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**Building a New Generation of Wargame
Professionals with Intention:
From Avalon Hill to Oregon Trail and Beyond**

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Building a New Generation of Wargame Professionals with Intention: From *Avalon Hill* to *Oregon Trail* and Beyond

Ebbs and flows in military interest and support for the practice of professional wargaming have generated significant barriers to maintaining a broad, multi-generational workforce capable of supporting the U.S. military's wargaming needs. Various articles¹ and volumes² have described the challenge professional wargaming faces in building the next generation of wargamers who are needed to ensure continuity in the field. The task, while difficult, also presents an opportunity to be intentional when filling the gaps in the discipline.

The author therefore suggests approaching such a transformation by not only considering its challenges, but also its opportunities. In order to understand the implications of bringing new perspectives into the wargaming field, the author reviews salient portions of the current literature on diversity, specifically its benefits for and challenges to institutional thinking. A case study of hobby historical board games is a vehicle for exploring how another industry faced generational challenges and overcame them. Finally, the author discusses lessons that the literature review and case study suggest for professional wargaming, and posits possible future sources of wargamers.

Challenges and Opportunities

The challenges inherent to building wargaming's next generation are well-documented. Wargaming has never come with a clear career path—it is an “accidental career” for most people.³ The generation that cut its teeth playing complex hobby wargames from Avalon Hill a few decades ago continues to dominate professional wargaming, which complicates passing the baton to a generation of younger wargamers that is increasingly diverse in terms of demographics (immutable personal characteristics), functions (professional and academic background), and values.⁴ Wargaming remains an elite, guild-like community, reflecting its origins in Prussian nobility.⁵ Further constraining the breadth of perspectives and thought in wargaming is the fact that the U.S. national security world's hiring and security practices select

¹ <https://paxsims.wordpress.com/2020/05/21/how-to-raise-a-wargamer/>

² https://www.usmcm.edu/Portals/218/Forging%20Wargamers_web.pdf

³ Sebastian Bae, “Introduction,” https://www.usmcm.edu/Portals/218/Forging%20Wargamers_web.pdf

⁴ <https://www.howwegettonext.com/wargaming-needs-new-recruits-to-save-lives/>

⁵ https://www.usmcm.edu/Portals/218/Forging%20Wargamers_web.pdf, p. 134

for specific backgrounds and lifestyles; most “creatives” instead choose private sector jobs that allow for a broader choice of lifestyles.

While this challenge is an abiding and significant one, recent changes in the cultural, commercial, and professional aspects of wargaming offer several opportunities to overcome it with new generations of wargamers.

- Wargaming is becoming more popular. Government programs like the Wargaming Incentive Fund, and public outreach from think tanks, such as the Center for a New American Security⁶ and Center for Strategic and International Studies⁷ are fueling this expansion.
- Commercial wargaming is undergoing a renaissance, developing a hobby that can feed into professional wargaming through innovation and increased personal interest. As board game designer Harold Buchanan points out in *Conflicts of Interest* magazine,⁸ commercial wargames are more plentiful, with more topics and mechanics, than ever before. Newer innovations in hobby wargaming arrive from a broader range of sources, such as eurogames and role-playing games. This borrowing enables more dynamic games, typically with less complicated rulesets and a more appealing user experience. The hobby has also become more academically rigorous: some upcoming board games have been peer reviewed by academic institutions such as Central Michigan University’s Center for Learning Through Games and Simulations.⁹
- Younger generations are accustomed to gaming as an educational tool. The 1980s and 1990s saw a boom in “edutainment,” which precipitated the rise of “gamification” in educational services such as the language-learning app Duolingo. Journalist Cassie McClure has gone so far as to refer to a cohort of Millennials (typically born between 1981 and 1996) as the “Oregon Trail generation,”¹⁰ named for the educational computer game most of us in this cohort played (and some even learned from). Using games for education has only grown in popularity since then, with Generation Z increasingly using laptops and tablets in the classroom.

