



Introduction

Where did wargames come from? What purposes did they serve? Who participated in them, why, and what for? What forms did they take? What factors drove their development, and to what extent did they reflect changes in the art of war itself? What did they simulate, what didn't they simulate, how, and why? What do they reveal about the conduct of war at the times, and in the places, where they were played? How useful are they in training for war and preparing for it? Why are some so much more popular than others, how do men and women compare in this respect, and what can the way the sexes relate to wargames teach us about the relationship between them? Finally, what does all this tell us about real war, fake or make-believe war, and the human condition in general? These are the sorts of questions the present volume will try to answer. Before it can do so, however, it is first of all necessary to say a word about what wargames are, where they stand in relation to other kinds of games on the one hand and to "real" war on the other, what has been written on them, what may be learnt from them, and where all this may lead.

What is a wargame?

Games, including wargames which form the subject of this book, are all around us. Even the most superficial observation will soon conclude that not only humans but many kinds of animals engage in games, i.e. play. The great Dutch historian Johan Huizinga has argued, to my mind with very good reason, that not economic needs (as Karl Marx thought) but play and games represent the real source from which all human culture, everything beautiful, true and good, springs.¹ In his view, a game is an activity characterized above all by the fact that it creates its own little world. To this end it is carefully and often ceremoniously separated from "real life," standing to the latter as the terrarium or tableau in a glass paperweight does to the room in which it is positioned. Within the space where the game is held, and for as long as it lasts, cause and effect are abolished.

¹ J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, Boston, MA: Beacon, 1950 [1938].

The nature of the activity does not matter much. Provided it is done for its own sake, for “fun,” as people say, almost anything may be turned into a game.

Another way of putting the same idea would be to say that men (in all that concerns wargames women are a separate species, and will be considered toward the end of this volume) and animals (as far as we can judge) engage in play primarily because doing so provides them with some kind of thrill. A thrill, in turn, results when we are engaged on, or have accomplished, something that is not too easy. Even if that something is, “realistically” speaking, of no value whatsoever, such as driving a ball over a net or into a goal; and even if it does not involve any activity but simply confronting danger, real or simulated, in a passive way, like people riding a roller coaster. Again it is apparent that, depending on personality, age, experience, and the culture of which the individual forms a part, almost any activity that is neither too easy nor impossibly hard – in which case it will lead to frustration or despair – can produce a thrill. To the extent that it does, some people will turn it into a game and enjoy it as such.

The variety of games found in nature and among humans is almost infinite and there is no point in trying to list them here. They range from the simplest to the most complex, from the unstructured to the highly structured, and from those that require little more than imagination and creativity to those that demand equipment worth hundreds of millions of dollars. One very good way to classify games is to distinguish between those that involve chance, those that require physical skill and/or force, and those that involve strategy. Some anthropologists have tried to link each type to a certain kind of society, but these attempts are not very convincing and need not preoccupy us here.² Concerning games of chance, presumably no explanation is needed. Think of a game of dice, think of roulette. Such games do not require either physical or intellectual resources. Usually they are considered childish, unless, that is, they are played for high stakes, in which case they turn into tests of character. Games of physical skill or force are just what the name implies. However, the more strenuous among them also test such emotional qualities as determination (“grit”), endurance, and the ability to cope with pain. This fact goes far to explain why, from the ancient Olympics on, they have often drawn crowds of spectators and generated tremendous excitement.

This brings us to the third kind, i.e. games of strategy. According to Clausewitz’s classical definition, strategy is the art of using battles, which themselves are the province of tactics, in order to achieve the objectives of a campaign.³ Nowadays it is often used to describe a carefully planned series of steps needed to achieve an objective. Here I shall employ it in a different sense

² J.M. Roberts *et al.*, “Games in Culture,” *American Anthropologist*, 61, 4, August 1959, pp. 597–605.

³ C. von Clausewitz, *On War*, Princeton University Press, 1976, p. 127.

suggested by Sun Tzu, Thomas Schelling, and Edward Luttwak:⁴ namely, the art of seeking to achieve your objectives in the face of an opponent who thinks and acts. That opponent is allowed not just to try to achieve *his* objectives but to actively prevent you from doing the same – by killing you, if appropriate and necessary. Strategy, in other words, does not just mean planning one’s own moves, as in a bicycle race or a swimming contest. It is that, of course; but it is also, and above all, a question of trying to detect, predict, interfere with, and obstruct those of the opponent. Briefly, it consists of the *interplay* between the two sides. Whether that interplay takes place on a board, or in a court, or on a computer screen, or between two squads, or between two army groups, is immaterial. So are the kinds of weapons used and the state of military technology in general.

