



KEYNOTE

## The state of Wargaming

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Wargaming – or, to avoid that sometimes contentious term – serious games are booming. Their wide application ranges from computer and tabletop games played by casual gamers and the enthusiast scene up to applications in military training and real-life operational planning. There is also some scientific interest in serious games, a trend that appears to have intensified over the past decades as disillusionment with the rationality assumption in classical game theory set in. In this short note, I intend to take stock of these developments, and to provide an assessment.

If one looks at the usual book-length contributions in the field of wargaming, their eclectic nature is very much obvious. I believe that this is a serious shortcoming. Serious games deal with rational decisions, and therefore they should be seen as a part of Economics, being utilised as an approach to lay a scientific foundation for analysis of military strategy.

Military practitioners typically insist that military leadership and strategy is an art form, not a science. In this, German practitioners are bolstered by current doctrine, in particular by the traditional definition of *Truppenführung* in German military thinking.

There exist two versions of this claim: One, which is encapsulated by a famous saying of Moltke the Elder (Graf Moltke, 1869), takes the “artsy” character of military operations for granted, but insists on the irreplaceable support of science – at the time, mainly ballistics and civil engineering: “So wird der Krieg zur Kunst, einer solchen freilich, der viele Wissenschaften dienen. Diese letzteren machen bei Weitem noch nicht den Feldherrn, aber wo sie demselben fehlen, müssen sie durch Andere ersetzt werden.“ The second perspective harks back to Clausewitz’ (1873) seminal contribution and maintains that it is that is impossible to come up with a system of military strategy on a scientific basis if this this meant to go beyond a few principles based on experience.

The second claim basically rests on the scarcity of observations, which make it impossible to theorise in advance of military operations and subject the hypotheses derived from the theory to an empirical test. In this view, each war is a singular occurrence, which can only be analysed by historical methods. These, by their very nature, are backwards looking. The hope is that by understanding history, one learns enough to avoid mistakes in the future. Although this karma funds historical professorships and research, there is very little basis for a positive evaluation – in effect, if one accounts for the fact that in retrospect someone is always right, historical research by itself does not further our understanding of strategy at all. However, it may still prove its worth as a source of hypotheses.

On the other side, serious games allow for sufficient observations (if configured correctly) to empirically test hypotheses on leadership and strategic choice. Therefore, they open a way to make military studies a proper science.