beginners (and yet, still a challenge for experienced players). Each one comes with series rules, meaning there are other games in the series with the same base rules; once you have learned one game, you just learned four to six games.

## Why Board Wargaming Is Better

by Joseph Miranda

I have been playing and designing wargames for quite some time, to include both computer and board games, as well as conducting seminars using games for training. My general preference is for board games, so let's look at the reasons why.



**The 1st Provisional Marine brigade and Marine F4U Corsairs leading a counterattack near Masan, 12–13 Aug 1950. (Photo by author.)**

### Design Discipline and No Black Boxes

I has been designing wargames for quite some time, to include both computer and board wargames, as well as conducting seminars using games for training. Designing board wargames places a certain discipline into the process. A board game requires limits on rules and number of pieces in order to keep it playable. This refines the process so the designer is thinking in terms of essential systems and ergonomic mechanics. There can be a tendency in computer games to throw everything into the design, overwhelming the players, or in constantly refining the code such that the game program is never finalized. Consequently, board wargames can be much more usable in training since they focus on essential learning points. Board games place the components where the players can see and learn from them. They are the source for much data on things like order of battle.

All systems are transparent. For example, combat resolution in a board wargame is usually by a printed table with some randomizing element (like a die roll). By actually conducting these processes and applying their modifiers (such as logistics and morale), the players come to understand the actual structures behind operations and learn it is not just about “firepower.”

There is a secondary advantage insofar as board wargames have few issues with “glitches” and “crashes” (other than someone upsetting the playing board!). If there are discrepancies in the rules, these can be worked out by player agreement or doing some research. Errata may be a part of board games, but there are no delays caused by reprogramming.

Also, something to be considered is that computer simulations can be rendered unusable by changes in platforms. Often, people have shelves full of computer games that they could play a mere ten, or even just five, years ago but will not run on their current platform. Today, gamers are still playing board wargames designed and produced in the mid-20th century and will continue to do so far into the future.



## Physicality

Board games use physical components. These include maps, counters, rules books, charts, and cards. Counters are usually small cardboard pieces with information about unit type and various capabilities (expressed as numerical combat and other “factors”). Sometimes the counters can be blocks or plastic figurines. Regardless, the tactile nature of moving physical components is often part of the learning process. Why? It has been observed by many wargame designers that “there must be an illusion of movement” because players find movement to be psychologically satisfying. They gain the sense that by taking action one can change the map.

Board game maps can be of any size, not limited by the size of monitors (though recent technical innovations are catching up here), and players can add or subtract counters as they desire to fit situations. By use of teleconferencing, players in remote locations can be linked together for board gaming.

Another aspect is in the use of cards. Cards are a way to summarize rules in a way which does not require reference to rules booklet. Gamers like playing with cards. Something I have observed is the same gamers who loathe reading a 10,000 word rules booklet will immediately sort through cards to read what they are about!

Cards are a useful way for a player to introduce fog of war factors. A player can conceal cards generating special reinforcements and combat enhancements while also hiding their intentions. Cards can give players such facets of warfare as surprise attacks and new doctrines. Designers can add to the intelligence game by giving players the capability to examine the other player’s cards by conducting various G-2 type missions. Cards can also introduce such technologies involved with cyber warfare and information operations as part of a commander’s “hand” of weaponry.

I am using a card system in the upcoming DG *North African Campaign* game (an update of the 1970s *Campaign for North Africa* game on the World War II Western Desert campaign). To streamline the original game’s very complex rules, I categorized many of

their general staff functions and placed them on cards for personnel, intelligence, operations, and logistics. Each player selects their cards for the turn then plays them to initiate various actions. This allows for players to think in grand operational terms, and by putting the rule on the cards, the system provides immediate reference as well as efficient utilization.

Another aspect is social learning. This is the theory which holds that people can learn more efficiently in situations involving groups. There is also the element of teamwork with a group of players on each side taking on different roles (such as joint commander, component commanders, and so forth). Having a group of players standing around a table with a game map and moving counters creates a dynamic that enhances involvement.

## Scenarios and Variants

Board wargamers are well known for doing variants, taking an existing game and then adding or changing compo-

nents and rules for various reasons: to provide updates from research, for more realism, to analyze hypothetical situations. This can be done simply by using pen and ink corrections on maps and counters—or producing entirely new maps. Again, there is no need here for computer reprogramming. Board gaming can be vital for classified situations where trainers can create physical components for specific situations or tactical situations where the commander might need an immediate modeling situation.

Finally, board wargames can be designed and produced on tight production schedules, allowing for immediate response to crisis situations. The Marine Corps has been involved in conflict across the spectrum of conflict, whether we are talking the classic small wars or up to global level operations. Board wargaming is an efficient means to provide training and analysis for all these situations.

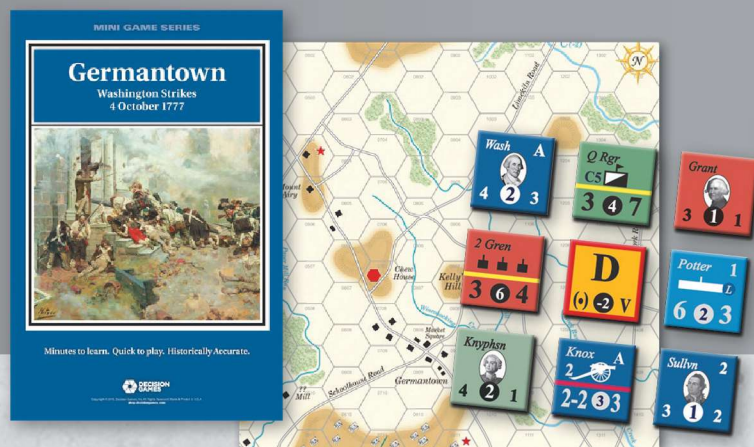


**Marines hitting the beach at Saipan, 15 Jun 1944.** (Photo by author.)

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**Molino Del Rey:** Gateway to Mexico City, 8 Sept 1847

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**Chantilly:** Jackson's Missed Opportunity, 1 Sept 1862

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## ANCIENT WARS

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**Campaigns of Montrose:** A Year of Living Dangerously, 1644–45

## AIR WARS

**Eagle Day:** The Battle of Britain

**Cactus Air Force:** Air War Over the Solomons

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## COMMANDO/RAIDER

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**Long Range Desert Group:** Special Operations Against Rommel, 1941–42

**Merrill's Marauders:** Commandos in Burma, 1943–44

**Viking:** Scourge of the North

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**Lawrence of Arabia:** The Arab Revolt 1917–18

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