

THE ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF RECREATIONAL MINIATURE WARGAMES

Models of soldiers have been with us since antiquity, at least since the Egyptian Middle Kingdom when Prince Emsah was buried with two sets of painted soldiers carved from wood; one of Egyptian heavy infantry and one of Numidian light infantry.¹ Clearly these were considered items of value and importance. They may have been mere toys, or decorations, or funerary items of some spiritual significance, but the details of whether or not (or how) they were used when the Prince was alive are lost in the mists of History.

Throughout early modern history we find sets of miniature soldiers belonging to the likes of Louis XIII, Frederick IV of Denmark, and Tsar Peter III. Napoleon had a number of sets of toy soldiers made for his son, the King of Rome, including a set of 117 crafted in gold by Claude Odinot.² Louis XIV had the designer of the royal ballets, Henri de Gisse, make a set of finely painted cardboard figures for the Dauphin, the future Louis XV. This collection included 10 battalions of infantry and 20 squadrons of cavalry. It seems possible that, in addition to being attractive toys, such a large collection may have been used to introduce the future King to the basics of commanding troops. They were later replaced by a set made by the silversmith, Merlin, for which the King paid the sum of 6000 francs. (These were, unfortunately, melted down in 1715 to help alleviate the financial crisis that followed the War of the Spanish Succession.)³

By the time of the Renaissance, with the rise of interest in the classical world and the rebirth of a literature of military theory, it begins to appear that model soldiers were used as part of the education of the sons of the wealthy and powerful. Play and the inculcation of military principles may have merged in the form of collections of toy soldiers crafted for the use of nobles and monarchs whose interest in perpetuating their dynasties caused them to pay extravagant sums to artisans for toys that their sons would find both amusing and educational. A solid connection between model soldiers and a military education is found in the household records of Henry Percy, ninth Earl of Northumberland. Henry was imprisoned in the Tower of London from 1607, when his son Algernon was just five years old, until 1621, on suspicion of having been complicit in the Gunpowder Plot. Loth to leave the young Percy's education in the hands of his mother and nursemaids, he arranged for young Algernon Percy to visit him in the Tower with his tutors, in keeping with his belief that "the care of fathers is as well to make fair their insides as their out; to this end I find his nursery society will be a let, both out of much pamperings and other humours that are incident to overtender mothers".⁴ As part of the means to this end, he laid out almost thirteen pounds (something approaching a couple thousand pounds in modern currency) for "An inlaid Table, for practicing the Art Militaire . . . a mould of Brass to cast soldiers in, and making 140 of them, with wires for pikes . . . making 300 leaden men, &c, with a Box to put them in . . . the Table, and Points; and gilding the same".⁵ His efforts must have been fruitful, because the tenth Earl eventually became an admiral in the "ship money" fleet, and later, Lord High Admiral.

As the making of metal miniatures was quite expensive at that time, their use was restricted to families of considerable means. The cost prevented them from becoming popular among any but the upper strata of seventeenth century society. This was all to change in the eighteenth century with the appearance of the German "zinnfiguren" (also known as "flats"), a much cheaper form of model soldier. These were cast in alloys consisting mainly of tin, from molds engraved by hand, in slate. The figures were less than two millimeters thick and stood various heights (depending on the manufacturer), usually 30, 40 or 60 millimeters from the heel to the top of the head. Skilled artisans in German towns

like Nürnberg and Fürth made models representing the soldiers of nations involved in contemporary wars, intended as toys for children. These figures were likely the inspiration for Han Christian Anderson's story *The Steadfast Tin Soldier*. Eventually, the factories would number in the dozens and their combined output would be millions of figures per year.⁶ There is no indication, however, that they were used at that time in formal games (as would happen later, with written rules and special playing surfaces) but more likely formed the central feature of the informal play typical of children's playroom floors. On occasion they would produce figures from biblical stories, or gods and heroes from the Greek and Roman classics, which appear to have been used to illustrate a kind of narrative play with a secondary, educational purpose.

During the course of the nineteenth century, advancements in casting would yield first half-round (demi-ronde) and then fully three-dimensional figures, using the innovative and economical hollow casting method developed by William Britain. These would form the basis of the widely popular collections of toy soldiers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Let the Games Begin!

About the same time as the rise of zinnfiguren, there began to appear games which were based on the precedents set by the chess variants that had been popular in Europe since the 13th century. One of the earliest ones, designed by Johann Ferdinand Opiz around mid-century, enjoyed some popularity in certain military circles but was not formally published until the author's son, Georg Emmanuel Opiz, had it put into print in 1806.⁷ It followed the basic paradigm of chess in that it was played on a grid of squares. However, the squares were of various colors, to represent different types of terrain, which had effects on the movement and interaction of the pieces. The pieces were mostly abstract, infantry and cavalry consisting of differently shaped blocks, but the general officers were represented by mounted figurines. Similar games by several other designers popped up in the latter portion of the century (prominent among them, Johann Christian Hellwig in 1780, and Johann Georg Julius Venturini in 1798) but there is no specific evidence that either of them were aware of Opiz' work.⁸

Interestingly, in the introductory chapter to the first published edition of his father's design, Georg Opiz claims that Hellwig's game was too simple and chess-like to be useful for instruction and that Venturini's game was too detailed for amusement, but that the elder Opiz's design struck a balance between them; thus, he fired the opening round in an argument that still rages furiously among wargamers today. From this point on, there is a parting of the ways between wargame designs that strive to be useful in understanding military operations, and those in which the primary purpose is amusement and any resemblance to actual warfare is incidental. This split has been handed down to modern wargamers in the form a completely fallacious but widely held belief that playability and historical fidelity are mutually exclusive properties of historical wargames.

