Practical Problems in Wargaming

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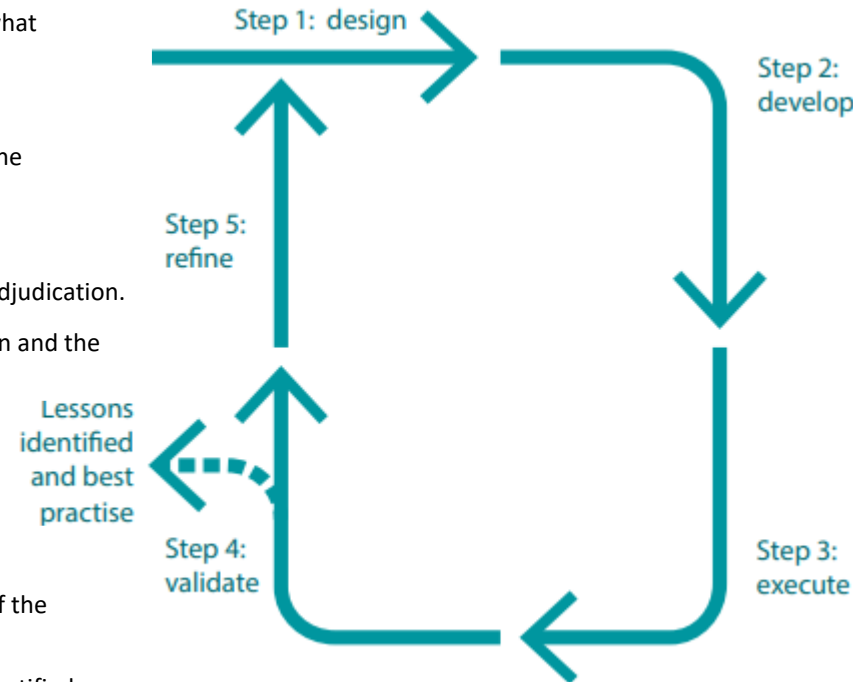
My Wargaming Story

- I am not much of a gamer in my personal life, so I came to this role with little previous experience!

- It was a steep learning curve that involved playing lots of games and doing courses.

- I have designed and run all sorts of games, from 3* analytical games on Maritime Campaigns through to tactical games developed whilst deployed on Ops.

- I tend to focus on 'soft effects' and influence type wargames, including the representation of audiences and effects in wargames.

- I think it is really important to provide an environment that challenges thinking and decision-making and enforces consequences.

The Doctrine

- Specify the aim, objectives and purpose.

- Identify how the outputs will be used and integrated.

- Identify the subjects, themes and topics of interest, and any key variables.

- Determine how these subjects will be examined and what information/data is needed.

- Determine the scenario, and any specific vignettes.

- Identify the people required to ensure the validity of the wargame.

- List any assumptions made to date.

- Identify, or design, the processes required, including adjudication.

- Create an audit trail by documenting all decisions taken and the reasons for them.

- Conduct post-game analysis.

- Suggest refinements to any aspect of the wargame.

- Record and distribute the lessons identified, observations and insights.

- Record any factors arising from the wargame that will shape future iterations in a series of games.

Step 1: design
Step 2: develop
Step 3: execute
Step 4: validate
Step 5: refine
Lessons identified and best practise

- Develop the setting and scenario.

- Refine adjudication methods and any tools/data.

- Clarify processes.

- Refine data collection and analysis plan, including reporting timescales.

- Develop roles and responsibilities.

- Develop simulation software, if using.

- Develop player lists and supporting personnel (and any pre-reading).

- Book venue and develop layout, facilities needed and infrastructure.

- Set up the wargame room (virtual, federated, physical).

- Conduct participant training as required.

- Conduct pre-wargame and start-of-wargame briefs for control staff and all participants.

- Conduct the wargame.

- Capture data and analyse the wargame.

- Conduct the after action review(s).

- Collect and collate lessons identified.

The Reality

- Be honest, do you actually follow the doctrine? And if you do, is it really that straightforward?

- What are some of the issues you're most likely to encounter?

    - Lack of understanding and preconceived ideas about wargames and wargamers!

