

Wargaming Literature in Popular Culture

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The depiction of wargames in popular culture is surprisingly uneven. In *Third Person: Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives*, Matthew Kirschenbaum identifies this tension by using two conflicting arguments to prefigure his chapter on wargame narration (Kirschenbaum 2009, 357-72). The first, by Greg Costikyan, asserts that “[t]here is no story in chess, bridge, *Monopoly*, or *Afrika Korps*” (Costikyan 2007, 5). This statement is easily refuted by several authors in the same book, including Bruno Faidutti, who counters that “you can easily retell a game of chess or Go with the same tension and suspense of a whodunit” (Faidutti 2007, 95). There seem to be two issues at stake here. The first is that the act of playing a game, compared to the immediate and retrospective recreation of the game as an event, are two different experiences, and not necessarily ones that should or can be placed together. The second is the more familiar argument that narrative in games is very different from, say, that of a film, book or television series, thus negating some of the estrangement created by the first. Both quotes come from *Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media*, a collection of essays that argue specifically for the importance of role-play and story within games and suggest that these two elements are important if not vital elements of gaming.

This chapter aims to unpack some of these ideas in relation to the representation of wargames in literature and popular culture. Why are wargames used so pervasively as tropes in popular culture, yet why are these depictions so limited? Furthermore, many of the texts used here suggest that the difference between a wargame and a tale of a wargame is not always clear-cut. This chapter therefore examines some of these examples but also asks if it is possible to move beyond these constructions.

What's in a (War)Game?

I have deliberately taken an expansive view of the term “wargame” for several reasons. Literature (and other media) use rather generalized and nebulous criteria to define this term, criteria that shift from text to text. This chapter examines these texts critically rather than attempting to categorise them within a framework of “better” and “best” representations of wargames and wargaming—an entirely reductive activity that does not allow for effective critique. The mode and semiotic meaning of “wargame” is constructed according to need by these texts, and this moves beyond literary depictions alone, as many of the different perspectives elsewhere in this collection clearly demonstrate. It is not therefore, a productive activity to follow this avenue; rather we must examine how literature and popular media use the term, and what subsequent meanings these texts produce.

As Kirschenbaum argues, board wargames have a lot to teach about how narrative is created in games and “help us to understand the role of process and procedure in stories and games” (Kirschenbaum 2009, 369). In addition, they have a rich history of their own as reportage, literary texts and fan-produced artifacts. Literary and popular texts also refer to wargaming as a common trope, including using them as a central theme, as an adage or plot device, as extended or short metaphor, or simply as a throwaway reference. This chapter will unpack some of these ideas and argue that wargaming literature occupies a number of different positions within popular media. Thus the two ideas—of seeing literary elements in wargames through playing them as a narrative and consuming their narratives retrospectively—are able to live cohesively together.

The Evolution of Wargame Narratives

Although gaming continues to become a more developed leisure activity and engages more people in both physical and virtual contexts, this has translated slowly into popular culture representation, which often still presents gaming—perhaps because of feelings of threat or unease—as problematic and artistically stunted. The social stigma of playing games means that they are referred to vaguely within other texts, lest authors be seen to have too much of a close relationship to them, or to alienate readers with details they might not know. Direct references to games are often seen as a marker of geek culture, rather than as signifiers in their own right; for example, the discussion of *Settlers of Catan* in Benedict Jacka's novel *Chosen* demonstrates the unity and domestication of a group of characters who were antagonistic in the previous book in the series—but *Chosen* is clearly aimed at a very specific urban fantasy niche.

This chapter examines the popular and literary representations of wargaming, but also questions what this literariness means and how it manifests in popular culture, as allegory, metaphor and subject. Rather than listing the repetition of wargaming tropes in popular culture, I discuss some of the motivations for this. Wargames are often used as signifiers to suggest fairly broad tropes: the villain who plays chess is a clever tactician who will almost certainly be caught out in the end by the hero; the soldier who takes part in a team game before the war begins is doomed from the moment he picks up his cricket bat (see also Clover 1992 for the “final girl”).

Ideas of sportsmanship, playing by the rules and cheating become dominant thematic elements. Here, a more vague idea of what play entails is used to suggest that warfare in general is not a “fair” activity, engaging with a more emotive ethos of war and conflict that usually positions it as wrong. These ideals are confused by the contradictory ideas that war is definitely not a game but that, like games, warfare is an ultimately futile, immature activity. Elsewhere, physical wargames such as LARPs, re-enactments or Airsoft often connote deviance and

criminality. This chapter unpacks some of these ideas, asking whether popular culture has any inclination to portray wargaming and its participants in a more nuanced light.

I then examine how games can be used to suggest or discuss warfare in literature and other popular culture. First, I examine how chess is used as a quick-and-dirty signifier to connect metaphors of warfare and games. Chess provides a familiar example for the reader, although surprisingly it is also rather semiotically bland, rarely moving beyond this binary connection or making in-depth situational arguments. Despite this, wargame-as-chess metaphors have become important cultural signs.

Next I discuss the rather fleeting examples of wargames in literary texts that have been used to discuss social, political and cultural constructions. (Although one might expect wargames to be a pervasive feature of science fiction texts in particular, they are rarely the focus.) Notable examples occur through the creation of fictitious war/sociopolitical games such as in the HBO series *Game of Thrones* (based on George R. R. Martin's long-haul fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire*), the worldsphere of Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* and the Global Thermonuclear War "game" in the 1983 film *WarGames*.

Finally, the last two examples in this chapter show how depictions of wargames can move beyond simplistic representations. Here, games are used to reflect the adversarial nature of political machinations, but develop in novel ways. In Roberto Bolaño's *Third Reich*, the Avalon Hill game *Rise and Decline of the Third Reich* takes center stage as the author uses protagonist Udo Berger to explore the potentialities of a German playing the Third Reich in a World War II wargame, unpacking ideas of nationalism, sanity and obsession. In Iain M. Banks' *The Player of Games*, the game of Azad not only underscores the central argument of the book, but is narratively a game so powerful that it determines who rises to power and shapes an entire

empire. In these novels the ideas of wargaming and “war as a game” are used more subtly, and perhaps point to more sophisticated means of representing wargames in future media.