⁶ <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/dangerous-straits-wargaming-a-future-conflict-over-taiwan>

⁷ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/first-battle-next-war-wargaming-chinese-invasion-taiwan>

⁸ <https://sdhist.com/conflicts-of-interest-zine/>

⁹ <https://www.cmich.edu/news/details/new-academic-board-game-covers-topics-of-racism-and-environmental-issues>

¹⁰ <https://www.lcsun-news.com/story/life/sunlife/2016/05/20/my-so-called-millennial-life-old-west-pioneers-digital-age/84227566/>

- Technology has spurred new types of remote online wargaming that use platforms such as Tabletop Simulator and Tabletopia to connect players from around the world.

Such ready-made opportunities suggest natural paths and benefits for cultivating new wargamers.

Diversity and Creativity

Cultivating the next generation of wargamers engenders the opportunity to improve the field and help avoid the historically endemic “accidental career” problem mentioned earlier. But, if we want to be intentional, where should we look for gamers, and how varied should these sources be? Reviewing current literature on diversity and creativity can help us better understand the benefits of intentionally recruiting wargamers into the field.

This literature review comes with a few caveats. First, it focuses on the practical benefits of diversity, rather than sociopolitical or ethical aspects. Second, diversity is a far more complex and multidimensional issue than this short literature review can tackle; functional and demographic diversity offer different benefits and challenges, and intersect to lead to more complex dynamics. Third, as an overview of diversity’s positive and negative effects as they apply to wargaming professionals, this article does not describe all of the research around diversity.

The social science research into diversity and creativity follows two different research paradigms that together strongly describe the presence of diversity as a double-edged sword: it creates opportunities to include broader and more innovative perspectives, but also raises the management costs of effectively integrating those perspectives.¹¹ The *information/decision-making* paradigm focuses on diversity’s strength of fostering broad, more innovative perspectives, and expanding the pool of ideas.¹² The *social categorization* paradigm considers the risks of diversity, indicating that people tend to work best with those who are similar to them, and that differences increase the risk of social conflict.¹³ Thus, maximizing diversity’s benefit requires striking the right balance while working to mediate the negative outcomes.

According to the information/decisionmaking paradigm, diversity offers numerous benefits related to creativity. Divergent viewpoints stimulate teams to challenge biases, augmenting the

¹¹ Paul B. Paulus, Bernard Arjan Nijstad. *Group creativity. Innovation through collaboration*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 32–62. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195147308.002.0005>

¹² D. van Knippenberg, C.K. De Dreu, and A.C. Homan, “Work Group Diversity and Group Performance: An Integrative Model and Research Agenda,” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 89, no. 6 (2004): 1008–22. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.89.6.1008>

¹³ van Knippenberg, et al., “Work Group Diversity and Group Performance:...”

value of structured analytic techniques.¹⁴ Even open conflict can help groups by challenging assumptions, as long as the conflict is respectful and not personal. Diversity reduces groupthink and premature closure; a single divergent viewpoint can make a group's decision-making process more rigorous, even when that dissenting view is objectively incorrect.¹⁵ Diverse groups tend to perform better at creative, complex tasks, such as divergent thinking, but worse at more straightforward tasks, such as convergent thinking.¹⁶ For wargames that involve red-teaming or otherwise understanding another actor, diversity can enhance empathy and cultural understanding while reducing mirror-imaging.¹⁷ Diversity alone, however, is insufficient to generate these benefits if it is not sought and welcome (an attitude sometimes termed *inclusivity*), and if it is without an openness to challenging biases.

Diversity's benefits also come with challenges. The social categorization paradigm points out that diversity risks creating fault lines, which "divide a group's members on the basis of one or more attributes."¹⁸ Fault lines do not negatively affect team performance when they lie dormant (i.e., the team acknowledges them, but does not perceive them as a division), but numerous internal and external processes can activate them. If activated, fault lines become more salient than the overarching team identity; the divisive pressures can lead to coalition-forming, in-group conflict, and decreased work satisfaction.¹⁹ These fault lines manifest differently across the different types of diversity: demographic (immutable personal characteristics), functional (job roles and expertise), and values (moral value systems).²⁰ Activated fault lines can lead demographic and functional diversity to slightly undermine team cohesion and performance when a team is just forming; the same circumstance in the context of values diversity has an even larger negative effect.²¹

¹⁴ van Knippenberg, et al., "Work Group Diversity and Group Performance:..."

