



Commercial Disease

The Current Flawed Methodology of COTS Games and How to Fix it.

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Disclaimer

- Josh's opinions do not represent the opinions of the U.S. Army, U.S. Army War College, or any other body of the U.S. Government.

Intro

- Who is Evan?
 - PhD student at King's College London studying Immersion in Professional Wargaming.
 - I design many games (~20+ a year) and help run many games (NATO, academic groups, MOD, etc..)
 - A portfolio of (free!) games can be found at <https://evandalejandro.com/>
- Who is Josh?
 - MA in War Studies from King's College London, Studied at UNSW Australian Defence Force Academy, and a fellow at the Irregular Warfare Initiative
 - Wargaming faculty member at the US Army War College instructing for the wargame design courses and creating bespoke games for PME
- What is this about?
 - This presentation looks at COTS Games as used in education.
- **NOTE:** We will use the term COTS game, commercial game, and board game pretty interchangeably here to mean a Commercial Board Wargame. (please don't sue us for definitional laxness – we know these are different things)



The Problem

Why do we use COTS games?

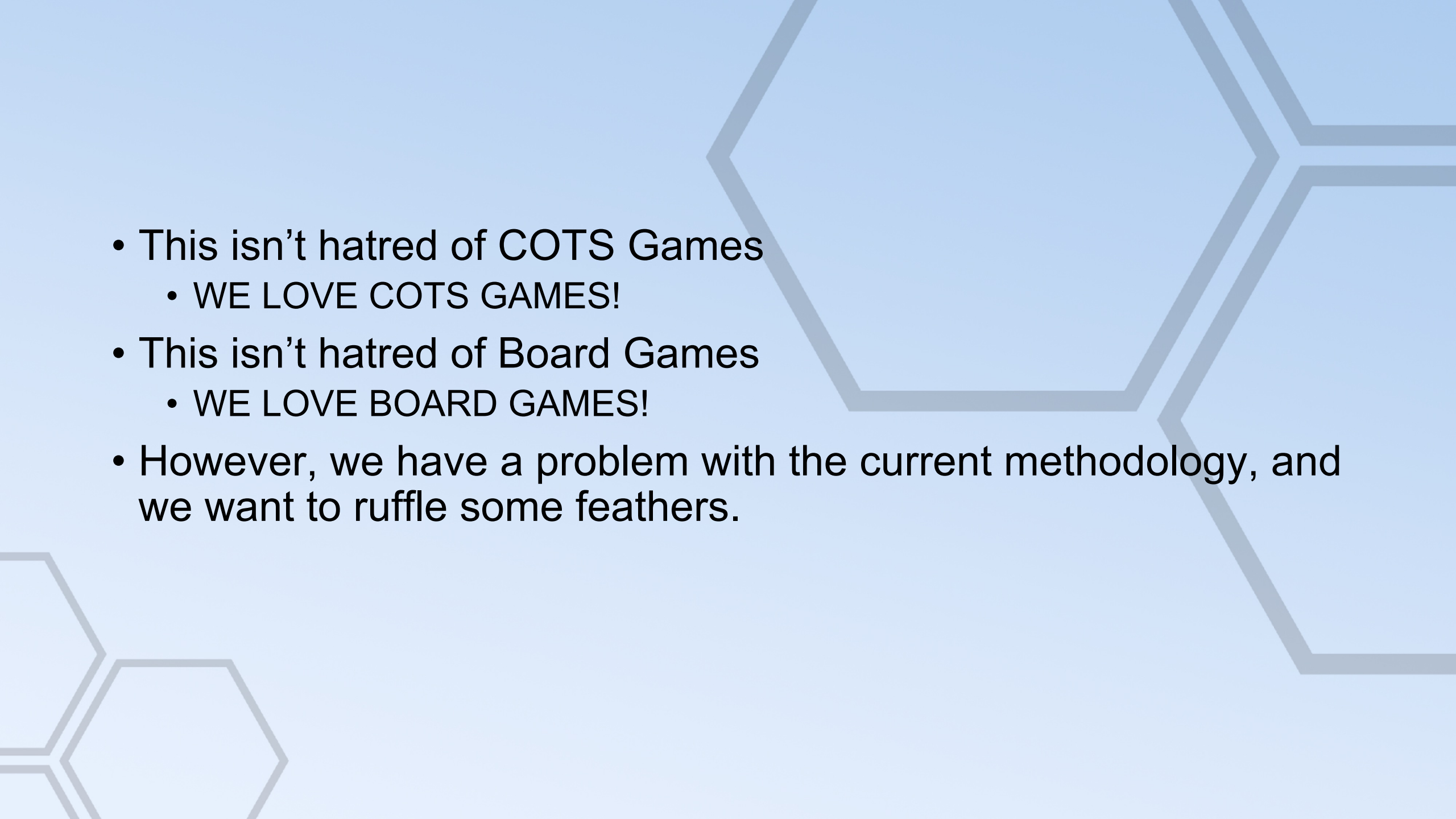
- It's easy to run them
- It's fun
- It's educational
- All (mostly) Lies!
 - Or at least not wholly the truth

