

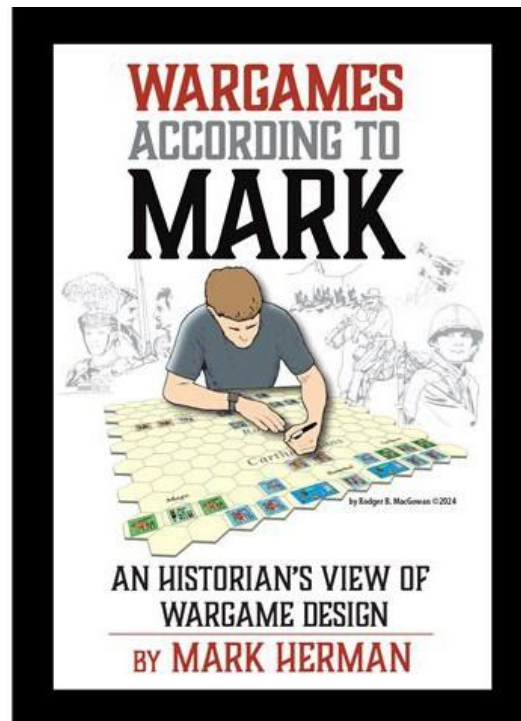
Wargames According to Mark

An Historians View of Wargame Design

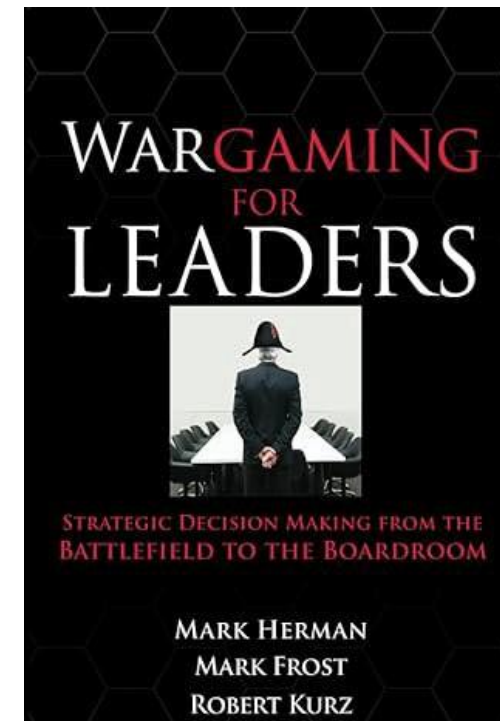
Mark Herman

11 September 2025

Book Presentation

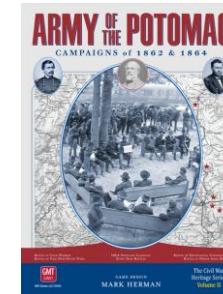
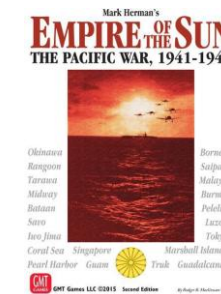
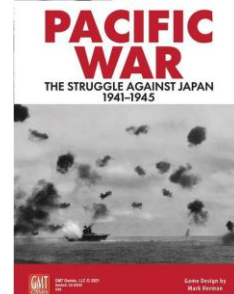
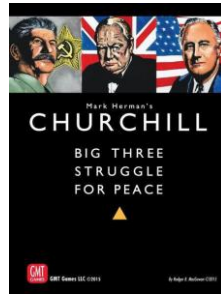
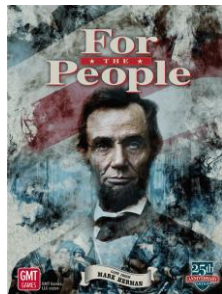
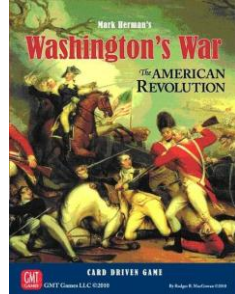
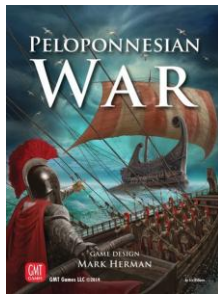


Mark Herman, Studiolo Designs



Who Am I?

- Professional Historian (current book project: *Civil War Combat and Entropy*)
- Commercial Career from Front Desk to Designer to Head of Victory Games (1980s)
- Retired Senior Partner at Booz Allen Hamilton Inc.
- **Conducted several hundred professional wargames** for OSD and Joint Staff from 1979-2014
- Designed and delivered around a **hundred corporate strategy exercises/** simulations covering all topics including Pandemic viruses (Wargaming for Leaders, Chapter 14)
- Remain a commercial game designer with **~100+ published titles**, majority military historical wargames
- About to publish *Defiance: Second Russo-Ukrainian War*



Why Did I Write the Book?