Wargames as Literature: Modes of Narrative

But first let it be noted in passing that there were prehistoric “Little Wars.” This is no new thing, no crude novelty, but a thing tested by time, ancient and ripe in its essentials for all its perennial freshness—like Spring.

—H. G. Wells, *Little Wars*

There is a long-standing tradition of wargames told through the medium of storytelling. The Brontë sisters were inspired by a box of toy soldiers, and created the Angria stories and the Gondal Saga from subsequent games with them. Anne and Emily Brontë continued to work on the Gondal Saga throughout their lives and Emily produced over seventy Gondal poems. Poems like “The Prisoner” tell specific moments from the Saga, but often hint at far more developed backstories:

The captive raised her hand and pressed it to her brow:

"I have been struck," she said, "and I am suffering now;

Yet these are little worth, your bolts and irons strong;

And were they forged in steel they could not hold me long." (Emily Brontë, 1845)

Although Charlotte Brontë destroyed a great deal of the work after their deaths, what does remain suggests a richly developed world subject to war, political intrigue and overthrow. One hundred and fifty years later, the first *Dragonlance* series (1984-1985) by Margaret Hickman and Tracey Weis, and Tom Clancy's books *The Hunt for Red October* (1984) and *Red*

Storm Rising (1986) mimic this structure by retelling, respectively, an *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* campaign and aspects of the games *Harpoon* and *Convoy* (see LaGrone 2013).

The *AD&D* games were played by the authors and their friends from TSR in the early 1980s; the *Dragonlance* books were released consecutively with several *AD&D* modules of the same name and went on to become a successful franchise. “Dungeon crawl” novels are still popular, and echoes of these can be seen in many fantasy series including Jim Butcher’s Harry Dresden books, in which the characters clearly become stronger as they progress through the novels, and even more directly in Jen Williams’ *The Copper Promise*, in which the main characters clearly mimic an adventuring party moving through various encounters and ultimately fight an epic battle against an invading horde of dragon people: “[E]ven the trio of central characters bear the hallmarks of a tabletop fantasy RPG: a fighter/mage (Lord Frith), a paladin (Sir Sebastian) and a thief (Wydrin, aka “the Copper Cat”) (Webb 2014).

This first aspect of wargaming literature demonstrates how objects or game systems can be used to create stories, echoing Faidutti’s statement about wargames being a site of suspenseful re-enactment. War and combat underpin the narrative throughout: the forces of darkness threatening to overwhelm Krynn, a war against faerie and humanity, an invading army. However, how do players reach this point? For the Brontës, toy soldiers led to an obvious act of *paidia*, subsequently recreated through poetry and writing. Hickman and Weis needed a more regimented pre-existing structure, the *AD&D* rules, in order to give their war story voice; around this evolved a rich narrative in which warfare plays an integral part, both as part of the meta-narrative, and through individual moments such as skirmishes between the player characters and other adversaries.

This leads to the first of the transitional wargame literatures, the “example of play.” In tabletop role-playing games, it is common for an example of play to be written as a script, with

stage directions indicating the points at which game rules come into effect. The text is meant to demonstrate to players how they might integrate role-playing with the more technical aspects of combat. The *Call of Cthulhu* rulebook has a cringeworthy example of this, where the fictitious players mix actions interchangeably between role-play, ludic play and the representation of themselves as players or their characters:

The KEEPER continues: Shuffling into the room is a ghastly parody of a man. It stands almost eight feet tall, with deformed, twisted extremities. Its face is a mass of wrinkles. No features are visible. Its sickly brown-green skin is loose and strips of decaying flesh flap from its limbs. It drips the filthy brown water seen earlier. You three try Sanity rolls for 1/1D10 points each.

JOE: I made my roll successfully.

CATHY: I blew it, but Jake lost only 3 Sanity points.

PAULA: Uh-oh! I'm really scared! I lost 9 points (*Call of Cthulhu*, 88).

Gary Fine sees this sort of construction as integral to building a shared fantasy of the gaming world, and helps establish what he calls the *idioculture*—the culture that develops between small groups in order to help them negotiate unique social cues—of each individual group (Fine 1983; Fine 1979, 734). Fine differentiates wargames from role-playing games since they lack such developed levels of personal involvement, are more tied to history, and are not as ludically flexible. Regardless, the emphasis on the historicity of the role-playing gameworld, which often contains warfare and is frequently referred to using military terminology (e.g., “campaigns” are lengthy story arcs), shows that there is considerable, although often blurred, crossover between the two. Peterson argues persuasively that this was not a coincidence: it derives from Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson's roots in wargaming, and resulted from their use of

such terminology in *Chainmail* and early versions of the *D&D* handbooks (Peterson 2012, 203-5).

Although the example of play given above is fictitious, Kirschenbaum notes a clear stylistic similarity between write-ups of wargame battles and actual war reportage. Wargame accounts posted online often have disclaimers in front of them “lest an unwary Web surfer, Googling for grist for a term paper, mistake a wargame after-action report for an authentic account of a victorious Japanese navy or a triumphant Napoleon at Waterloo” (Kirschenbaum 2009, 357). These “after-action reports” reports are written in the style of war reportage, detailing each action, giving statistical information, tallying up casualties, losses, equipment and munitions in an abstracted manner, as if written from afar. In the case of the Gondal Saga and the *Dragonlance* books, a more detailed, personal context overlays this type of account, adding depth and compassion through characterization and individual responses. The examples of play are a sort of halfway house whereby statistical information or ludic detail is inserted to provide guidance for players, and to encourage them to develop their role-play in response to this.