In the present context, the most important of the three elements is strategy. No exercise that does not involve the kind of interplay just mentioned can be considered a wargame. This is true even if it is used, as a great many are, by the military in order to prepare men for war. For example, attacking a stake with a sword, as was the practice of Roman legionaries and gladiators; or riding a galloping horse and using a lance to hit an object suspended on a rotating pole, as medieval knights, the Mongols and the Mamluks all used to do; or having thousands of troops pretend to “storm” a beach. Many such exercises require a very high degree of skill and take years to master. However, in them the stake, or the object, or the beach, cannot hit back. Unlike flesh and blood humans and, nowadays, some kinds of computer programs, they have neither intentions that must be discovered nor capabilities which they can bring to bear. Hence such exercises will be mentioned in this volume only for purposes of comparison. Also excluded is the kind of exercise where an individual or team plays not against an opponent similar to themselves but against some sort of “control” which determines the course of the game but cannot be influenced in return. Such games may have their uses; however, they involve not strategy but a puppet-master and his puppet.

Since the number of possible combinations is limited, the strategy required in one-on-one engagements is relatively straightforward. Conversely, the more numerous the participants and the more heterogeneous they are – in other words, the more differentiated their capabilities and the larger the number of possible ways of combining those capabilities – the harder the problem of developing a strategy and applying it against the opponent becomes. The substitution of complex terrain for a simple arena or court adds to the difficulties. That is even more the case when each participant must make his moves while only having at his disposal limited information about his own forces,

⁴ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, Fairfield, IA: World Library, 2006; T. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966; E. Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1987.

those of the opponent, and the environment in which the game takes place. As Napoleon is supposed to have said, under such conditions the conduct of strategy requires intellectual resources not inferior to those which a Newton or an Euler might command.⁵ Furthermore, nothing prevents two or more of the above-listed elements from being joined in a single game. To the contrary: often the way this is done is just what distinguishes one kind of game from another.

How are games and war related?

In the words, of Jonathan Swift, war is “that mad game the world loves to play.”⁶ As expressions such as “the great game” confirm, the two are linked in so many ways that separating them is sometimes impossible. Specifically, in war skill/force, chance, and the two-sided activity known as strategy mix. Conversely, war is separated from games by two principal factors. First, whereas war only makes sense to the extent that it is the continuation of politics, the very existence of games depends on that *not* being the case. Games, in other words, even those that incorporate political factors, possess a certain kind of autonomy that war does not have and cannot have. Second, games differ from war in that they are subject to certain highly artificial limits: such as those that govern the location in which they may be held, the way in which they may be played, the equipment that may be used, and, above all, the time they may last and/or the conditions under which they must come to an end. Think of the peculiar size and shape of a basketball court with its hoops; or of the twice forty-five minutes a game of soccer lasts; or of the rules that define just what counts as victory in tennis, bridge, or chess.

Fundamentally, the restrictions in question can take two forms. The first consists of pretense, i.e. some way of signaling that the encounter is “unreal.” Not by accident does the Latin word for game, *ludus*, have everything to do with “illusion.” The second is a set of formal, often written, rules. Generally the more developed and specific the rules are, the less the need for pretense, and the other way around. The rules’ function, in other words, is precisely to eliminate the need for pretense; within the framework that they create, anything goes. For example, a medieval knight who had his servants strew the tourneying field with caltrops could expect to be disqualified by the umpires. However, he did not have to worry that he would be punished for hitting too hard.

A wargame might be defined as a game of strategy which, while clearly separated from “real” warfare by one or more of the above means, nevertheless simulates some key aspects of the latter: including, quite often, the death and/or

⁵ Quoted in Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 112.

⁶ Quoted in W. Hardcastle Brown, *Odd Derivations of Words, Phrases, Slang, Synonyms*, General Books, 2010, p. 312.

injury and capture that results from warfare's quintessential element, i.e. fighting. The more aspects a game simulates, and the more accurate the simulation, the closer to real-life warfare it is. This proposition can be turned around. Just as warfare has often served as inspiration for wargames, so wargames can be, and often have been, played not just by amateurs (from the Latin *amatores*, lovers) for their own sake but by the military for training, planning, and preparation too. To the extent that they allow and force players to strategize, indeed, they are not merely the best form of training but the only available one.

