

War Colleges spotlight gaming for strategic military education

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Sep. 18, 2017 – Wargames entertain, and stir the imagination. Because they engage, they stimulate the intellect, according to a leading expert in a roundtable discussion of Wargaming in Education, sponsored by the Army War College division of Strategic Simulations. “They enlighten you. They do that by creating what I like to call ‘synthetic experience’,” he said.

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Perla, quoted above, is the author of ‘The Art of Wargaming: A Guide for Professionals and Hobbyists’. Rounding out the panel of experts on gaming in the classroom: James Lacey of the Marine Corps War College; David Lai, Army War College research professor; and James Sterrett, chief of Simulations and Education for the Army Command and General Staff College.

Army Lt. Col. Joe Chretien, of the Army War College, set the stage for the roundtable among participants engaged in strategic education. “We’re here to discuss the importance of integrating wargames into the curriculum to provide a more interactive and experiential experience for the students.”

“The only thing I want them to be able to do when they leave is think about gaming,” said Lacey. “I don’t want them to react. They’ve spent 20 years learning to react in tactical decision-making, training, actual fighting – they are very good at reacting. Now I want them to think, and I want them to have as much time as I can for them to think.” He contrasted interaction with a strategic thinking game against playing a video game – “a first-person shooting game” – in terms of the effect on the student’s ability to think, learn, and comprehend.

Lai offered a sports analogy to help in understanding why gaming fits with strategic education. “Sports are a way for warriors to practice mental attitudes and physical traits without fighting – and that’s what games do intellectually,” he said. “They let you develop those mental muscles.”

Perla added: “Games are, in essence, a form of player-developed narrative and they draw on the power of human storytelling ... to bring people into the game. And, by doing that, the players engage themselves in the game. They take ownership of the game.

“It’s a game, but, for a little while it’s real,” said Perla. “They don’t just observe it; they don’t just read about it. They have to actually act. They have to do something: they have to move a piece ... or make an argument. It makes the intangible tangible.”

Perla pointed to the fact of Navy commanders’ decision-making during World War II as evidence of the success of Navy wargaming between the wars at the Naval War College. Since then, educational methodologies have come and gone, especially with the advent of computers and operations research, but gaming endures.

If debate is a way to more fully deconstruct the issues, then the speaker-audience interaction provided rich understanding of the tactical elements of shaping and executing gaming in education. For example, one educator opined that, “games, by their nature, are reductionist.” Additionally, the audience questioned the speakers on the risk that gaming could reinforce the wrong lessons. One member of the audience triggered a discussion of the instructor’s roles. ‘What do you want the students to learn’, ‘what’s the purpose’ and ‘how much time is available’ are among the questions, and it’s the answers to these questions that will drive the gaming support specialist in creating an effective gaming experience.