

THE BETTER URBAN WARGAMES

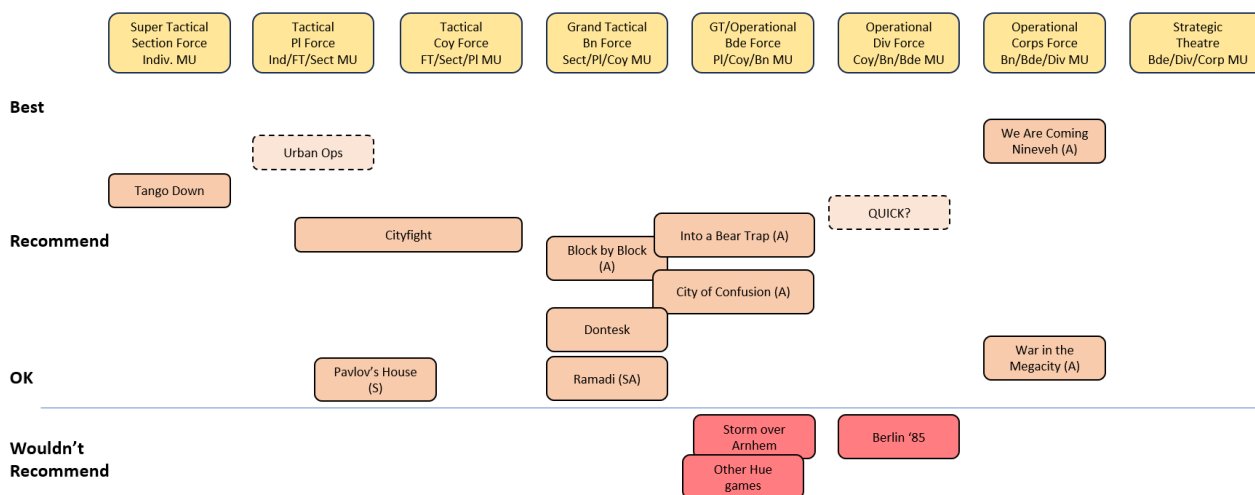
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1. Introduction

This document provides a brief guide to what I consider to be the “better” current urban wargames – principally hobby and hybrid games as that is what I mainly have access to. As has been stated by many people the “best” wargame always depends on what you want the game to achieve, who the audience is, and a whole bunch of other constraints which might be imposed. So please bear that in mind when I talk below about games being “good” or even “best”, and hence why I’ve entitled the document as being about “better” games.

The diagram below gives a quick overview of my current mapping. Note that this mapping is currently based purely on gut feel and playing the games a small number of times, so may change as I can apply a more rigorous assessment as my PhD evolves, and as I get to play some of the games more (or even at all!). It’s default is also in assessing games for an Education role, e.g, in PME, rather than for entertainment/edutainment or even for analysis/training.



Dashed outline = evaluation from reviews not plays. S = Solitaire. A= Asymmetric. Recommendations are about urban treatment.

I’ve also taken the opportunity to flag some games (particularly well know games) which I don’t think are of much use for serious education work.

Note that my wiki has the game reviews for each of the urban wargames I’ve played, both those listed here and ones which didn’t make the cut.

1.1. Super Tactical – Section Force, Individual Soldier Manoeuvre Unit (MU)

I haven’t played many games at this level as it’s not my main focus, but *Tango Down* (Porter, 2019; Tiny Battle Publishing) seemed to be a very good skirmish level game set around various in-building missions. Possibly a bit more special forces than simple room clearance, but deal with several issues (such as snap shots around corners) which other rules leave hanging.



This is also a popular area for miniatures rules, and in a pre-PhD exercise I did some years ago of trying out every skirmish rules set I could find the ones that came out tops were *Danger Close* (XX, 20XX; Empress Miniatures) and *Albedo Combat Patrol 64* (Surdu, 2019; Sally 4th Games).

1.2. Tactical – Platoon Force, Individual/Squad/Section MU and Company Force, Squad/Section/Platoon MU

At the tactical level (especially Platoon) *Urban Operations* (de Peyret, 2017; NUTS! Publishing) always gets good reviews, and was developed by an officer from the French urban training school – so ought to be good. The 2nd Edition was being mooted when I started my PhD, but is currently slated for release late in 2025, so I'll be interested to see what it's like. I've read the rules, and the downside is that it might be a bit complex for some/many use cases.

The core ideas in *Cityfight* (Balkoski and Donaldson, 1979; SPI) are good, but the rules are way too complex for most players. My *Cityfight 2024* rules don't cover all the features of the original (e.g. vehicles), but more than enough I think to give you a good sense of the games key feature of double-blind using two separate maps and a "battleships" style detection mechanism.

Pavlov's House (Thompson, 2018; Dan Verssen Games) probably sits at this level, but is a bit of a curio, as it takes you deep into the experience of one section/platoon trying to hold the eponymous house during the Battle of Stalingrad. Great for immersion and theme, but not really any use for tactical education.