However, a game capable of simulating every aspect of war would *become* war. Generally the larger the scale on which warfare is waged, and the more important the role of political factors as opposed to military ones, the greater the difficulties of simulating it. Above all, unrestricted physical violence, the very factor that forms the essence of war and sets it apart, is hard to capture in a realistic way. Most people will probably refuse to play a game that claims too many casualties. Such a game is also very likely to be condemned and banned by the authorities, as many in fact were. Another possibility is that the game, by escalating out of hand, will develop into the real thing. That was just what happened in 1273 when an Anglo-French tournament turned into the so-called "Little Battle of Châlons" after King Edward I of England, who was among the participants, claimed that one of his opponents had committed a foul.⁷

As a result, all wargames seek to limit violence in one way or another. The place where it takes place may be controlled very carefully so as to affect only the direct participants, thus making sure that escalation does not ensue; or it may be represented by purely symbolic means, as in chess and similar games; or it may be committed by, and on, figures that only exist in virtual reality, as in computer games; or the rules may ban the use of the most lethal weapons, as in some forms of tribal games and tournaments, as well as paintball, laser tag, and their like; or an element of pretense may be introduced, as in many kinds of sham fights and reenactments. Incidentally, the way various games manage violence and restrict it provides another excellent method for classifying them.

Why study wargames?

As I learnt at first hand when students at a seminar literally started jumping up and down on tables, wargames have always been enormously exciting. This fact, as well as the growing involvement on the part of government and big business, explains why the literature on them is vast. However, practically all modern workers in the field seem to have committed a fundamental error: their definition of wargames is both much too broad and much too narrow. It is too broad in that the term is applied to any kind of mock adversarial engagement without regard to whether what is simulated is war, or politics, or economics, or whatever. It is too

⁷ See M. Keene, *Chivalry*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984, p. 87.

narrow in that they focus on the kind of games played by opposing individuals or teams in some kind of room, with the aid of maps and/or boards or, beginning in the 1960s, either on the screens of computers or inside them.⁸

Furthermore, the obligatory reference to chess and its alleged failure to present an adequate portrait of war apart, existing studies of wargames focus on the period since the elder Baron von Reisswitz invented modern wargaming exactly two centuries ago. That, of course, reflects on their understanding both of wargames and of war itself. Most leave out the games played by many tribal societies around the world, some of which are all but indistinguishable from “real” war; single combat and combats of champions from the Old Testament and the *Iliad* onwards; the Roman gladiatorial fights, which were probably the most popular, and certainly the most deadly, wargames of all time; as well as trials by combat, tournaments and duels, to mention but a few. Nor is it simply a question of leaving out most of history. Many modern wargames, be they of the kind “fought” by the American military at the National Training Center, or those that paintball and laser tag enthusiasts practice in their spare time, or those which reenact historical battles, are also given the cold shoulder. Even that, however, is but one side of the problem. Just as modern writers on wargames habitually ignore most of history, so anthropologists, ancient historians, and medievalists have stubbornly refused to look beyond their own specialties. As a result, their work has made little or no contribution to the field. Needless to say, truncating the subject in such a way imposes serious restrictions on what can be learnt from it.

It is in order to avoid repeating this error that the present volume has taken the historical approach in an attempt to trace the games’ development from its origins to the present day. Here it may be worth mentioning that this approach is in many ways the exact opposite of the one that “game theorists” use. They have set themselves the task of reducing real events to games and games to a series of precise mathematical formulae; I, to the contrary, wanted to reintegrate wargames, a subject that is too often neglected or looked down upon, with human culture as a whole. Their objective was reductionist; mine, inclusivist. As we shall see, their method is in danger of producing results that are too abstract to be of use in the real world; mine, I hope, will prove fruitful and interesting to those who take the trouble to follow my work to the end.

⁸ Just a few of the more important works that have taken this approach include: T. B. Allen, *War Games*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987; J. F. Dunnigan, *Wargames Handbook*, 3rd edn, iUniverse, 2000; P. Perla, *The Art of Wargaming*, Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1990; T. C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960; M. Shubik, *Games for Society, Business, and War*, Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1975; and A. Wilson, *The Bomb and the Computer*, London: Crescent, 1968. To my knowledge, the only volume that attempts to cover earlier periods as well is T. J. Cornell and T. B. Allen, eds., *War and Games*, Woodbridge: Boydell, 2002.

