



# Wargames: Little Wars or Great War?

## *How to choose them, build them and use them*

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In this young summer, I have the pleasure to propose you some new considerations on wargames topic, also because, precisely in the last week of June, the second edition of **WIN** (Wargames in Nato) Conference has been held at the CASD in Rome. **WIN** was created ad hoc to respond to a pressing need in the Alliance aimed at developing new capabilities and skills thanks to wargames and their evolution, that are nowadays a truly strategic topic.

The first edition of **WIN** was held last autumn in Paris with a strong and qualified participation from military and technical/scientific point of view; already in that event, the Italy's contribution was articulated and remarkable, covering both interventions on innovative issues in the plenary sessions as well as in terms of organization and involvement of multiple entities and subjects. Certainly, the skills and effective dynamism demonstrated by Italian Contributors made the idea to organize the new edition in Rome a natural choice. **WIN23** in Rome has considerably and further grown both in terms of visibility and interest for the Alliance as well as in terms of active participation of Nations. Surely you will have the opportunity to read other articles on this subject that will provide you with more details on the Organizational and Institutional aspects, but in my role as scientific observer I am glad to confirm that our National Defense, all round, has demonstrated an excellent ability in directing the NATO Initiative on wargames, in growing this Event and managing it, all by giving visibility and providing opportunities for valuable National and International Wargame Solutions. The involvement of the Community interested in the topic, from the Commands to the various Users and Developers, resulted excellent.

This success has made it possible to reaffirm, for our Country, the full right to have a place of honor among the leaders in wargaming and to underline our particular excellences. In fact, Germany, which has done its utmost to support the event also due to its role as the next NATO Host Nation for **WIN**, faces a challenge in having to deal with the results obtained in this edition.



In facts, many NATO Commands were present at **WIN23** at their highest level and many Nations intervened significantly and actively. Alongside Italy: the contribution of France and Germany is remarkable, which have a strong interest in these issues, but also many other nations have sent specific experts on the sector and shared wargames and interesting experiences.

In the face of this remarkable success, I would like to share my perception linked to the observation of **WIN23** from a scientific and strategic point of view: I appreciated many of the discussions, precise, sharp and full of meaning, conducted precisely with the aforementioned High Commanders, but also with very many Young Officers and Alliance Experts; discussions conducted in front of Wargames while they were being demonstrated and/or employed. I believe this result is one of the major success points of this Conference, a harbinger of soon being able to support new capabilities and further develop existing ones thanks to wargames, their evolution and their widespread use.

These dialogues between multiple subjects, from Defense to Developers, from Strategic Decision Makers, to Experienced Officers, Cadets, Educators, Academics, Students, Technicians and Companies, reaffirms the key role of creating synergies that produce concrete results. In fact, it is precisely from the union between different subjects, talents and experiences that crucible is created that allows new solutions to be forged, whether they are new wargames or new ways of using them and/or where to do it.

In facts, this dialectical action on wargames allows you to understand what to do, how to do it, what to choose, how to improve and how to grow together.

So, I am glad to use an historical quotation to highlight the importance of this aspect, recalling the full original title of the well-known pamphlet by H.G.Wells on wargames: "Little Wars: a Game for Boys from 12 years of age to one 150 and for that more intelligent sort of Girl who likes Boys' Games and Books". You will recall that this text explains how to transform your children's toy soldiers into pawns of an interesting wargame that includes stochastic elements and that was played for the first time by himself, probably with J.K.Jerome. In 1913, before the Great War, our two favorites were certainly not affected by today's influence dictated by the politically correct, indeed they were both fine humorists and certainly Wells, in defining the wargame as a game for boys from 12 to 150 years old and for smarter girls who love games and children's books, has well represented precisely that playful and competitive spirit of the wargame which makes it an intellectual challenge for bubbly people.



Well, wargames lend themselves to intriguing young officers, but also those with experience, up to generals or admirals from one to three stars, as well as very different people in the Academic, Governmental or Corporate fields; all this has been seen around those battlefields that the various wargames have proposed in dozens and dozens of game sessions hosted and exemplarily supported by the CASD.

