

# Missing in Action: Professional Wargaming in Game Studies

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## INTRODUCTION

Game studies has produced a substantial body of scholarship examining how digital entertainment games represent war, militarism, and violence. Influential analyses of titles such as *Spec Ops: The Line* and *This War of Mine* demonstrate how games can unsettle heroic narratives, foreground civilian suffering, and invite players into ethically fraught situations. Work on the military–entertainment complex similarly reveals how commercial digital games intersect with recruitment infrastructures, security discourse, and popular imaginaries of armed conflict (Huntemann & Payne 2009; Payne 2016; Stahl 2010). These contributions have been essential for understanding how militarism circulates through digital culture and how entertainment games operate as critical media.

Yet professional wargaming, the formal, institutionalized use of games by militaries and defence organizations, remains comparatively underexamined within game studies. Scholarship such as Harrigan and Kirschenbaum’s *Zones of Control* (2016) maps the historical and cultural breadth of hobbyist and artistic wargaming traditions, while recent studies including Hirst (2024) have begun to theorize contemporary professional practice. Game studies itself, however, is largely void of studies in professional wargaming, and one of the most politically consequential domains of game-based reasoning remains only loosely integrated into mainstream game studies discourse.

This gap is increasingly significant given the scale and influence of professional wargaming today. Armed forces across the globe employ wargames for officer education, operational planning, capability development, procurement analysis, crisis response, and long-term strategic forecasting. Defence organizations invest substantial resources into wargaming centres, simulations, personnel training, and methodological development (Curry 2020). These games do not simply represent conflict; they actively shape how future conflicts are imagined, prepared for, and managed. Professional wargaming therefore involves not only games-as-tools but also games-as-media: artefacts that encode assumptions about rationality, technology, identity, and geopolitical order.

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This article presents an argumentative and agenda-setting intervention. Rather than presenting new empirical findings, it argues that professional wargaming constitutes a major but underexplored object for game studies inquiry and outlines several feasible lines of research through which scholars might engage it. While access restrictions pose genuine methodological challenges, meaningful analysis remains possible through a wide variety of methods and materials.

To address this gap, the article outlines several possible research trajectories for game studies scholars, including:

1. Examining wargames as pedagogical and identity-forming tools within professional military education;
2. Analysing the epistemologies and assumptions embedded in models, abstractions, and rule systems;
3. Design-oriented analyses of mechanics, scenario structures, and representational logics;
4. Cultural and discursive critiques of how wargames frame conflict, actors, and political contexts;
5. Institutional and ethnographic approaches to wargaming practice;
6. Historical and comparative studies of national wargaming traditions and their evolution across time and institutions.

Professional wargaming shapes real decisions with significant human and political consequences. As such, it demands the same analytical scrutiny that game studies already applies to entertainment media, procedural systems, and cultural imaginaries. The article's contribution is therefore not an empirical study of a particular military institution, but a conceptual reframing of professional wargaming as a necessary and legitimate object of game studies research, and as an extension of academic concerns with how games operate within, and actively shape, structures of power.

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