- Legacy for my descendants to know me beyond stories.
- Who was the crazy guy married to Grandma?
- What are all these games on the shelves about?
- *Wanted to share with the hobby my methodology for designing historical wargames.*



Mark Herman, Studiolo Designs

Basic Tenets of My Design Process

- All wargames are alternate history, else read the book.
- Wargames take a book's static narrative on how a war progressed and let you drive the car.
- Historical Wargames need to capture the kinetic factors of the past, but more importantly the psychological mindset of the participants, else its not historical.
- "Keep it simple; smartly" (JFD quote)
- "A wargame is the designer's argument for why things turned out as they did." (Frank Chadwick quote).
- Sam I Am!
 - Tightly define who the player represents in the wargame.
 - What decision does the player have agency over?
 - What decisions does the player not have agency over and how are those factors represented.
 - Design must not only capture the historical narrative, but more importantly the paths discussed, debated, but not taken. (Me)
- SPI/ Dunnigan method: mini prototype, rapid modification; rinse and repeat.
- "It's not a game until the rules are written" (Me)
- "No game is ever finished; it just gets published." (JFD quote)

Kinetic Factors

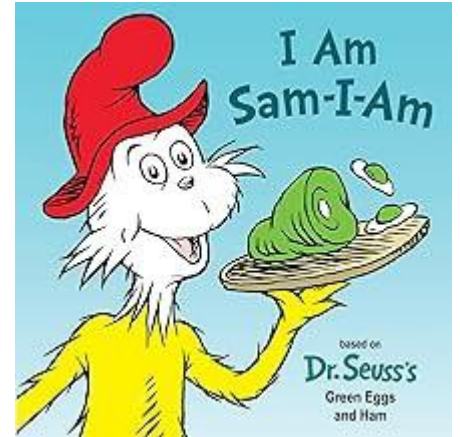
- How are you **abstracting reality**?
- What **historical paradigms** are you explicitly using and not using?
- **Scale**: Strategic, Operational, Grand Tactical, Tactical?
- **Components**: What are the players looking at and what do they touch?
- **Granularity**: What moves and what does taking attrition mean?
- **Math**: What gets calculated and resolved?
- How are you handling that which matters but is often unseen?
 - Terrain and Weather
 - How are you handling support functions: C3ISR, long range fires, off map elements, other
 - Cyber, Space, Undersea, etc.

Psychological Factors

- **Who** or what do the participants represent?
- Player Agency: What **decisions** can participants **directly or indirectly control**?
- Who's the Boss? **What decisions are imposed** on participants?
- Probability of Politics: What excellent **decisions** are the players **prohibited from making**?
- Probability of Participant **Innovation**? How to you handle new ideas not considered within your design **without anarchy**?

SAM I AM!

- Historical Wargames often define a player amorphously in a telescoping design
 - Taskforce anti-aircraft formation to national production
 - Player has too much control over their forces.
- My view is the more focused the personage represented, the more immersive the experience.
 - Churchill (Churchill, GMT Games)
 - Alcibiades (Peloponnesian War)
- Decisions above and below the player's role are handled as context, resource allocation, chaos.



Churchill Team Photo

British Delegation

En Route to the 2nd Washington Conference

- Photo Taken at *HMS Duke of York* dock
- Cards mirror picture
- Each personage has their historical skill



<p>4 Sir John Dill Prime Minister's Representative</p>  <p>Attribute: If issue is on US Track, +1 Strength. Health: After each use, roll 1D6: on a result of 1-3 Dill dies and his card is removed from play.</p>	<p>4 Averell Harriman Special Envoy</p>  <p>Attribute: If issue is on Soviet Track or Churchill is active in a conference, +1 strength.</p>	<p>3 Lord Beaverbrook Minister of Aircraft Production and Supply</p>  <p>Attribute: if Churchill is still active in the conference, +2 strength.</p>	<p>3 Sir Gordon N. Macreedy Assistant Chief of the Imperial General Staff</p>  <p>Attribute: If played on a US Directed Offensive on the US Track, +1 strength.</p>	<p>7 Sir Winston Churchill Prime Minister of the United Kingdom</p>  <p>Attribute: If played on a Global Issue, gain 1 Political Activity marker. Health: After each use, roll 2D6: on a 2-4 Churchill suffers a heart attack; he is inactive during the next conference. National Characteristic: Imperial Staff: Pre-conference staff card, +1 strength.</p>	<p>1 Sir Dudley Pound First Sea Lord</p>  <p>Attribute: If Strategic Materials issue, +3 strength. Health: After each use, roll 1D6: on a result of 1-3 Pound dies and his card is removed from play.</p>	<p>1 Sir Charles Portal Chief of the Air Staff</p>  <p>Attribute: If issue is on US Track, +2 Strength.</p>
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Design Simplicity

- It all about putting the player into an immersive narrative.
- Ensure the **design has as many systems/ mechanics as it needs and no more.**
 - I have not always followed this concept in my past, but we all must evolve.
 - Take the time to write the 'shorter letter'
- **Historical verisimilitude is often determined by small details,** not the big picture.
- At some point, some aspects need to remain on the cutting room floor.

SPI/ Dunnigan Rapid Prototyping

- Initial design should not take more than a couple of days.
- Use small map, few counters, and play.
- Make list of
 - Pros (what you liked)
 - Cons (what you did not like)
 - Why were the Cons there?
- Rinse and Repeat
- **In my method, there is no game until there is a full set of rules.**
- Once there is a game, create a full-sized prototype.
- You must want to **play your own game**, else why would anyone else?

Wargame Design Musings

- There is **no correct way to design a wargame**, I only discuss mine.
- When you have questions, use **research** to answer them.
- **Avoid** modifying your design with **special rules** to make it work; instead, go back to the historical drawing board.
- **Sometimes** playing an historical wargame is **more about the journey than the destination**.
- If you do not want to **play your design**, why would anyone else?
- **It's finished when I am addicted** to playing it; else redesign