

Pleasure Under Pressure: Laughter, Learning, and Competitive Play in Professional Wargaming

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INTRODUCTION

Wargaming is a long-standing pedagogical method in military education, designed to cultivate officers' decision-making, tactical awareness, and professional judgment under uncertainty and time pressure. Wargaming encompasses a broad family of analogue and digital practices, but this study focuses on collaborative, digital, map-based military wargames in which participants manage unfolding tactical scenarios through consequence-based decision-making (Bennerstedt and Sjöblom 2026). In such settings, wargames become affectively dense social encounters in which learning emerges through how participants manage failure, disagreement, and the affective intensities of competitive play. Previous research on simulation-based training and debriefing suggests that laughter plays an important role in navigating such sensitivities (Lymer, Lindwall, and Sellberg 2025). Participants use laughter to soften the delivery of negative feedback, maintain affiliation, and sustain progress toward professionally relevant conclusions without threatening face (ibid). These prior findings encourage extending the analysis of laughter to the gameplay phase of professional wargaming itself, where educational, competitive, and professional orientations must be continually negotiated.

Following interactional work on laughter (Glenn 2003; Jefferson 1984), the present study treats laughter not as a reflection of internal emotional states but as a sequential and multimodal practice. Conversation analysis shows that the placement, timing, and design of laughter can recruit alignment, mitigate socially delicate actions, or recalibrate the seriousness of an unfolding activity. In

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institutional environments such as classrooms and military training settings, these practices become consequential for managing participation roles, distributing authority, and coordinating shifts between frames of “work,” “play,” and “learning.” This perspective aligns with studies of laughter in digital gameplay, which show how players use laughter to relieve tension, maintain engagement, and shape affective framing in play (O’Hagan and Flanagan 2018). Such practices are also relevant for understanding how participants shift between multiple roles and orientations during professional gameplay, for example as players, students, and future officers.

Whereas conversation analysis examines how affective orientations are locally produced in interaction, Hirst’s (2024) analysis of contemporary military wargaming emphasizes how wargames are designed to shape affective as well as cognitive engagement. Through immersion, tension, and competitive pressure, wargames cultivate “buy-in” and channel participants toward particular strategic imaginaries and institutional priorities. This affective design dimension is politically consequential: rule structures, scenario logics, and facilitation practices delimit what emotional investments and identifications are possible, and thus what kinds of professional subjectivities can form. From this perspective, laughter becomes a meaningful site in which affective steering is enacted, resisted, or renegotiated in the moment-by-moment conduct of educational wargaming.

Empirically, the study draws on an audiovisual corpus of approximately 80 hours from an ongoing study of naval wargaming practices, with the present analysis focusing on episodes of laughter across gameplay and debriefing. The study is conducted within the Swedish Defence University’s officer program. Using multimodal conversation analysis (Mondada 2019), the study analyzes laughter in relation to talk, timing, bodily orientation, and participants’ ongoing engagement with gameplay activities. The analysis shows that laughter serves as a key resource for regulating transitions between seriousness and playfulness during wargaming. Participants deploy laughter to frame competitive actions as clever or light-hearted, to acknowledge miscalculations without undermining collegiality, and to navigate delicate moments where scenario outcomes—such as mission failure or simulated casualties—carry potentially grave implications in real-world military contexts. Instructors, meanwhile, strategically join or resist such laughter to rekey activities toward professional learning objectives, reinforcing the institutional mandate of the exercise.

Theoretically, the paper juxtaposes these interactional findings with established serious-game evaluation frameworks such as the Game Engagement Questionnaire (Brockmyer et al. 2009), the Game Experience Questionnaire (IJsselsteijn, de Kort and Poels. 2013), and EGameFlow (Fu, Su, and Yu 2009). These models primarily conceptualize engagement and enjoyment as measurable psychological outcomes, including constructs such as motivation, flow, immersion, and usability. While valuable for comparative assessment and design evaluation, such models are not designed to account for the collective, embodied, and sequential organization of pleasure in situated interaction. By treating laughter as an interactional accomplishment embedded in institutional order, the paper expands DiGRA 2026’s theme *Pleasures* beyond design metrics to include the lived, collaborative shaping of professional wargaming as a learnable and enjoyable activity. Pleasure, on this account, is not an internal variable but a publicly organized and pedagogically consequential achievement through which practices of war, play and learning are

rendered intelligible in military education. We thus contribute an interactional account of pleasure that complements existing approaches to player experience by showing how pleasure is collaboratively and interactionally accomplished in professional wargaming practice

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