The Truth

- We go to them because they are familiar and easy
- We use COTS games for the same reason a researcher keeps using one methodology (case studies, large N) – because that's what they are familiar with
- We (professional wargaming) suffer from Commercial (Wargames) Disease
 - Why - US wargaming comes out of a board wargaming tradition (which is mostly what we were going to talk about here)



Please Don't Kill Us

- 
- This isn't hatred of COTS Games
 - WE LOVE COTS GAMES!
 - This isn't hatred of Board Games
 - WE LOVE BOARD GAMES!
 - However, we have a problem with the current methodology, and we want to ruffle some feathers.



COTS Games

J- Advantages

- Engaging!
- Simpler to implement as low/no design time
- Easily available to buy
- Looks cool and fun
- Students can take them away and play the game themselves (the games are in a box)

Disadvantages

- Complex
 - Not designed with the beginner in mind, even if it is, it often has a lot of assumed knowledge baked in
- Time consuming
 - Often designed for longer play, 2 hour+ play time)
- Typically low reflexivity on the game
 - Poor designers notes, sourcing, etc.. – see our other presentation!
- Internal model is opaque
- Designed by non-SME's
 - Often pop history creeps in, or systems are not well understood
- Designed with fun as the primary goal, no representativeness or education.
- Will never meet your purpose out of the box¹

¹Blockbuster: Dstl Urban Manual Wargame COTS Assessment, Paul Beaves and discussion with UK Wargamers on other COTS Assessments

J- Disadvantages

Results in:

Risk of Negative Learning!

Revisiting Advantages

- None of these advantages are inherent or unique!
 - *Engaging!*
 - *Simpler to implement as low/no design time (you can just buy several copies)*
 - *Easily available to buy*
 - *Looks cool and fun*
 - *Students can take them away and play the game themselves (the games are in a box)*
- All of this value is not inherent to COTS games.
- Our Contention: Consequently, there are only a few precise applications where COTS games are good

Negative Learning Risks

- Examples
 - *Twilight Struggle* – domino theory, bipolar great power view of the Cold War
 - *Flashpoint SCS* – doesn't really represent the SCS
 - *Operational Games* – inherent maneuverist thesis of warfare
 - Etc..
- Not just inherent to the design, the context matters:
 - Littoral Commander is a good example of a good game used badly by some (uncritically, without additional information, low reflexivity)



Bespoke Games

(the other option)

Advantages

- Perfectly tailored to your objectives
 - Can be made simple/low rules overhead
 - Can be made to play fast
- Allows you to see the internal model
- Designed by SME (or w/ SME help, or serious research)
- Just as engaging as a COTS Game (if not more, its tailored to a desired set of players!)
- Gives opportunities to young designers

Disadvantages

- Longer lead time (to design and make copies of the game)
- Need a qualified designer (e.g. SME or time to do research/have SME access)

Answering the Disadvantages

- Longer lead time
 - *Inevitable problem* – ask around and see if anyone has something or is working on something
- Need a qualified designer
 - Never been as many people looking to do a game – probably someone out there
 - Professional wargame designers produce better professional wargames than COTS designers¹
 - Provide the SME expertise/research if possible
- Weigh Advantages and Disadvantages
 - Allows you to get a custom design!
 - Non-opaque game (better for student learning!)