H. G. Wells’ 1913 *Little Wars* is regarded as a core moment in the development of wargaming (see Jon Peterson’s chapter in this collection). It combines these modes of wargame literature in the short pamphlet that explains how to play the game. Before the rules of the game are explained by Wells, *Little Wars* contains thirteen pages of introductory text which detail how the author invented the game and honed the rules, largely through playtesting with friends. This serves as an early version of a development diary, as well as justifying the importance of wargaming to the prospective audience. After the detailed and rather discursive rules section, the book has an “example of play,” a long description over another eight pages of “The Battle of Hook's Farm.” This could perhaps be described as inventive reportage—the author supplements his commentary with subjective statements wryly analyzing each competitor's moves:

What Red did do in the actual game was to lose his head, and then at the end of four minutes' deliberation he had to move, he blundered desperately. He opened fire on Blue's exposed centre and killed eight men. (Their bodies litter the ground in figure 7, which gives a complete bird's-eye view of the battle) (Wells 1913, 27).

Little Wars uses these different techniques to engage its audience, drawing in those familiar with the author's work into the unfamiliar territory of gaming, and providing them with a number of different access points through which to appreciate the game.

The examples given here are important not because they represent defining moments in the historicity of wargaming or wargaming literature, although some do this as well, but for their varied nature and for the diversity of writing formats represented within them. The Gondal Saga is a series of imaginative retellings of paideic play, while *Little Wars* and the “example of play” in *Call of Cthulhu* are imagined descriptions of a series of ludic rules for a game. H. G. Wells deliberately takes this in three different directions: the narrative at the beginning draws in readers familiar with his writing, the rules explain the game, and the example of play balances both together. The *Dragonlance* series and *The Copper Promise* extend the reportage aspect into a more imaginative domain: they are retellings of tabletop role-playing games after the event, which narrativize the adventures of the participants in a fictional context and contain warfare as an undertone in the background. All of these texts are legitimate examples of wargaming literature, despite their differences. At the core of each example lie fundamental differences in the way that “play” and “game” are understood, and as such, they not only epitomize the multifarious issues surrounding these terms within game studies, but are a fair expression of the diversity of narrativized wargaming.

Importantly for the purposes of this chapter, each example engages with war in different ways. *Dragonlance* tells the story of a long, drawn-out campaign, in which war takes second place to the development of character. H. G. Wells uses *Little Wars* to justify his fascination with simulating battles through play, as well as presenting a series of rules to readers who he assumes are totally unfamiliar with the then non-existent genre. The example of play in *Call of Cthulhu* is also instructional, attempting to detail a short combat sequence through the eyes of a typical role-playing group. While this example might seem furthest from “wargaming,” it still carries elements of reportage, and showcases a single moment within a larger battle.

My argument here is that it is difficult to separate each formation when looking at literary accounts of wargames. These complex representations all encapsulate one or more ways of representing wargaming in literature, but they also suggest rather fuzzy edges. While tabletop games contain extensive campaigns that often lead players into war, they might not always be termed “wargames.” However, as Wells has shown, the difference between a wargame and a tale of a wargame is not always clear-cut. It is worth remembering this when thinking about texts such as Tom Clancy's *The Hunt for Red October* or Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One*.

The latter book contains core plot elements devoted to *Dungeons & Dragons*, the video game *Joust* and the film *WarGames*. *Ready Player One* is a tale of protagonist Wade's journey to find the secret at the heart of the MMORPG/virtual world the OASIS—but at the same time, the signifiers of wargaming in video, paper and filmic format throughout the book not only place Wade into a situation where he must play his way free from each scenario, but suggests a more direct war against the villainous employees of the ISP IOI; at the end of the book, Wade and his friends use giant retro-mecha to fight IOI. It is this sort of complexity, whereby wargame, wargame narrative and narratives which contain wargames overlap, that must be taken into consideration when considering the narrative potential of this subject.

“All Part of the Plan”: The Metaphor of Warfare

References to wargames in popular culture are often vague or simply refer to games or gaming culture in general; so for example it is common for the act of game playing to be mentioned as an indication of manipulation, or for a central character to be seen playing a wargame (usually chess—see below) to demonstrate their devious nature. Similarly, children or young adults are often shown playing wargames (usually FPS titles), to connote their abstraction from society, lack of social graces or violent tendencies. Wargames are rarely mentioned in a positive context; they are often used instead to suggest that their players have skill or intelligence but possess underlying sociopathic or degenerative tendencies. An interesting example of this comes from the TV show *CSI: New York*. In the episode “Fare Game” (2006), a man is shot at a graveyard and yet no bullet is found in his wound. The trail leads to a group of people who are playing an ARG called *WaterGun Wars*, in which they are given targets who they then have to stalk and “kill” with water pistols (the series calls *WaterGun Wars* a “wargame,” whereas to a more critical eye the game seems more a combat-based ARG or PvP game). The prize for being the last contender is \$100,000, but it rapidly transpires that the contestants don’t really know how their targets are being selected; instead they receive instructions and “hits” from an organizer known only as the “Supreme Commander.” The detectives track down contestant and suspect Jordan Stokes, first seen watching a preview of the game *Hitman* through a shop window. In fact, the game is a red herring and the murder involves out-of-work actors (those rascals!), but the implication throughout is that the participants are greedy and rather paranoid (one contestant hires an office to entrap other contestants and adds glass powder and security lasers to his windows). Although the “violent video game” trope is not trotted out here (it makes several

appearances in other *CSI* episodes), the "wargame" is seen as a peculiar, antisocial activity, and attached to a type of gaming that might appear unusual to a casual onlooker.