The outline of the volume is as follows. Chapter 1, “On animals and men,” opens with a brief look at hunting as well as the “wargames” animals play. Following a discussion of unarmed combat sports and contact sports, it proceeds through the various kinds of sham fights held by many tribal societies toward combats of champions and single combats. Chapter 2, “Games and gladiators,” is devoted to what were easily the most deadly wargames in the whole of history. Here the objective is to find the cultural factors that made them possible, what aspects of war they simulated, what aspects they did not simulate, why they were as popular as they were, and why they were finally brought to an end. Chapter 3, “Trials by combat, tournaments, and duels,” explores certain types of wargames which for centuries used to form an important part of Western culture but are now defunct. As was the case with Rome, not the least interesting question is *why* they are defunct, and what, if anything, has taken their place.

Moving closer to the present, Chapter 4, “Battles, campaigns, wars, and politics,” focuses on various types of wargames that, resting on much older foundations, became very prominent in the nineteenth century when both amateurs and professional soldiers developed them and played them. Since the latter often used the games for training, simulation, and planning, this is also the place to take a look at their possibilities and limitations in these respects. Chapter 5, “From bloody games to bloodless wars,” deals with the kind of wargames that, instead of using floors, boards, or tables, are played by real people on real terrain. Chapter 6, “Enter the computer,” explains how those machines have transformed the field in which we are interested and how they are causing real reality and virtual reality to merge. Chapter 7, “The females of the species,” asks some questions about the way 50 percent of humanity relate, or do not relate, to wargames; here the goal is to use such games as a prism for examining what, to me, looks like some fundamental differences between the sexes. Finally, Chapter 8, “The mirrors and the mirrored,” represents our conclusions.

Going beyond the obvious questions – why wargames are/were held and how, how they relate/d to war, and how useful they are/were in helping train for it, simulate it, and prepare for it – what can a study of wargames teach us? To answer, consider an old story by Ephraim Kishon (1924–2005), a Hungarian-born Israeli humorist whose books, translated into German and other languages, sold in the tens of millions. A man is sitting on a park bench. After a while he is joined by an older man who takes out a photograph of a child and shows it to his companion. “My grandson,” he says. Once the stranger has expressed his admiration, the grandfather calls one of the children playing on the grass and presents him. “Why did you not call your grandson in the first place?” the younger man asks. “Because,” the proud grandfather answers, “recently the child has not been eating very well. The picture looks more like him than he does!”

Though the story is deliberately silly, the point the grandfather is trying to make is anything but. “Reality,” after all, is an elusive, ever-shifting, thing. It exists, if at all, only for a moment, and that moment itself may very well be entirely untypical. That is why some representations of it can capture its essence better than reality itself can. Studied both as they were held at certain times and places and across time, wargames provide a singularly useful tool for understanding the nature of war and the way various societies related to it. Like Kishon’s photograph, they can present us with war in its purest form, so to speak. At the same time, the way people related to them can tell us something both about changing social attitudes and about human nature in general.

War, to quote one modern scholar summing up what many have said before him, “offers the individual an escape from debilitating tedium and existential boredom, a glorious alternative to the banality of everyday life and work. It appeals to his need for excitement, adventure, stimulation, sensation, spectacle, and his craving for power, grandeur and self esteem.”⁹ Whether that applies to real-life war may be, and often has been, disputed. But when it comes to wargames there can be no doubt concerning its truth. After all, one of their main functions is precisely to provide the thrill at little or no cost to participants, spectators, or both; their very existence proves how successful they are in doing just that. If only for this reason, it is important that they be studied and understood.

⁹ J. M. G. van der Dennen, *The Origin of War*, PhD dissertation submitted to the University of Groningen, 2000, vol. I, 245.