While the aforementioned gentlemen were creating their entertaining and instructional games, there were efforts being made in the purely professional and theoretical arena as well. In 1770, Major William Young published *Manoeuvres: or Practical Observations on the Art of War*, the final section of which was a set of instructions for maneuvering blocks of troops (similar to those used by Opiz and contemporaries) on a map sketched on a tabletop with chalk or crayon, using the actual words of command then in use by field officers. It was laid out in the form of a game, with the winner being the player who managed to outflank his opponent's battalion before he could appropriately react. On the naval front, John Clerk of Eldin, a Scottish merchant, geologist, engraver and enthusiastic student of naval history and tactics, wrote *Essay on Naval Tactics* in 1779 (published in 1790), in which he laid out ideas that conformed to the signature British tactic of "breaking the enemy's line", used to such

good effect in the decades immediately following. It is recorded that he made a collection of wooden miniature ships which he carried about in his coat pocket, using them on a tabletop at every opportunity to illustrate his ideas to anyone who would listen. These were aimed at a strictly military audience and were not, except in a very technical sense, intended to be amusing.

In later revisions of his work, Venturini (who was, after all, a military topographer) recommended abandoning the square gridded board in favor of topographical maps, a step which the Von Reisswitz' took when they constructed the Kriegsspiel that would eventually be adopted by the Prussian military establishment as an official training device. This would eventually lead to the somewhat less game-like "free Kriegsspiel" of Verdy du Vernois, the use of which received much of the credit for the Prussian victory over France in 1870 and brought wargaming to the attention of the general public.

Miniature Wargaming Becomes a Recreation

The awareness that the glorious aspects of war could be separated from its seamier side and made into a game captured the imaginations of some among the educated classes in the eighteenth century, especially in Victorian England, and spawned a number of private attempts to create recreational wargames, frequently using the by now ubiquitous and affordable miniature figurines. We only know this because of the literary bent which caused these pioneers to meticulously record their efforts.

In the 1870s, one George Keef created a fictional country called Georland, ruled by King George I (not coincidentally his namesake) and fought and documented a series of campaigns using demi-ronde lead figures.⁹ In the 1880s, author Robert Louis Stevenson in company with his stepson, Lloyd Osbourne, worked out an elaborate campaign system with miniature battalions and squadrons, fought over a countryside chalked on the floor of an unheated and poorly lit attic. He described these maneuvers in a series of humorous and satirical reports and newspaper stories in the style of those which sometimes appeared in actual periodicals of that time.¹⁰ Just after the turn of the twentieth century, St. Petersburg artist Boris Popov peopled a fictional country named Elyria with armies of flats and accurately portrayed buildings, and fought battles using a set of rules he had devised which utilized dividers for measuring movement and cannon which fired small nails with a flick of a finger.¹¹ In 1910, A. J. Holladay published a booklet called *War Games for Boy Scouts Played with Model Soldiers*, indicating that the ideas which had until then been the private pastimes of the literati had made significant inroads into the cultural awareness of the population at large.

The culmination of all of this amateur warlike activity was the publication of H.G. Wells' *Floor Games* in 1911 and *Little Wars* in 1913, which laid out the recognizable foundations of what became miniature wargaming in the latter half of the twentieth century; painted three-dimensional miniatures traversing three-dimensional terrain, with rules governing various aspects of their action and interaction on the tabletop.

The naval aspect of miniature wargaming was not neglected during this time, either. Fred Jane's naval wargame was aimed at a professional audience, but found favor among civilian naval enthusiasts around the turn of the twentieth century. During World War I the specter of real warfare dampened civilian enthusiasm for miniature martial pursuits, but in the 1930s they experienced a revival and Fletcher Pratt's naval wargames became well attended social events, occasionally held in a ballroom complete with a bar and spectator seating.¹² Similar attention was drawn by the huge, elaborate interwar campaigns run by Norman Bel Geddes, fueled by a growing interest in board games of all types and by Bel Geddes' fame as a designer and position in New York society. His games were attended by celebrities, high ranking naval officers and world-class chess champions, and included terraced

topographical terrain and fleets of painstakingly detailed 1/1200 scale ships which he had made in his private workshop.¹³

It is interesting that none of the wargames created by these military amateurs looked very far into the past. They all took inspiration from contemporary or very recent conflicts. This may have been the result of manufacturers of toy soldiers attempting to maximize sales by focusing on figures from current events with a high profile in the popular imagination, much like their predecessors in the eighteenth century, thus limiting the choice of figures available to early recreational wargamers.

Oddly, all of the games which depicted land warfare seem to have been set in fictional countries created by their designers, even though they used figures based on real soldiers, while the naval games used the navies of actual nations.

World War II caused another hiatus in civilian wargaming and in the production of metal miniatures, since the raw materials were strategic resources needed for the war effort. Afterwards, however, beginning in the 1950s new manufacturers like Jack Scruby, Hinton Hunt, Holger Ericsson, and Edward Suren emerged, making ranges of figures depicting soldiers of past centuries in both metal and plastic (some of which are still in production today) that fired the imaginations of the founders of modern miniature wargaming. For the first time, it became possible for the creators of miniature wargames to take historical battles as the subject matter of their games.

The works of such founding fathers of the modern hobby as Brigadier Peter Young, Donald Featherstone and Charles Grant were illustrated with these now-classic miniatures, and formed the basis for what would become the lively and diverse hobby we have inherited from them. Not until the 1970s, inspired by movies and fantastical works of fiction, would miniature wargames take on the subject matter of fantasy and science fiction, although the massive popularity of these genres would quickly overshadow historical miniature wargaming. From the humble beginnings of toy soldiers, combined with a literary and artistic fascination with war, has sprung an industry that encompasses a bewildering array of forms, genres and manufacturers that reflect the richness of the human imagination.

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