¹⁵ <https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/structured-analytic-techniques-for-intelligence-analysis/book255432>

¹⁶ C.A. Bowers, J.A. Pharmed, and E. Salas, "When member homogeneity is needed in work teams: A meta-analysis," *Small Group Research*, 31, no. 3 (2009): 305–27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/104649640003100303>

¹⁷ https://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/documents/ufmcs/The_Red_Team_Handbook.pdf

¹⁸ D.C. Lau, and J.K. Murnighan, "Demographic Diversity and Faultlines: The Compositional Dynamics of Organizational Groups," *The Academy of Management Review* 23, no. 2 (1998): 325–40.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/259377>

¹⁹ K.A. Jehn, and K. Bezrukova, "The faultline activation process and the effects of activated faultlines on coalition formation, conflict, and group outcomes," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 112, no. 1 (2010): 24–42. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2009.11.008>

²⁰ Daan van Knippenberg and Michaéla C. Schippers, "Work Group Diversity," *Annual Review of Psychology* 58, no. 1 (2007): 515–41. <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev.psych.58.110405.085546>

²¹ A.E. Randel, "Identity salience: A moderator of the relationship between group gender composition and work group conflict," *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 23, no. 6 (2002): 749–66. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.163>

Thankfully, these challenges can be mitigated. Good leadership and friendship-building can bridge such fault lines and reduce animosity.²² Professional wargamers avoid the worst problems because they typically enjoy values cohesion (given a shared interest in supporting a common mission). Moreover, with good leadership and growing team interdependence, the early problems with demographic and functional diversity can be alleviated, but lost time might damage a team in other ways. Leaders can reduce or eliminate fault lines by encouraging teams to work closely together to achieve superordinate goals.

The challenges of diversity do not outweigh its benefits, but diversity needs to be carefully and intentionally managed to maximize its utility. Leaders should not throw together a disparate group and hope for the best—they should prepare to carefully support team-wide or industry-wide diversity and integration. Conversely, team leaders should not avoid forming diverse teams just because they have the potential for difficulty. Regarding the generational diversity salient to this article, leaders should be aware that generational differences can lead to harmful power differentials or to healthy mentorship relations. Different generations communicate differently; teams of players in a wargame might require more flexible or modular communications structures, and might respond differently to facilitation styles or wordy rulesets.²³

The Case Study of Hobby Wargaming

Complementing the previous section’s theoretical framework, this section analyzes a practical case study with similar challenges to professional wargaming: historical hobby board gaming, commonly (but often simplistically) referred to as *hobby wargaming*. The hobby wargaming industry, a sub-set of the broader board game industry, has obvious similarities: similar processes for distilling geopolitical dynamics, a similar need for creativity and design thinking, and, most importantly for this article, similar generational challenges. Both types of games faced a similar decline, and are now experiencing a resurgence. Though this case study—comparing a commercial entertainment genre to an analytical, practical discipline—is flawed, it still usefully suggests lessons for how to grow a field with intention.

Hobby wargaming has existed as a commercial, mass-market publishing industry since Charles S. Roberts founded Avalon Hill in 1952, but it faced a crisis in the 1980s and 1990s: games became overly complicated and struggled to find an audience with a newer generation of gamers who preferred *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Magic: The Gathering*, and *Settlers of Catan*.

²² H. Ren, B. Gray, and D.A. Harrison, “Triggering faultline effects in teams: The importance of bridging friendship ties and breaching animosity ties,” *Organization Science* 26, no. 2 (2015): 390–404.
<https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2014.0944>

²³ <https://hbr.org/2021/08/how-to-manage-a-multi-generational-team>

Two of the largest publishers, SPI and Avalon Hill, closed shop amid internal business problems and a stagnating market. Hobby wargaming dried up for years, to the point where Millennials grew up thinking of wargames as digital (or video) games like *Starcraft* or *Command and Conquer*, rather than analog games like *Advanced Squad Leader*.