On animals and men

Hunting, combat sports, and contact sports

To begin at the beginning, both humans and many species of animals hunt. In so far as hunting is a question of using violence to catch, overcome, and kill a living creature, unquestionably it has certain things in common with warfare. Unless the animals are driven to be killed, physical effort and/or skill play an important role. So does chance in the form of a sudden gust of wind that may carry the hunter's scent, or, in the days of edged weapons, deflect his arrow from its intended target. Hunting also involves strategy, although it differs from the kind commonly used in war. Not many animals will stand and fight the hunter just as he fights them, and almost none will do so unless it is cornered first. Even if it is, normally precautions are taken to ensure that the killing is one-sided. That is why, in English, hunting is also known as the "chase," from the French *chasse*, "pursuit." Semantically it is closely associated with its opposite, to flee; the same is true of its German and Dutch equivalents, *Jagd* and *jacht*.

Other similarities between hunting and war, specifically including the willingness to shed blood and the outdoor life that both require, do not have to be explained in any great detail. Plato at one point claimed that war was simply a different form of hunting,¹ which was not meant exactly as a compliment to soldiers. Xenophon and Machiavelli, both of whom had commanded men in war, saw things in a different light. To them it was a useful form of military training.² Pigsticking and other forms of big-game hunting continued to be advertised as such down to the last years of the nineteenth century.³ Warriors of

¹ Plato, *Laws*, London: Heinemann, Loeb Classical Library (LCL), 1926, 823b; also Isocrates, *Plataicus*, LCL, 1945, 163.

² Xenophon, *On Hunting*, R. D. Doty, ed., Lampeter: Mellen, 2001, 2.1, 12.1. See, for similar views, Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, 12.10–1; Plato, *Republic*, LCL, 1919, 549A; Plato, *Laws*, 763b; Plato, *Sophist*, LCL, 1921, 219d–e, 222c; N. Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, bn Publishing, 2005 [1517], p. 511.

³ See on this J. A. Mangan and C. McKenzie, "Pig-Sticking is the Greatest Fun': Martial Conditioning on the Hunting Fields of Empire," in J. A. Mangan, ed., *Militarism, Sport, Europe: War without Weapons*, London: Cass, 2003, pp. 97–119.

all periods have often hunted during their leisure hours. For example, the Roman Emperor Hadrian is said to have incurred a scar when hunting, causing him to grow a beard and ending a centuries-old tradition when Romans had shaved. During the Middle Ages, and indeed for centuries after they had ended, hunting was the warrior's sport par excellence; before he was killed at the ripe old age of twenty-six, World War I flying ace Manfred von Richthofen spent his leave hunting.⁴ One anthropologist, investigating the Avatip of New Guinea, has suggested that they see warfare as a superior form of hunting in which the prey is human beings.⁵

Certainly among humans, and probably among some animal species such as chimpanzees, hunting is often practiced not simply for nutrition but for fun as well. Cats will even try to catch images floating on a screen; at least one dog I knew used to chase spots of light thrown on the floor by a flashlight. Whether these and other animals behave as they do because of some "hunting instinct," or because the activity generates a thrill, it is, of course, impossible to say. Possibly both motives are involved, and possibly motives differ not only from one animal to another but also from one moment to another; after all, human behavior in these matters is not always consistent either.

Some evolutionary biologists believe that hunting, passed to us by our primate-like ancestors, is the oldest sport of all.⁶ In this context it is worth pointing out that, several centuries before the word "sport" came to acquire its present meaning of serious physical exercise, it was used in the sense of "joke," "amusement," or "game." Be that as it may, hunting, whether carried out by animals or by humans, differs from war in that it is an interspecies activity and not an intraspecies one. One sometimes comes across "manhunts," as well as attempts to institute games in which some people are tasked with running away and others with tracking them and hunting them down. However, the former are not games, whereas most of the latter seem to fizzle out almost as soon as they are started. Both involve a chase, not strategy. Hence hunting, though useful for purposes of comparison, will not be further considered in these pages.

As is the case with human games, those played by animals may be divided into different kinds. In many of them there is no sentient opponent capable of putting up resistance, and therefore no strategy as defined in the introduction to the present volume. For example, ravens and otters sometimes engage in sliding games. Squirrels seem to like to manipulate pine cones, dogs to chase objects, shake them, and tug at them. My late poodle, Poonch, even developed a whole

⁴ See J. Castan, *Der Rote Baron: Die ganze Geschichte des Manfred von Richthofen*, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2007, *passim*.

⁵ S. Harrison, "The Symbolic Construction of Aggression and War in a Sepik River Society," *Man*, 24, 1989, p. 586.

⁶ See D. M. Carroll, *An Interdisciplinary Study of Sport as a Symbolic Hunt*, Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 2000, especially pp. 29–69.