    - 'Problem' players, participants, teams or seniors.

    - Unclear/ambiguous objectives.

    - Large amounts of paper and random scribbles.

    - Long days getting set up and debriefing at the end of the day.

- If you're doing large scale analytical games, then you need to play test and have back-up plans in place. For example, what will you do in case of epic IT fail on the day? Red team the wargame.

Common Issues: Planning
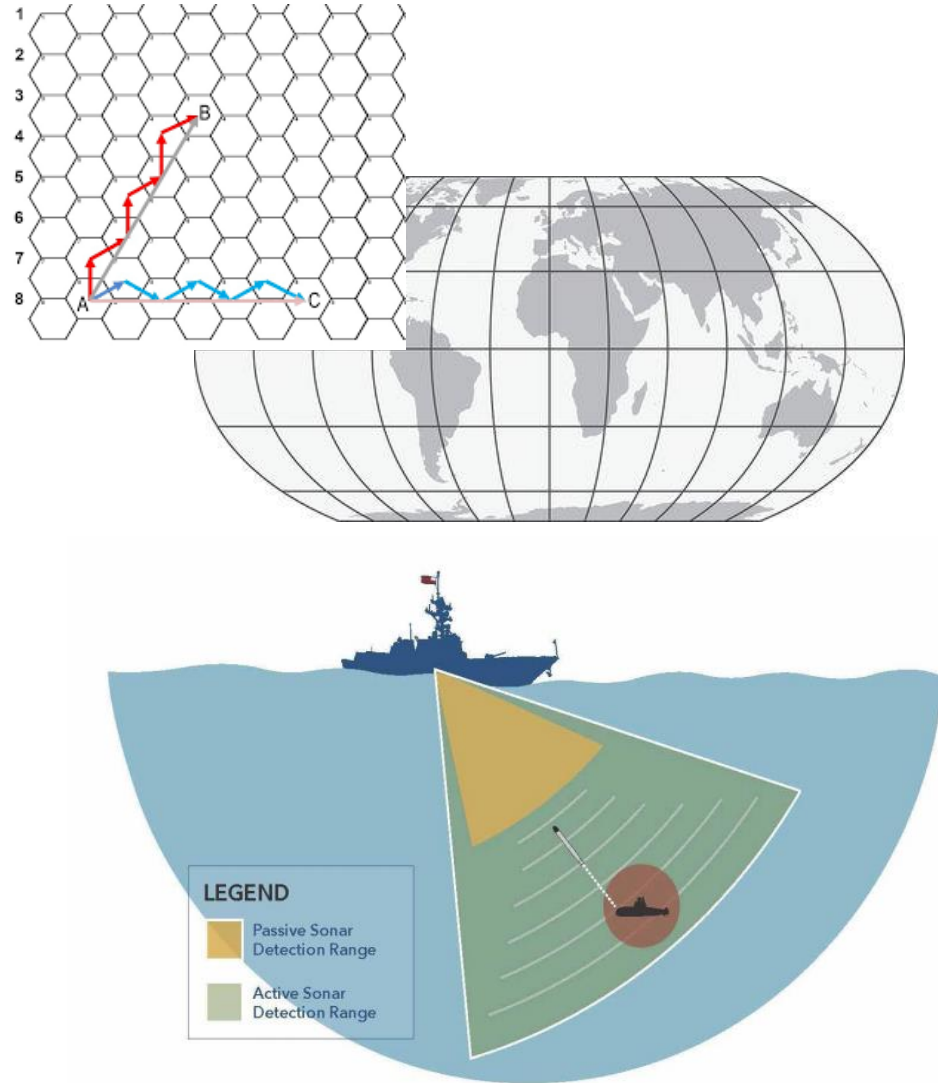
- **Objectives** are either unclear/ambiguous or too grand and not achievable. *This is probably the most critical issue, and it is worth spending time understanding and clarifying problem.*

- Finding the **right players and participants**. *This is my 2nd biggest issue; a wargame is only as good as the people in the room. Particularly for matrix games, rules/process cannot make up for a lack of appropriate players.*

- **Rules and fidelity** need to be matched to the objective (and thoroughly tested). For strategic games, high fidelity data (such as range rings) are probably not needed.