¹Blockbuster: Dstl Urban Manual Wargame COTS Assessment, Paul Beaves

Bespoke is easy(ier)

- Bespoke is easier than you think – you don't need to build a perfect rigid game, you can facilitate!
- Mantra: “Whatever you are not willing to facilitate, you need a rule for”
- This also means it's faster to build!
 - You can always go back and make it rigid later if needed...



Other Options

J- Some Suggestions

- Use a matrix game or Free Kriegspiel (or semi-rigid kriegspiel)
 - Fast and easy to make
 - Give bonuses if the argument is supported by a class reading.
 - Less rigid games are more realistic to non-wargamers (usually)
 - Encourages talking within the language of the literature not the language of the game
- Use the reacting to the past framework
 - Gets the players reflexive and also highly engaged with the subject matter.

J- Some Suggestions

- Modify Professional Wargames/COTS Games to meet your purpose
 - Simplify or Facilitate
 - Change to make more representative
 - If possible start with a Professional COTS game (Majors Gambit, LC, OWS, Powers of Persuasion, PaxSims Matrix Games, GUWS Microgames, Fight Club Games, ect.) – there have never been more free professional games
- Lessening Barriers to Learning (always applicable!)
 - Have a planned teach/walkthrough of the game
 - AAR about what the game gets wrong



Conclusion

Evaluative Framework to Use COTS Games in the Classroom

- Is a COTS game the best choice?
 - If Yes - how do you mitigate critical disadvantages?
 - Typically low reflexivity on the game
 - Internal model is opaque
 - Designed by non-SME's
 - Designed with fun as the primary goal, no representativeness or education.
 - If No – Get a bespoke game
- How do I get students to be reflexive about it?
- How do I get students to know enough to be reflexive about it?

Final Thoughts

- You wouldn't:
 - Hand a paper or book over to students that didn't have footnotes and a bibliography
 - Discuss a paper out of context of the other work in the class.
 - You wouldn't use another person's lesson plan without at least tweaking it.
 - *Why do we do it with games?*
- We are not arguing for an end to COTS game use, rather we are arguing for a more selective and well thought out use with a better pedagogy around COTS game.

Our contention is that most of the time, a COTS game is a bad idea, both design wise, and pedagogically!

So First:

1) Bespoke game

If not possible than...

2) Modified Professional Wargame

If not possible than...

3) Modified COTS game

If not possible (IF AND ONLY IF THERE IS NO OTHER OPTION)...

4) COTS game (with AAR and contextual discussion)



Questions?

Bespoke in 15 minutes – Decision First Method

- 1) What is the purpose of the game?
- 2) What decisions will the players make?
- 3) What information is required for the players to make those decisions?
- 4) What things are required to generate that information?
- 5) Which of these things need rules, which can be made up on the fly? Is process modeling needed, or can you do end effects?
 - Good facilitation over Rules
 - Good artists copy, great artists steal

This is a practiced skill, and one helped by a breadth of game experience

Bespoke in 15 minutes – System First Method

- 1) What is the purpose of the game?
- 2) What is the system that I need to represent?
- 3) Are there enough decisions to make that help with the purpose of the game (e.g. is a wargame a necessary/useful tool)?
- 4) Make the model of the system:
 - 1) Which things need rules, which can be made up on the fly?
 - Good facilitation over Rules
 - Good artists copy, great artists steal

This is a practiced skill, and one helped by a breadth of game experience