And that's it. There are loads of rural games working at this level, but very in urban which seem any good. *Take That Street* from Fight Club will sit here once done, and may be the game that is needed, but it seems stuck in perpetual development and has been through quite a few drastic changes.

1.3. Grand Tactical – Battalion Force, Section/Platoon/Company MU; and Brigade Force, Platoon/Company/Battalion MU

At the Battalion level I think I'd rate *Block by Block – The Battle of Hue* (Edwards, 2020; Modern Warfare Magazine) as one of the better ones, although being about Hue it is a fairly asymmetric fight. Far more vanilla is *Donetsk – Battle for the Airport* (Kirk, 2017; Flying Pig Games), set during the 2014 conflict. It does have a nice treatment for things like building storeys, but its not a very dense map. The *Take That Street* team used it as the basis for one of their original versions of their game. *The Battle for Ramadi* (Ward, 2018; Tiny Battle Publishing) is quite good for a relatively simple urban game set around the 2006 battle, but is very attritive and something of a slugfest.

At Brigade level *Into a Bear Trap* (Moore & Rohrbaugh, 2004; Against All Odds) has always had good reviews and was one of the games flagged by Dstl. It is fairly asymmetric though, and I wasn't 100% convinced by it, certainly for modern European conflict. *City of Confusion* (Rohrbaugh, 2012; High Flying Dice Games) is very much asymmetric but I think one of the best games overall for the size and scope of the wargame, bringing in lots of different issues but in a relatively simple rule set, and with some innovative mechanics. Most of the other Hue games set at the same, whole city, level I wouldn't rate at all.

One well-known game which is at this level is *Storm Over Arnhem* (Allen, 1976; Avalon Hill). It also established the whole "Storm over..." set of "area impulse" mechanics which has been used on many games since. Area impulse itself is very sound, and being area based is, I think, particularly well suited to urban games, but whilst the *Storm over Arnhem* map is one of the town of Arnhem, and shows all the streets and houses it basically plays as a rural game, so I can't really recommend it for urban study – but a lot of fun if you want to learn something about Arnhem.

Again a paucity of really good games which would suite modern conflicts at this level.



1.4. Operational – Division Force, Company/Battalion/Brigade MU; Corps Force, Battalion/Brigade/Division MU; and Theatre – Army Force, Brigade/Division/Corps MU

Brain Trains *QUICK (Quick Urban Integrated Combat Kreigsspiel)* (Train, 2022; Self-Published) is probably the go-to game here, but version 1 was very abstract. Version 2 does have a “proper” map, but a lot of the mechanics are still quite abstract. I haven’t yet played v2 so will reserve my judgment, but I’ve heard good things from others who have played it.

Berlin’85 (Dunnigan & Ritchie, 1985: SPI) is unfortunately one to miss here. It has a lovely, very dense and cluttered, map of the whole of Berlin, but actually seems quite light on many urban elements, and, typical of a hex game, a lot comes down to how you arrange counters on the hex grid rather than from the influence of the underlying terrain. There is a “re-imagining” by Compass Games called *Enemy at the Gates*, but I haven’t played it yet (and it’s very expensive!).

Above Division the undoubted go-to game is *We Are Coming Nineveh* (Le Ménahèze et al, 2023; NUTS! Publishing), on the 2017 fight against Daesh for Mosul. Very slick game, very good mechanics. There are some undoubted similarities with my *City & CEMA* game which I developed before I played, or really even saw, *We Are Coming Nineveh*, but given the people involved in that game (Brian Train, Sebastian Bae) I like to think it was a case of parallel evolution and us all seeing the logical way to represent many urban issues (areas, blocks, collateral tracks, capability cards etc).

One game which gets *null pointe* is *War in the Megacity* (Miranda, 2018; One Small Step/CounterFact). I think it has the potential to be a really nice game, if a bit biased towards entertainment rather than education, but as published it is almost unplayable due to errors and lack of clarity – hence why I wanted to do my own version as *Streets & Shadows*.

And again, that’s all there is that I’ve played so far and would rate.

1.5. Strategic – Political-Military

And there’s nothing at this level either!

2. The Sample Set – What Am I Missing, If Anything?

Given how few games I’ve included here you might think that there must be loads out there, but I just haven’t played them. Admittedly out of the 285 games on my database I’ve only played 38 (13%) of them, but those 38 have been driven by what I’ve been told are good, what look good, and what has appeared on the “recommended games” lists produced by Dstl and 40IDs Urban Warfare Planners Course. So whilst there may be a few more good ones on the database that I haven’t played I don’t think it will be many. The main issue is that I am looking primarily for games which can be used to represent modern (i.e. 2020s, not even 1980s, let alone 1945) urban combat, within the context of peer vs peer Large Scale Combat Operations, and that just isn’t something of interest to many hobby players, and as a result to many hobby publishers.