- **Classification and security** tends to only be an issue if it's not pre-planned or if players/participants suddenly want to explore topics at the last minute.

LEGEND

Passive Sonar Detection Range

Active Sonar Detection Range

Common Issues: Planning

Audience support and perceptions

Objectives or key variables; Allied Cohesion, Infrastructure, Force effectiveness
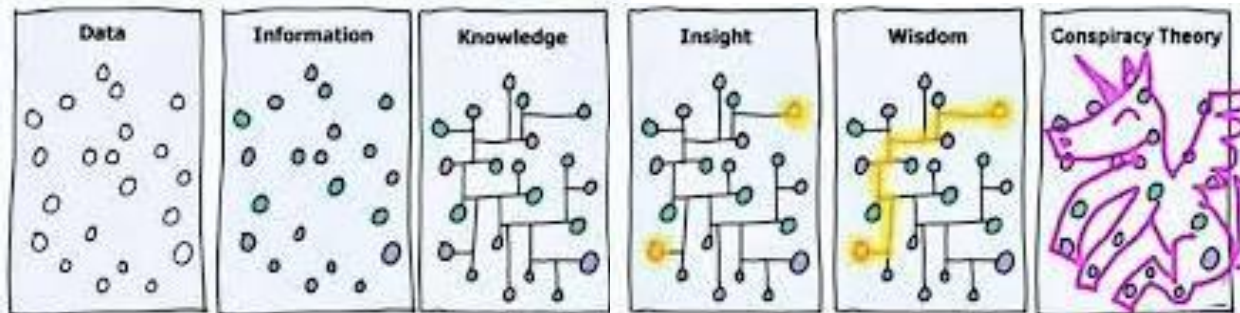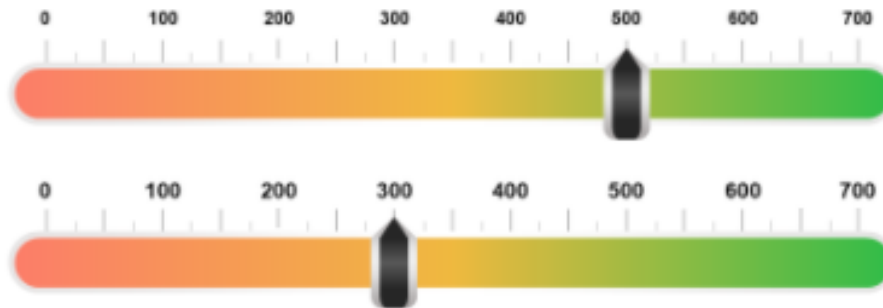
- **Consequences** of actions and representation of objectives is an important aspect of wargames, particularly for soft effects games. How will you track and record unintended effects during the game? How will you assess the validity of potential actions?

- **Note takers vs SMEs.** There is a big difference between a notetaker that does not understand the subject and one who does. But there are issues with using SMEs as they often have their own biases and pre-formed ideas (which you will need to take into account when doing any subsequent analysis and reporting).

Common Issues: Execution

The military hierarchy!

- In a military context, unbalanced teams rarely work for open wargames, equal representation tends to be very important. Closed wargames are less of an issue.

- Having Senior Officers in the room also impacts gameplay!

    - The 'everyday is an OJAR day' culture means some players want to be seen as doing well and contributing.

    - Some players may be nervous of looking stupid and not contribute as much as they could.

    - Seniors can also go off track and may need reigning in.

    - But having a Senior in the room can help secure the right participants, just ask them to leave after the first turn!

- Discuss the issues of rank with any Seniors' beforehand!

- A safe to fail environment is really important, different organisations/HQs have different cultures that you need to consider when planning and running the game.

Common Issues: Execution

Disruptive players and teams

- The 1st turn is always clunky and takes longer than subsequent turns, avoid examining anything important during this turn.

- But what if game play does not improve? And players/teams start to cause problems…

  - The use of the 'note-taker' in the room can be a useful spy in the camp if you are not in the same room.

  - The use of a team lead can also be useful, particularly if you have pre-selected and briefed them. This is where the military hierarchy can sometimes be useful!

