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Wargames, From Gladiators to Gigabytes

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Abstract: The author also discusses nuclear wargames and the implications of computer-based wargames as leaders continue to replicate all aspects of warfare within their wargames.

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Full text: Wargames, From Gladiators to Gigabytes By Martin van Creveld

Martin van Creveld has produced an extensively researched and exhaustively written history of wargaming. This is especially timely given that wargaming is regaining visibility within the national security community writ large. As the United States, NATO countries, and other regional leaders seek to understand the national security issues developing post Arab Spring and, more specifically, post Iraq and Afghanistan, wargames are returning as a key tool in this effort.

Van Creveld defines a wargame as a contest of opposing strategies that, while separated from real warfare, simulates some key aspects of real war. He begins his study examining the behavior of animals, then transitions into hunting, combat sports and contact sports, all which reflect issues associated with warfare and wargames. Play fights, as he describes them, provide the earliest indications of the conduct of wargames and the concepts of wargaming. During his discussion of Great Fights- staged engagements between primitive societies-he highlights some of the limitations of wargames, which are encounters prearranged in both time and place, sacrificing perhaps the most important "principle of war," surprise. Throughout the book, van Creveld constantly returns to the theme regarding the limitations of wargames in substituting for real war. His extensive research into the behavior of tribes throughout the world and his demonstration of similar behavior patterns where they engage in "wargames" to settle issues and disputes provide a detailed understanding of the universality of this behavior.

As he addresses single combat as wargames he starts with the interesting story of David and Goliath, attributing to David a strategy that allowed him to exploit specific advantages to defeat his opponent. The author spends considerable time discussing champions who fought in lieu of major combat throughout ancient civilization. He then leads us through the history of gladiators and ancient Rome and its eventual decline due to the incredible cost of maintaining a professional combat force used specifically to entertain people. The conduct of tournaments during the Middle Ages, where champions and later knights, who reflected the flower of their societies and fought each other for prestige, honor, and advancement, reflects the same motto as modern soldiers of fortune, "meet interesting people-and kill them."

The changes that overtook warfare in the 15th and 16th centuries had a significant impact on these types of games. The introduction of gunpowder and firearms essentially eliminated the honor associated with champions, who fought in tournaments to demonstrate their abilities without fighting a war. Other games began to be used, and van Creveld highlights chess as an example of a game that reduces the threat of physical injury while developing strategic thinking. Although chess reinforces Clausewitz's dictum that the objective of war is to overthrow the enemy, i.e., capturing the opposing monarch, it reflects the imperfections van Creveld continues to raise regarding wargames-the lack of any of the threats or pains associated with war.

He traces the rise of the hex-based board games that allowed leaders to conduct complex wargames as we understand them today. By the 19th century, wargames that used complex rules and a hex-based board system allowed leaders to use them for military training and education. They encouraged leaders to practice command and control and exposed them to the world of strategy and dealing with the paradoxical and unexpected. He

also highlights the introduction of what we today call the "after action review." Each game ended or was supposed to end with a thorough discussion. The objective was to find out what had been simulated, what had not been simulated, and what had and had not worked and why. One of the other interesting points he raises is that while military leaders selected the scenarios to wargame, the vast majority of them were never translated into reality. Van Creveld does identify the key objective of military wargames is to allow participants to try their hand at dealing with the unexpected, whether a scenario is ultimately realized is almost irrelevant. Wargames also allow participants to understand simple but essential ideas regarding the conduct of war.

Van Creveld also highlights the introduction of the political dimension into wargaming. He quotes President Kennedy as saying, following the Bay of Pigs operation, that senior American military did not understand the political implications of their recommendations, opening up a new perspective to wargaming. The key factor of political games is that there are no detailed rules as to what constitutes victory. The author also discusses nuclear wargames and the implications of computer-based wargames as leaders continue to replicate all aspects of warfare within their wargames.

He details the fact that conventional warfare is far more complex than ever before and that wargames must be connected to the real world as these games are serious business on which many lives depend. Much of what van Creveld addresses in this book is deep history and of questionable value to someone trying to understand the issues of wargames and their value to the military; however, the sections that outline the current uses of wargames and, more specifically, the issues that limit their value are worth consideration.

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