A related trope deploys wargames in a more omnipotent manner: characters in books or series might be trapped within the "game" of an adversary and forced to play by specific "rules" in order to escape. Examples of this include the 1982 film *Tron* or the 2010 *Sherlock* episode "The Great Game." In *Tron*, the initial plot revolves around the fact that all of protagonist Kevin Flynn's programs have been plagiarized by villain Ed Dillinger, thus resulting in Flynn's quest for proof within the virtual world of the ENCOM system. Within this world, "users" are forced to play martial games until they are destroyed, thus ensuring that Dillinger's acts are never exposed to the world outside the game. In *Sherlock*, the allusion is more bland and refers to both Sherlock Holmes' habit of declaring in the short stories that "the game is afoot!" and the plot, in which Holmes must solve a number of cryptic riddles sent via text message before an allotted time runs out. "The Great Game" also demonstrates a further common trope: wargames in which the villain cheats or adds a new, unforeseen element, as the puzzles set by Moriarty conclude when Holmes manages to solve the final riddle only to find that Moriarty has strapped explosives to Watson which he plans to detonate regardless of Holmes' actions.

Cheating or playing "unfair" seems to be tied to a literary semantic idea that suggests that war itself is unjust and cruel. Wargames in literature fall particularly foul of this, as it makes for a strong twist if the game proves to be something other than it pretends to be, or is being played by different rules. *Ender's Game*, which I will return to, is a very strong example of this—in it Ender ultimately discovers that the game he has been playing has been a real war all along—but more generally this trope is used in a variety of different literary texts to suggest that villains perhaps understand the viciousness of warfare better than the more "sporting" protagonists. In the MMORPG *World of Warcraft*, the Medivh or "chess" encounter within the Karazhan raid

forces players to adopt the role of chess pieces and fight against the opposite army, controlled by Medivh himself. The encounter is fairly easy, since it does not rely on a player's equipment or ability other than to move pieces around the board and attack the opposing side, but Medivh periodically cheats by moving pieces incorrectly or attacking the players in unexpected ways. Here, Medivh is specifically positioned as a villain because he bends the rules of chess unfairly, thus showing that not only is he unchivalrous, but deviant.

One of the most direct examples of this trope occurs in the 1987 James Bond film *The Living Daylights*, during the final encounter between Bond and villain Brad Whitaker. Whitaker's deserted mansion is filled with waxworks of his own likeness wearing the uniforms of famous tyrants, including Adolf Hitler, Napoleon and Genghis Khan. Whitaker is using a wargame table with automated figures and special effects such as miniature explosions to re-enact the Battle of Little Round Top "as I would have fought it." He tells Bond that Gettysburg would have incurred a further 35,000 casualties if Grant had been in charge since "Meade was tenacious but he was cautious." After Bond knocks Whitaker off his feet by activating a remotely-controlled drawer in the wargame table, he explodes a statue of the Duke of Wellington next to him, knocking Whitaker onto another diorama. Later, when asked what happened, Bond says grimly, "He met his Waterloo." Although rather comic, the obvious parallel between playing at war and moral turpitude are clearly made here. Whitaker isn't just a megalomaniac, he's one with a deranged sense of how war should be fought "well," inspired by the dehumanizing use of miniatures instead of people.

Chess

Napoleon the Great, who had a great passion for playing chess, was often beaten by a rough grocer in St. Helena. Neither Shakespeare, Milton, Newton, nor any of

the great ones of the earth, acquired proficiency in chess-playing.... A game of chess does not add a single new fact to the mind; it does not excite a single beautiful thought; nor does it serve a single purpose for polishing and improving the nobler faculties.

—C. Munn, S. Wales, and A. Beach, “Chess-Playing Excitement.”

It would be impossible to write a chapter of this nature without referring to the vast usage of chess as a metaphor for conflict within all forms of popular literature, which also includes the long tradition of war chess variants.¹ As a game with an already-abiding cultural footprint, viewers are familiar with the game and its semiotic meanings. Surprisingly however, the examples tend to be very similar, and present rather bland expressions which are not often used in much depth. The quotation at the top of this section is extremely unusual in that here chess is seen as a negative activity for those with weak minds (rather unfairly pillorying grocers) and tyrants (Napoleon). However, the underlying precept that chess is a military activity played by strategists remains, and this underpins most examples of the game's appearance in popular culture.

¹ The website *Chessvibes* once hosted a video montage of several hundred examples of chess used in film and television series, spanning everything from domestic drama to space opera (and sometimes both); this has since been removed for copyright infringement. But see also *TVTropes* <<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/TabletopGame/Chess>>. Some chess variants were actually called "kriegsspiel": see Wikipedia's excellent page on this subject <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chess_variant>.

A number of distinct tropes emerge from within this formation; here I examine the ones that specifically deal with warfare or conflict.

Chess as Power Struggle

Chess is played between two antagonists, usually at an early stage in the proceedings before other power plays or actions have come into effect, or when one of them has been caught and safely imprisoned. This gives the two a chance to meet and establish some of their dominant characteristics without real conflict between the two taking place. Magneto and Charles Xavier play chess while Magneto is locked in his glass prison at the end of the first *X-Men* movie (2000). The game foreshadows the fact that Magneto will escape at the start of the sequel, and the game is visible in the background as he does so (2003).

Conversely, “chess as power struggle” is used when antagonists have become so adversarial that they can only communicate through a game, with the suggestion that conflict in real world situations would be socially inappropriate, possibly violent. In *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (2014), a much younger Magneto and Charles Xavier play chess again as they attempt to find common ground from which to rebuild their formerly amicable relationship.

A Game Like Chess

Again, many examples of this exist, but it is usually fantasy or science fiction worlds that take these to useful extremes when reflecting on warfare. Three-dimensional chess (*Star Trek*), Thud! (the Discworld novels) and Cheops (*Dune*) are all used similarly to chess to reflect the importance of tactical thought in "real" situations, to show superiority, and to reflect on the specific marital makeup of each situation.

Thud! (Truran 2002) began as a real-world game based on the Discworld novels and ultimately became the topic of a novel of the same name (Pratchett 2005); Pratchett reverse-engineered the history the game to echo that of chess, and the cover of the book shows

the main protagonist trapped between life-sized stone pieces that look rather similar to those of the Viking Game (circa 400 CE), standing on a black-and-white-checkered game board. The interplay between the characters and the Thud! pieces suggests a melding of Discworld life and game, in which the two come to represent elements of each other; this neatly summarizes the tone of the book itself.