  - Sometimes teams have issues because they do not understand what is required of them, clear objectives and instructions can help with that.

- Beware of the final turn mayhem as players 'go all in' (linked to the lack of consequences of this turn).
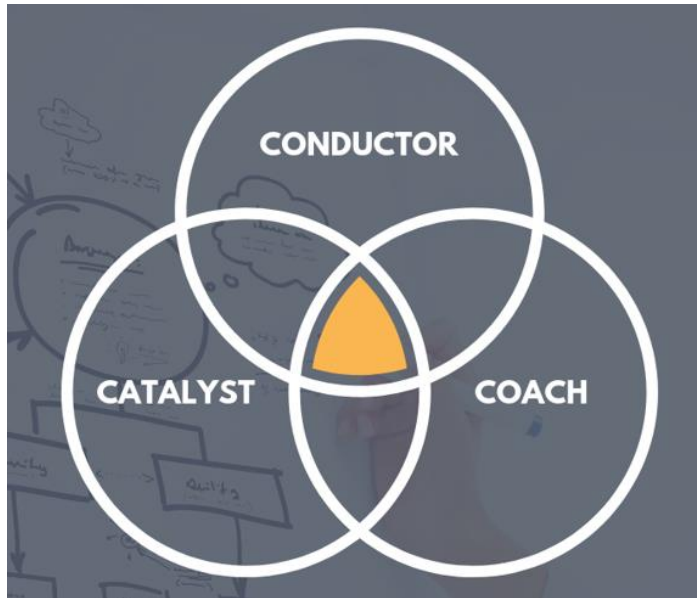
Facilitation during the game is critical, you need a good leader/facilitator!

Common Issues: Analytical Games

- The data collection and analysis plan is discussed in all the doctrine and yes it is important to clarify what information you need and how you will to analyse it.

- If running analytical games over several days, it is worth doing 'fast OA' at the end of each day, as opposed to waiting until the end of the game to start analysing the data!

  - It can be as simple as key actions/outcomes, themes, issues, assumptions.

  - This will also help you refine the game, rules and address and other issues (such as players, technology etc).

  - But it will make the day much longer for those involved!

- As with any analysis, be mindful of biases and assumptions etc.

Key Points

- As long as I have decent objectives and I have the right people in the room, I can normally make most wargames work, but I do not normally use complicated rules or IT.
  - If you do have rules/IT, play test as much as possible, with people that have had no involvement in the game design!
- Understand your audience, are they open to wargaming? Are they likely to cause you problems? If so, what countermeasures do you need in place??
- Who is going to lead and facilitate your wargame?

Red team your wargame!
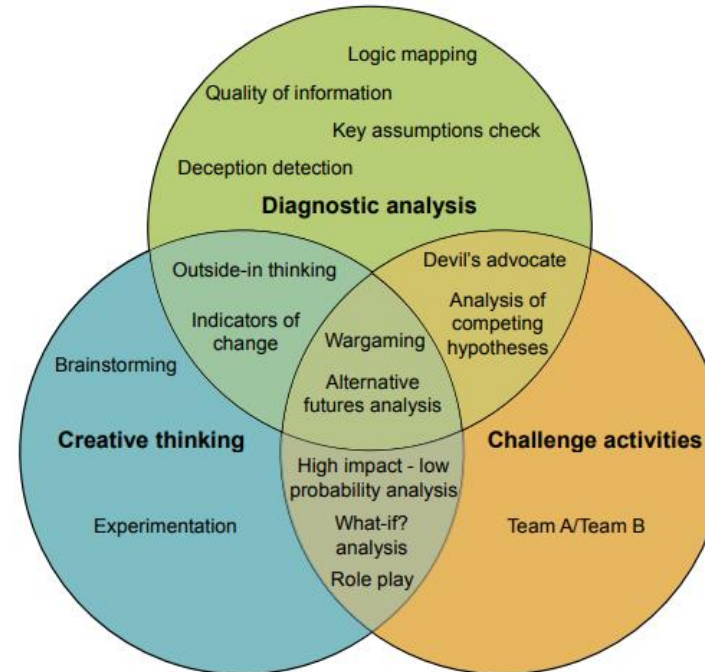
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