



NO PLAYING AROUND WHEN IT COMES TO WARGAMING

For Yuna Huh Wong, wargaming started as a hobby after she attended a 2011 wargaming conference. Soon after, Yuna began inviting gamers to her home to learn about and practice her newfound passion.

Yuna Huh Wong is an accomplished researcher for the Joint Advanced Warfighting Division of the Systems and Analyses Center, one of three federally funded research and development centers that IDA manages. In addition to research for sponsors in the Defense Department, Yuna teaches a course in artificial intelligence and national security at Georgetown University, where gaming topics such as disinformation, facial recognition technology and autonomous weapons systems are part of the class. She is also a wargaming enthusiast who is committed to increasing the number of women in the professional wargaming community. Yuna shares how she became interested in the field in the Eye on IDA video “Wargaming.”

What Is Wargaming?

When asked to define wargaming in simple terms, Yuna holds up Peter Perla’s “The Art of Wargaming: A Guide for Professionals and Hobbyists,” published in 2011. In the book’s introduction, Perla writes, “Wargaming is part of a larger toolkit of techniques useful for learning about warfare.” Yuna adds that it’s “a way to model warfighting without the weapons.” The games approximate reality, allowing gamers to learn how different decisions affect outcomes without having to live with real-world consequences.

According to “[A Brief History of Wargaming](#)” by Albert Świdziński, wargames have been used both to entertain and to model combat for centuries. Historic strategic battle games like chess, go or chaturanga are often considered the first wargames. But games that more closely resemble the modern style of wargaming were developed in the early 19th century. In 1812, a Prussian artillery officer invented a game called Kriegsspiel (“wargame” in English) that is similar to many wargames played today.

In her office at IDA, Yuna displays game boards, game pieces and multi-sided dice that are used during play in modern wargames. Miniature forces and equipment are also commonly used. Participants generally work in teams to pull together and execute a plan based on a certain set of circumstances. Wargaming can be a primary asset for the military to prepare for various potential conflict scenarios.

Wargaming presents national security planners with situations and solutions they may not have already considered. Incorporating more women into professional wargaming adds diversity of thought and stimulates fresh ideas. Broadening the demographics of professional wargamers should also help address the shortage of experienced wargamers available to support defense wargames.

Overcoming Misperceptions

Yuna is aware of the challenges the craft of wargaming faces. It can be difficult to get professional wargames published because of proprietary concerns or because there is no immediate demand for them. This means that, over time, most of the work done in professional wargaming is lost. Although reports about wargames exist, the wargames themselves disappear. The commercial wargames that are published tend to have a number of limitations for professional use, such as an overly narrow focus on historical wars and game mechanics that are generally too complicated for professional use. At a time when there is both high demand for professional wargaming, but also generational turnover in the wargaming community, the challenge of transmitting knowledge and producing more skilled wargamers is especially acute. “I sometimes feel I’m not working fast enough,” Yuna says in reference to her efforts to encourage a new generation of gamers, particularly among women.

There are also ongoing challenges to pushing beyond conventional wisdom or commonly accepted assumptions behind the habitual use of any tool, including wargaming. “Sometimes in



Members of the Women’s Wargaming Network gather at an IDA-hosted event in July 2021 that provided an opportunity for in-person gaming during COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.

national security circles, they focus on the same courses of action," Yuna says. "There is always room for ways of trying to get more ideas into that space."

Like many fields in the national security sector, wargaming attracts more men than women. Less than one-fifth of senior officials at the Defense Department are women. According to 2014-2019 data from "The Great Wargaming Survey," an annual survey by the magazine Wargames, Soldiers & Strategy, less than 2% on average of respondents reported they were female. A video by Little Wars TV entitled "Why Don't More Women Play Wargames?" explores why women's participation is so low.

One reason women are typically underrepresented in wargaming is that they may not be introduced to gaming in the first place. Experience in the military and in hobby wargaming are indicators that a person may be more likely to participate in professional wargaming, but women are underrepresented in both these populations. Women are often overlooked or automatically excluded from wargame teams even when they have comparable levels of experience as men. When women seek out opportunities in professional wargaming, they can be given secondary roles such as note-taking or data collection rather than roles directly related to wargame design and adjudication.

Further, as Yuna found through her own experience, established participants in online hobby-gaming communities can be hostile to women who try to join. While professional wargamers have always encouraged Yuna's participation, she experienced sexual harassment and bullying from male gamers in online hobby-gaming communities. Yuna feels that increasing women's access to wargaming opportunities



Players at the 2021 Women's Wargaming Network event discuss rules before the game begins.

is not only fair – as everyone should have equal opportunity – but also beneficial for wargaming organizations because they can access a wider pool of talent.

Reversing the Tide

Yuna and others are committed to bringing more women into the wargaming space, and the tide is starting to turn. In 2020, Yuna and some of her fellow women wargamers founded the Women's Wargaming Network. The network aspires to help women thrive in the community by developing skills and building connections with other professional wargamers.

Although the Women's Wargaming Network is still young, it is expanding and stabilizing. It is actively moving towards nonprofit status. Being a nonprofit would allow the WWN to formally give leadership positions to women and to enter into formal agreements with other organizations and government entities.

Pandemic-Induced Complications

The COVID-19 pandemic worsened conditions for professional wargaming by making it difficult to play and introduce games to new players. Even as the Women's Wargaming Network was born because of the pandemic, the ongoing pandemic makes it difficult for events to truly get off the ground.

While the prolonged experiment of social distancing and virtual interactions pushed many in the professional wargaming crowd to adopt new online tools and forms of outreach, the classified nature of many professional games limits the transition of many of these virtual tools to professional wargaming. The pandemic also greatly limited one of the core ways that the professional wargaming crowd welcomes newcomers to the field: by meeting and playing games with one another.

Making Gaming Matter Again

The Defense Department has been actively trying to reinvigorate interest in wargaming, and Yuna sees herself and many others as part of that effort. In early 2021, she and then-IDA colleague Garrett Heath co-wrote [a commentary](#) for War on the Rocks, which posed questions about the quality of defense wargaming and the state of the defense wargaming workforce. Such questions

need to be answered to know if the Defense Department's efforts will be enough to bolster interest in wargaming and fortify workforce skills and capabilities.

IDA is also looking to expand its research into and use of wargaming within its organization. During her time at IDA, Yuna has run a few different wargames in support of research for IDA sponsors. IDA has recently hired new researchers with backgrounds in wargaming and defense planning who will likely also work on wargaming projects. In July 2022, IDA will host the [2022 Connections Wargaming Conference](#). The annual event has been a venue for wargamers to network since 1992. IDA is excited to host its next installation, which is being held in IDA's new [Potomac Yard facility](#). Yuna hopes that events like these will help grow the community of professional wargamers and improve wargaming as a tool to help the Department of Defense address issues and challenges.