So let's now move on to declining that 110-year-old title, in order to understand the principles that must guide us today to understand how to use wargames effectively: first of all, the key point is to understand that although wargames are "Little Wars" , or small games, they are intended for an adult audience capable of glimpsing how, from these experiences and from the challenge with others, one can better understand how the Great Wars will have to be fought.



All, of course, hoping that it will never happen to redefine what a Great War is, with its horrors, in the years to come, but on the other hand allowing us to acquire and develop skills such as to be able to better face a real battle and , even, to suggest to possible antagonists how inappropriate it would be to wage a conflict against us.

We remind you that wargames are simplified models, with rules for playing a "conflict at the table": obviously, as happens with all models, the key to their success is linked to the ability to identify the critical elements and the level of detail and the accuracy to be adopted with respect to the objectives that the games set themselves. This must be done precisely to avoid the risk of making the game too detailed and complex, so as to be unusable: e.g. if I have to manage even just a Brigade with very strong realism, maybe I don't have to play a Wargame, but develop a CAX (Computer Assisted eXercise) on an Entity Level Simulator; indeed, I will probably need a large part of the Royal Brigade staff, or a very advanced version of Intelligent Agents, perhaps the IA-CGF (Intelligent Agent Computer Generated Forces), to be able to play a game.

At the same time, maintaining too high a level, neglecting key factors, can lead to a wargame that does not allow to experience that "challenge" on the specific terrain that has become critical due to the presence of new principles or aspects in reality that result overlooked in the game: e.g. if we oversimplify the human, political, socio-cultural, religious factors with their dynamics in a wargame related to the COIN (Counteri-Isurgency), we lose precisely the critical component that will easily determine success or failure in the "game", as we the good David Galula has taught well, not only with theory, but with experience in the field.

Now in order to understand what characteristics the models and the entire wargames must have, it is essential to make game users interact with the developers and create precisely that already mentioned crucible capable of identifying how to best define and use the tool. From this point of view in previous articles, I had already highlighted that wargames lend themselves ideally to be used for multiple purposes and methods: from the Training Aspect of Senior Officers to a Military Academy, from the Strategic one to the Geopolitical level, from that of investigating a hypothesis of Conflict to that of developing one's own new Capabilities.



My personal experience is that the military are very valuable to throw into our crucible, not only their requirements, but also their perception, often based on experience, of what are the fundamental elements and what are the priorities in modeling the different components, which otherwise would be so vast and differentiated as to risk creating generalist potpourri. Obviously their point of view can sometimes be polarized by specific experiences and/or contextualized by their current role; therefore they can sometimes indulge in excessive confidence in consolidated aspects compared to innovative ones, or underestimate the peculiarity of a new context or the complexity linked to specific aspects that require new particular skills: e.g. "playing" a rapid deployment scenario today for a high-intensity conflict in Europe with saturated transport infrastructures, risks being able to exploit only a small part of the precious experience accumulated in limited conflicts, conducted overseas with completely different times and modalities; other times, a scientific contribution from an expert on a new topic that is still little known in the defense field would be needed; but I must say that I have frequently observed in the military, especially those with experience in the field, quite the opposite, i.e. their interest in deepening these sensitive issues together with a predisposition to consider the added value brought about by the contributions of other subjects and the importance of do not underestimate the new and specific elements of a "challenge" context. This is obviously common among intelligent people and requires the same reciprocity on the part of technical-scientific experts who must know how to share their knowledge, take advantage of the possibility of collecting further valuable experiences and testimonials, as well as enhancing the priorities provided by users in the guarantee that the "game" adapts to reality and never vice versa: we want to create a "small war" to grow and learn how to fight a "big" one, certainly not convincing ourselves that the "big war" will bend to the theories of our " little game" just to please our personal visions or hypotheses to be verified. We always remember that wargames are not intended to validate principles or concepts, even if they can obviously be useful for doing so, but obviously they must fit, if necessary, into a much broader Verification, Validation and Accreditation process given that the wargame could be wrong, obsolete or simply inconsistent with the real context it faces, becoming a pure intellectual game potentially misleading. Obviously the technical developers of the wargame must also be actors in this synergy; indeed, in addition to game experts, today, engineers and technicians are all the more crucial given that modern wargames frequently use Simulation, AI, XR (eXtended Reality) as seen in promising game cases proposed at **WIN23**. We have already talked in previous articles about why doing this is useful and the multiple aspects that suggest it, but I briefly recall some of them here: teaching how to play against, or together with, an AI to play at a strategic level, leaving the simulation to consider the tactical details, etc.