Cheops is perhaps one of the most ludicrous chess-like games, being “nine-level chess with the double object of putting your queen in at the apex and the opponent's king in check” (Herbert 1965, 588); however, it is a useful example since it neatly encapsulates the internecine warfare and gendered power struggles that take place in the Dune books, demonstrating “as in chess, so in life.”

Chess to Signify Conflict Elsewhere

Players play chess to take their minds off an ongoing conflict or to foreshadow one about to take place. Tavi from Jim Butcher's *Codex Alera* series (2004-9) plays chess (“ludus”) on several occasions, including during a battle, when he is asked by opposing general Nasaug to allow his people to collect their dead. The two play ludus while this happens, and the game is used to imply Nasaug's tacit support for Tavi against the insane ritualist Sarl. In the 1982 film *The Thing*, MacReady pours whiskey into a computer chess game, foreshadowing the frustration with technology and science he will feel when dealing with the later conflict with the Thing. Other famous examples occur in *Star Trek*—which often includes tri-dimensional chess in recreational scenes during which the crew discuss the events going on or defeat visitors who express more martial agendas—and the Holochess game played by Chewbacca and R2-D2 in *Star Wars*. It is of course advisable to let the Wookiee win.

Chess Players are Really Smart... or Rather Stupid

Mastery of chess signifies a complex, often deviant mind, and many of literature's greatest minds play chess to demonstrate to readers just how clever they are. Interestingly, this form of chess is often played against an absent or nonexistent opponent. Sherlock Holmes plays chess with himself, and Lord Vetinari of the Discworld novels plays Thud! (see above) remotely with a friend in Uberwald; Thud! is also used to contrast the oppositional viewpoints of Reacher Gilt and Lord Ventinari in *Going Postal* (2004).² In the Harry Potter books, Wizarding chess is additionally a signifier of empathy, since the players must gain the trust of the pieces. Hermione is terrible at it, but Ron is very good indeed and consistently beats Harry throughout *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997); all three heroes have to collaborate in the “real” version at the end of the book, with Ron telling them what to do and ultimately sacrificing himself in order for Harry to win. Here, the differences between cleverness, wisdom and empathy are seen as complementary types of intellect.

Chess is sometimes played by people who don't understand the game or what it symbolizes, and proceed to either make up their own version or play the game with different rules. Players either become engrossed with these rules or give up on the game, usually after an argument. Here the effect is often comedic, but can also symbolize differences between opponents or a character's lack of tactical prowess. In *Going Postal*, Crispin Horsefly's understanding of Thud! signifies his stupidity. A 2001 episode of the sitcom *Friends* (7.20: “The One with Rachel's Big Kiss”) begins with Phoebe and Joey apparently playing intently, using a competition timer. “We should really learn how to play the real way,” says Joey, but Phoebe counters, “I like our way!”, moving a pawn like a checkers piece and triumphantly announcing:

² In the same book, when the characters Death and Granny Weatherwax have to play Thud! against each other—in a nod to Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*—they both decide to play cards instead.

“Chess!” This fleeting scene is a typical use of chess to make a quick point, building on the “nice but dim” nature of Joey and the eccentricity of free spirit Phoebe. As a rather stupid beefcake and a pacifist, neither, it is implied, would be particularly good at either tactics or “real” chess.

Human Chess

Probably the most famous version of human (or anthropomorphic) chess is the game that takes place in Lewis Carroll’s 1871 novel *Through the Looking Glass* and forms the majority of what plot the book contains. *Through the Looking Glass* is the key origin text for the trope of human chess and includes an image by Carroll of the “moves” played by each character on a chessboard. The motif of human chess (or chess played by omnipotent rulers) remains popular: it is an early visual signifier in Patrick McGoochan’s 1967-1968 TV show *The Prisoner*, and helps to set the tone for the series; in Scott Lynch’s 2007 novel *Red Seas Under Red Skies*, nobles play a variant of human chess wherein every time a game piece/person is captured, the opponent is allowed to enact any punishment except death upon them. Both examples imply heavily that the human pieces are ultimately powerless “lions” led by uncaring “donkeys,” and draw attention as well to the disparities between class and power during conflict (see also Taylor 1974).

Chess is therefore a popular and useful symbol of war in popular culture, providing a quick shorthand to explain a number of concepts, character motivations or potential responses. However, to continue in this vein would simply create a long list, rather than a critical examination. Studying chess as a referent to war, or within war literature itself, makes it clear that many examples exist—however, after first examination, there is not really much to them. For this reason this chapter now turns to media texts which specifically deal with the wargame as a central narrative theme.

WarGames

The 1983 film *WarGames* is a Cold War thriller produced at the height of the “Star Wars” project in the US. College student David Lightman (Matthew Broderick) is a typical slacker teen, more interested than playing video games than studying. When he breaks into an unlisted computer called WOPR, its AI “Joshua” gives him a list of options of games to play, ranging from chess and backgammon to “Theaterwide Biotoxic” and “Global Thermonuclear War.” Out of boredom, and to impress his girlfriend Jennifer Mack (Ally Sheedy), he chooses the last option, unaware that the computer has now started a simulation at NORAD which convinces the military that the Soviet Union is about to launch a nuclear attack.

The film contains several major themes, expressed largely through Lightman's playing of Global Thermonuclear War, and the consequences of doing so. These include the now familiar unease about the growing role of video games (the graphics used to depict the NORAD war room are deliberately very similar to those of 1981's *Galaga*, which Lightman is seen playing in the first scene of the movie), a paranoia that distinguishing between real war and a simulation/game is becoming increasingly difficult (NORAD is repeatedly fooled by Lightman and then WOPR), a tension between traditional forms of learning and self-taught digital native behaviors (both Lightman and Mack get “F” grades in their biology class, which are subsequently changed by Lightman when he hacks into the school database), and an underlying fear about the political situation of the time.