These times gave way to a renaissance in historical gaming, primarily because the market reacted quickly and intentionally. When rulesets became too complicated to appeal to most players, publishers made games with broader appeal such as *Axis and Allies*. Wargames became less *war* and more *game*, portraying conflict in domains such as politics, economics, technology, and diplomacy. Increased cross-pollination with other genres of games have furthered this renaissance; games like *Twilight Struggle* and *Memoir '44* broke through to mainstream gamers. More recently, wargame publishers have expanded thematically, cultivating a more diverse set of historical themes, perspectives, and designers, and fostering a new sense of dynamism to the genre.

Despite the quick pivot and this recent growth, the genre faces some challenges born of the lost time. Game choice has made the hobby more welcoming; however, the industry has published games by new designers on unexplored topics, and invited them into the industry as equals to more established designers. Reflecting the social categorization literature on diversity, these changes have prompted some pushback, mainly from a small group of older gamers who possibly feel disoriented by change or feel that their experience is being devalued. Some established gamers have dismissed new game concepts, ideas, and topics, including “wargames” that do not meet their definition of “war.” They have labelled games with simpler or more focused mechanics as inferior to more complex fare, even if they appropriately handle the topic so that a broader audience can appreciate them. This elitism can turn off new gamers from going deeper into the hobby. Lastly, these changes (and the responses to them) have prompted some cliquishness among different kinds of gamers, which limits open communication, mentorship, and the flow of ideas to new generations of gamers. Unsurprisingly, each of these problems is also rampant in the professional wargaming world.

Lessons for Professional Wargaming

The literature about diversity and the case study about hobby historical board games point to useful lessons for professional wargaming.

- *Interdisciplinary needs require interdisciplinary approaches.* Wargaming is a vast field with a plethora of necessary inputs, so good wargamers need to come from a lot of different

sources. The graphic below is meant to spark thought and start a conversation, not to end one. What other domains might produce the next great wargamers?



- *The lack of a clear professional path to wargaming can be an opportunity.* Having too regimented a training program as an industry could limit creativity and innovation; drawing from a broader set of career paths reveals opportunities for growth. Wargamers can learn from all genres of gaming, not just classic hex-and-counter wargames. We can also reach out to fields such as design, social sciences, and communications.
- *Lean into generational differences rather than fight them.* Younger cohorts may enter the wargaming world in different ways than did previous generations, but we should welcome them and the perspectives they bring. The lesson from hobby gaming is that professional wargamers can benefit from being open-minded about points of entry, which would enrich the creativity and variety of approaches. Dismissing comparisons to popular games like *Dungeons and Dragons*, or arguing over whether a game is technically a wargame is off-putting and limiting. As professional wargaming increasingly takes on new, broader topics—diplomacy, climate change, logistics—it can learn from a greater range of sources. Even something as simple as using a term other than *wargaming* could frame the field so

as to bring in folks who are interested in using gaming to explore problems, but who are not interested in war.

- *Invest more into mentorship and friendly competition.* We can still do better at creating an environment that is more inviting to newcomers. Generally, professional wargaming has done less outreach than hobby gaming, but has succeeded with programs such as the Women’s Wargaming Network and the Georgetown University Wargaming Society. Tapping more groups can increase experimentation, for example with groups such as the Department of Defense’s “Fight Club.”²⁴ Beyond the defense world, reaching out at gaming conventions and more universities would also help. Wargamers could explore beyond our niches to find people with skills needed for wargaming who might not even know what wargaming is. Who in the Department of Defense would have reached out to social workers for wargaming advice before Chris Engle invented matrix games?
- Finally, and most importantly, *diversity amplifies creativity and innovation, but it does not come cheap.* Diversity requires work, good leadership, and time to support inclusion and to mitigate inherent challenges to team cohesion. Good leaders from older cohorts acknowledge their knowledge and experience in their work, but they should also embrace differences and ensure all perspectives are heard and free to express themselves, particularly when approaching new problems. Thankfully, wargaming in the defense world comes with a degree of shared mission and values, so the hardest part of a diverse team is mostly addressed. Time and team interdependence mediate some of these challenges, but teams need to be patient and cultivate cohesion.

Building this diverse new generation of wargamers intentionally, and learning from other fields and research, our field can not only envision new heights of creativity, analytical rigor, open experimentation, and real-world results, but set out to explore them. The future of wargaming is an exciting one.

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²⁴ <https://warontherocks.com/2019/01/welcome-to-fight-club-wargaming-the-future/>