Today I want to add that these technologies are also very important for involving the user: a game is successful to the extent that the player is stimulated to play and in this context a fundamental role goes to the ability to exploit psychological elements (e.g. desire to winning) and rational (e.g. curiosity), but the ability to better understand the scenario, requiring less effort to follow the game, avoiding Byzantine rules and vice versa being immersed in an attractive and intuitive world are also critical. All these aspects are very important... as always, the fact of being able to use these new technologies allows us to give added value to the player, providing him with a more effective, more pleasant, more correct, more understandable tool capable of considering multiple factors : all this is already a huge source of motivation to play, but certainly expert developers are needed who also understand the needs of the players and the complexity of the models. In fact, interaction with users and experts provides the guidelines for deciding how to build the game in a useful and captivating way, avoiding technologically convoluted solutions far from the spirit of the players.

Precisely for these elements, a great wargame is born from this synergy and close-knit people with experience and specific, scientific, operational and strategic knowledge are certainly the ideal team for its development; a dear friend of mine from NASA has always maintained that the focal point in the development of new solutions is to create a "transdisciplinary" group.

From this point of view, in my role as President of Simulation Team and Eurosime, as well as Council Chair of **STRATEGOS**, I confess that it was very gratifying in the Final Debriefing of the Closing Plenary Ceremony, to receive the honorable mention from the ACT referent for our Game CAPIAS, brought to the audience for example, together with ASP-X (serious game of the French Air and Space Academy for Cadets interested in understanding the themes of Defense in Space), compared to a total of over 30 game sessions of different wargames held during **WIN23**.

Transdisciplinarity is therefore important, the union of different subjects, the use of innovative technologies, but creativity is also important. In this regard, I therefore add that in order to create new wargames it is very useful, if not fundamental, to have young people capable of bringing new ideas as was said, again at the CASD, last year by our military leaders on the occasion of the Conference on Defense Innovation.



It is therefore worth remembering that during **WIN23**, many of our young talents, cadets, young officers, but also outside the military context, actively contributed to supporting the event. For example, there were young Strategic Engineers from the **STRATEGOS** Course of the Genoese University ([www.simulationteam.com/strategos.com](http://www.simulationteam.com/strategos.com)), among the first courses in the world on this new discipline which has become, moreover, the first Master's Degree in Genoa for enrolled despite a significant selection being made every year (e.g. 140 selected out of almost 700 applications in 2022 and over 890 candidates this year already today). In addition, the dynamic young people of the Rome Innovation Hub who are about to complete their degree in International Affairs were also present as well as other subjects. All young people highly prepared and interested in the issues in question, capable of bringing added value and being stimulated by these experiences for their career development.

Here, I must say that, although far from the critical issues and needs dictated by the current international crisis, I believe that this aspect can represent another important success of **WIN** in Rome.

An element of success to be seen just like one of those critical "bridgeheads", mentioned by Von Clausewitz, intended to guarantee us a more probable and less expensive success in our advance towards the Future.

These capable guys were extremely proud and enthusiastic to actively participate in **WIN23**, play wargames, but even more to learn and grow: they are the future; at the same time they stimulate all of us adults to commit ourselves to ensuring that our country and the Alliance maintain leadership on innovative and strategic issues such as the one in question and it is our duty to act to create and develop these opportunities.

May we never lack strong talented, competent, persevering, willing and good-hearted young people, essential for winning all battles from those fought in the dust to those conducted in cyber space or in cognitive warfare, but even more so on the boards of big Enterprises and of Kipling's "Great Game" that determine the wealth and success of our Nations.