Although Matthew Broderick learns to become a more responsible adult (this is, after all, a children's film—although Wikipedia seems to think it is also a “Cold War thriller”), by ultimately tricking the computer into a stalemate situation, *WarGames* clearly warns viewers of that perennial social fear: that games will turn us into an unthinking society that pays little attention to the subtleties of our real-world lives. This has little to do with the wargame aspect of the film but it is interesting that this message shares equal weight with a warning against the

perils of video games: as a result of Lightman's choices, both at the beginning of the film when he chooses the interesting option (a poor decision), and its conclusion, in which agrees to play “a nice game of chess” with WOPR (a good decision), the film rather drearily seems to suggest that conformity and a lack of experimentation are desirable social assets. Indeed, although the conclusion by WOPR that “the only winning move is not to play” is an obvious comment on the “game” of war, it also suggests that Lightman himself should stop playing, and return to a more conformist lifestyle. The film is a cultural touchstone because it manages to transmit contemporary unease around issues such as teenage disaffection, the interchange between "real" and "virtual" war (still a perennial worry), and the intrusion of the military into daily lives while also appearing to be an early teen flick. Yet *WarGames* is neither teenage coming-of-age movie nor thriller, hovering somewhere between both. Although the film ends with a conformist solution, the central plot still resonates today—in Ernest Cline’s 2011’s novel *Ready Player One*, part of protagonist Wade's first challenge is to enact the entirety of the film as though it were a game.

Ender's Game

Orson Scott Card's 1985 novel *Ender's Game* is excessively dystopian, and has caused considerable controversy and disquiet among scholars and critics (Kessel 2004, Radford 2007).³

³ *Ender's Game* has disturbed critics because of the unrepentant cruelty of the novel, as well as the Final Solution enacted upon the Buggers. Card's underlying homophobia (implied in the racial nickname for the Buggers, but expressed more specifically elsewhere) is throughout his writing also accompanied by suggestions of racial superiority and misogyny. “Whereas most exciting controversial novels include one or two hot-button topics at most, Card's novel is composed of nothing

In the book, *Ender*, a young boy from a violently dysfunctional family, is trained from a young age to become a military general as part of a group of children who have been closeted from the rest of the world. The children play a series of martial games, which are both physically demanding and tactical, and take place via computer simulation in rooms rather similar to the X-Men's "Danger Room." The harsh training program extolls bullying and violence in order to determine strong leaders; girls are relatively unsuccessful because, it is implied, they are genetically weaker. As the greatest hope in his group, Ender is systematically taught to distance himself from others in order to become a more ruthless tactician and commander, and during the course of his training, he kills two other children (although is unaware that he has done this). The book concludes with one final game against the enemy, an intelligent insectoid race called Buggers. At the climax of the game, Ender realizes that the enemy Buggers are behaving as if they were a hive mind. He isolates and destroys the queen. Retrospectively it is revealed that the game was in fact real, and Ender's murder of the queen has implemented a genocide of the Bigger race; every Bigger in the vicinity died at the same moment as their queen. Ender is horrified by what he has done, but the government considers him a war hero. Later books in the series chart Ender's attempts to reconcile himself to these events.

Card's depiction of a real event dissembling as a wargame points to one of the perennial background tropes of science fiction: the expression of politicized ideologies within a fantastical narrative. As with *The Player of Games* (see below), *Ender's Game* demonstrates that once again, despite being a core component of the novel, the game is not really the thing. Rather, it is a metonymic plot device demonstrating the underlying manipulative nature of the civilization

but a half-dozen hot-button issues wrapped in a *bildungsroman*" (Broderick and Di Filippo 2012, 16).

concerned. In the dystopian world of *Ender's Game*, it is Earth's military forces who mercilessly exploit Ender and encourage him to annihilate the Buggers; in *The Player of Games*, the Azadians reflect some of the worst excesses of humanity, and are thus ultimately destroyed—and not necessarily for the good—by the utopian agenda of the Culture.

A Song of Ice and Fire (*A Game of Thrones*)

Barquiel L'Envers rested his chin on one fist. "Will you teach me to play the game of thrones? I think not, Delaunay."

—Jacqueline Carey, *Kushiel's Dart*

George R. R. Martin's sprawling political epic deals with the machinations of a series of dynastic families and their struggle to rule the land of Westeros. Written over a period of nearly two decades (and incomplete at the time of writing), *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996-present) makes frequent reference to the "game" of politics, and by telling the story from a split narrative point of view presents each character as a player within it. Characters can easily be likened to pawns, queens, knights and religious leaders (bishops). Martin deliberately portrays his characters with nuanced strengths and weaknesses, and allows readers multiple perspectives on the same events. The frequent betrayals, assassinations and conflicts among these characters mean that the reader perceives each as potentially disposable, as mere pieces in a grander conflict, and the various factions in the novels clearly echo the representation of traditional factions in war and wargaming.

The title of 1996's *A Game of Thrones*, the first book in the series, uses a relatively common construction from fantasy literature to describe political intrigues; Jacqueline Carey uses the same term in 2003's *Kushiel's Dart* to describe politicking in the D'Angeline court, and

Robert Jordan uses the phrase “Game of Houses” in the *Wheel of Time* series (1990-2007; posthumously Jordan and Sanderson 2007-2013); Raymond Feist and Janny Wurts use “Game of the Council” in the *Empire* series (1987-1992). In all of these long-haul series, machinations between ruling families underscore the central plot arcs.

A Song of Ice and Fire has been adapted by HBO into their most popular television series to date; renamed *Game of Thrones*; the change of name places a stronger emphasis on intrigue and warfare than the more ambiguous “ice” and “fire.” *Game of Thrones* retains the emphasis on split narratives, although it frequently edits Martin's chronology in order to present a more coherent narrative to the viewing audience—for example, one or two characters may figure heavily in the same episode in order to make their story more memorable and cohesive, whereas the same events may have been interspersed throughout several books of the novel series. *Game of Thrones* visualizes its global conflict using various means, notably in its opening credit sequence. In this, the viewer takes a bird's-eye flight across a steampunk-esque clockwork map; as the camera approaches each stronghold or location, the building assembles itself, unfolding or growing accordingly. Marked on each building is the sigil of the house or faction that controls it. The map changes according to which locations are featured in each episode, and to reflect the current status of the buildings; for example, in later series, the fortress of Winterfell is a smoking ruin—although the surviving characters are represented by a world tree still growing in the ashes. This opening sequence directly connects a wargame-style map with the action of *Game of Thrones*. The (invisible) characters are rendered unimportant within the grander scheme of a larger game, and the buildings and terrain become tactical pieces to be captured or destroyed. The bird's-eye view of the camera as it sweeps across the map suggests a player who perhaps controls the map or acts as an omnipotent, dispassionate observer.

Game of Thrones therefore portrays a sophisticated response to wargaming, one which demonstrates a knowing relationship with the viewer. It does not matter if a particular viewer does not pick up on the wargame map metaphor—the credit sequence is still visually impressive and iconic (it won a Creative Arts Emmy Award in 2011) and encodes other strong metaphors, such as the encapsulation of the whole world within an orrery. During the series, the viewer also sees incarnations of the map in physical form at Stannis Baratheon's fortress, and on paper at Winterfell and King's Landing. Various characters, most notably Robb Stark, Stannis Baratheon and Tywin Lannister, are seen manipulating wooden or pewter figures on war maps.

The suggestion that the players are pawns or pieces within a game fits nicely with the themes of both show and books, and makes the references to wargaming less crude and overt. The books and series stay true to this theme; despite the nuances of most characters, and a blurring of obviously “good” and “evil” characters, the political landscape is nonetheless played out as a cutthroat, aggressive game. Following naturally on from the books, Fantasy Flight Games have also released a number of *Game of Thrones* board and card games.

The Third Reich

Roberto Bolaño's posthumous *The Third Reich* (originally published in Spanish as *El Tercer Reich*) contains one of the most complicated depictions of wargaming in literature, firstly because it depicts an actual game, Avalon Hill's 1974 *Rise and Decline of the Third Reich*, and secondly because Bolaño depicts the obsessive nature of the protagonist Udo by tying the narrative of the game tightly to the overall structure of the novel, becoming more detailed as Berger spirals towards madness. Berger, who always plays the German side, embarks on a game in the second half of the book with El Quemado, a burned man and itinerant hobo who may or

may not be the devil. As Berger becomes more engrossed in the game, so his behavior becomes more disassociated from the real world, subject to erratic and seemingly hallucinatory episodes.

It is interesting that reviewers of *The Third Reich* don't really seem to know how to interpret the gameplay within the book. Giles Harvey describes it as "like *Risk*, only much more complicated" (Harvey 2012), and Nicholas Thomson as "a strategy game much like *Axis and Allies*" (Thomson 2013). It's clear from these examples that reviewers are not generally comfortable with discussing, or indeed, understanding, the intricacies of the game—if they are even aware that it is a real game. Anthony Paletta argues that this leads to incorrect descriptions of Berger's gameplay as "obsessive": "That's not inaccurate, but it's a sort of obsession rendered by a clear kindred spirit, with a detail of gameplay description impossible to anyone who wasn't deeply familiar with the topic." (Paletta 2012). This in itself is interesting, suggesting that critics are more willing to go down the stereotypical route of "games as dangerous obsession" than really trouble themselves with the nature of Berger's play (he is a wargaming champion accustomed to playing intensive, lengthy campaigns). There's also an assumption in their rather trivializing examples that this type of game isn't really worth investigating in more depth; this despite the intensity of the gameplay descriptions of *Third Reich* within the novel.

For a more in-depth discussion of Bolaño's novel, I refer the reader to John Prados' chapter in this volume.

The Player of Games

The idea, you see, is that Azad is so complex, so subtle, so flexible and so demanding that it is as precise and comprehensive a model of life as it is possible to construct. Whoever succeeds at the game succeeds at life; the same qualities are required in each to ensure dominance.

One of the most prolific writers to feature wargames is Iain Banks (or, while wearing his science fiction hat, “Iain M. Banks”), whose caustic utopianism forms a dramatic contrast to the political and social mores of books such as *Ender's Game*.

Banks uses games in several of his books, including 1987's *Consider Phlebas* (Damage), 1993's *Complicity* (*Despot*), and 2007's *The Steep Approach to Garbadale*, which features a family who have become rich through the sales of the board game *Empire!*. Most of these games are themed around conflict in some form; *Despot* is loosely based around the video game *Civilization*, and Banks frequently described its inclusion in the book as a justification for the huge amount of time he spent playing it. *Despot* anticipates the complexity of later god-games such as *Civilization IV* (2005) and *Europa Universalis* (2000), and protagonist Cameron delights in playing an aggressive, immoral leader throughout the book:

Despot is a world-builder game from HeadCrash Brothers, the same team that brought us *Brits*, *Raj* and *Reich*. It's their latest, biggest and best, it's Byzantinely complicated, baroquely beautiful, spectacularly immoral and utterly, utterly addictive (Banks 1993, 51).

Cameron is less immoral as he likes to think, however, and as his life starts to collapse (a result of making the right decision a moment too late), someone hacks his game and destroys his carefully-built world. In *The Steep Approach to Garbadale*, *Empire!* is a game of conquest and strategy, mirroring the rather unscrupulous nature of the Wopuld family. Arguments over the nature of the game, and whether to allow a buyout which will almost certainly result in *Empire!* losing its core ethos, reflect the numerous conflicts and family secrets they hold. As a further example, in *Consider Phlebas*, the utopian society the Culture has been at war with the Idirans

for many generations. Reflecting the constant presence of violence and conflict are violent and antagonistic games such as Damage, where players bet body parts and mutilation against each other (also a form of wager in Azad).

However, the most famous of Banks' wargames is Azad, from 1988's *The Player of Games*. The protagonist of the book, Jernau Gurgeh Morat, is a renowned game player from the Culture (Morat means "game player" in the Culture's language, Marain). Bored of playing the same games and their lack of challenge, Gurgeh is recruited by Special Circumstances, the covert arm of the Culture, to play Azad, a game so complex that forms the basis of an entire society, in which those who perform well in periodic Azad tournaments are allocated positions of power according to their relative proficiency and play style.

Gurgeh's preparation and playing of Azad takes place over the majority of the book, which explores elements of morality and ludus in society, as well as commenting more generally on the nature of societal structure and ethics. Banks' typically socialist approach can be seen in the way that Gurgeh ultimately wins the game by playing more like the utopian, inclusive Culture than by assimilating the aggressive, reductionist tactics of the Azadians. As the book continues, Azad as a society is gradually exposed as deceitful, corrupt, misogynist and elitist. It is suggested that the Emperor of the Azadians may not actually have won his way to ascendancy, but instead has fixed matches in order to reach the top. To avoid the xenophobic shame of an alien winning the game, later Azad tournament matches are staged so that Gurgeh is apparently knocked out quickly and decisively, although he continues to play subsequent games. When Gurgeh is about to win the final game (and therefore become Emperor himself), the current Emperor cheats in order to keep his position. It is also suggested through this act of cheating that constructive interpretation of the rules, chicanery, assassination and political behind-the-scenes

wrangling has been responsible for the placement of players throughout the games—however this is an aspect of "play" that Gurgeh, and the reader, does not realise until this moment.

Gurgeh's blindness to concepts such as ownership or gender bias initially prevent him from understanding how to win, but ultimately allow him to use unexpected tactics against his opponents. His participation in Azad and his subsequent "win" causes the xenophobic Empire to collapse; exactly what the Culture had in mind: "Azad—the game itself—had to be discredited. It was what held the Empire together all these years—the lynchpin; but it made it the most vulnerable point too" (Banks 1988, 296).

The Player of Games epitomizes some of the issues with representing fictional games through non-visual media. There are several apparent contradictions in the game rules as presented, as well as areas in which the game is simply not explained very clearly, although this may be authorially deliberate. Instead, the reader is given fleeting glimpses of the game and basic details such as the fact that it takes place on three large, terrain-like boards and that the pieces are genetically engineered, "part vegetable, part animal": "It was only when he started to try to gauge the pieces, to feel and smell what they were and what they might become—weaker or more powerful, faster or slower, shorter or longer lived—that he realized just how hard the whole game was going to be" (Banks 1988, 104). Azad is both a two-player and a multiplayer game during different stages of play. Gurgeh plays two rounds against large groups of ten players, but alternates between two-player iterations of the game that appear to take the same form. Near the end of the book, when he has progressed to the last stages of the game, his penultimate round is against two other people. Of course this is within the remit of a complex wargames, and many board games can be played between two through six players—however, it is very unusual for games which involve two players to be successful with as large a group as ten

people. Perhaps inevitably, artists Mark Salwowski and Richard Hopkinson both drew their covers of *The Player of Games* to suggest an alternate variant of chess.⁴

Conclusion: “The only winning move is not to play.”

The most memorable quote from *WarGames* seems to reflect an underlying message about representing wargames in popular culture and literature: playing games is bad, and mixing war and games is even worse. Many of the examples in this chapter have shown games to demonstrate moral bankruptcy, deceit, ulterior motives and degenerate personalities. Although wargame literature does exist in forms such as the example of play or post-game reportage, the majority of popular and well-known examples of wargaming show it in a negative light.

⁴ Although Azad is an "impossible" game, in 2014, a group of players attempted to make a version of the game at the 72nd Worldcon (Loncon 3) in London, in honour of posthumous Guest of Honor Iain M. Banks. A group of game developers (including Steve Jackson, the inventor of *GURPS* and *Munchkin*), Banks experts, and fans took part in a breakneck game-jam as part of the convention. The games produced were lighthearted versions of the “Board of Form” and the “Board of Origin,” one spreading across the convention floor and another using a baffling array of pyramid-shaped pieces, fruit, and playing cards with the names and possible ideologies of Culture ships and characters. Small children were recruited by players to build war machines in exchange for bananas, and organisers role-playing adjudicators around the edge of the Board of Origin motivated the spectators to get involved, change the rules as they went along and heckle the players. The result was chaotic and ridiculous, more like a game of "Mornington Crescent" than anything serious, but it did also show the potential of Azad to inspire development and creativity.

Thousands of examples exist for chess, and the cultural meme that links playing games with poor socialization or a twisted understanding of reality is taken to extremes when wargames are used to connote dangerous situations or power struggles. It is therefore difficult therefore not to see the use of wargames in popular culture as a rather negative trope. They are not seen to disabuse traditional moral panics about games, tied as they are to undercurrents of violence or deviance; in most texts the reference is rather lazy, included to make a simple, trite point. Finally, as with Iain M. Banks and the fantasy writers who discuss variants of the “game of thrones” within their work, there is a generic element to representing wargames; it is used to suggest political situations or relationships, but rarely drawn further into actual descriptions of functioning games themselves. Bolaño’s *The Third Reich*, with its detailed hex-by-hex play, is the only meaningful counter-example of which I am aware.

Matthew Kirschenbaum has suggested that wargames can be read as narratives, and this brief overview of wargaming writing has shown that it also provides a valuable foundation for different types of prose. As a trope it seems culturally pervasive but not particularly exciting. Perhaps not playing is indeed the better option—or more optimistically, we can develop readings of alternative sorts of texts, such as “after-action” reportage and play examples as more complex ways to position wargaming in popular culture. It would be heartening to think that as games in general become more culturally accepted, their representation in popular texts will increase in complexity.

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