Wargaming Literature in Popular Culture

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The depiction of wargames in popular culture is a surprisingly uneven experience. In *Third Person*, Matthew Kirschenbaum identifies this tension by using two conflicting arguments to prefigure his paper on wargame narration (2009: 357-72). The first, by Greg Costikyan, asserts that ''There is no story in chess, bridge, Monopoly, or *Afrika Korps*'' (Costikyan 2007: 5). This statement is easily refuted by several authors in the collection, including 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). Crucially, 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*, (eds. Harrigan and Wardruip Fruin 2007), 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, and why are these depictions so limited? This chapter examines some of the ways that wargames are represented, as well as asking if it is possible to move beyond these constructions.

As Kirschenbaum argues, board wargames have a lot to teach about the ways that 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 inference. This chapter aims to unpack some of these ideas, as well as arguing 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.

Insert catchy subtitle here.

Although gaming continues to become more pervasive, via both physical and virtual contexts, this has translated slowly to its representation in popular culture, which often still presents gaming – perhaps from 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, or to alienate their readership with detail they might not know. Direct references to games are often seen as marker of geek culture, rather than signifiers in their own right; for example the discussion of *Settlers of Catan* in Benedict Jacka's *Chosen* (2013) demonstrates the unity and domestication of a group of characters who were antagonistic in the previous book, but 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.

This chapter is split into several parts. I first examine the different modes of writing about wargames. These modes are often confused or simply overlap, and have led wargaming literature to exist in a number of different forms. I then examine the ways wargames and wargaming are used in popular texts as allegory, metaphor or subject. Rather than listing the extensive amount of times that wargaming tropes are mentioned in popular culture, I discuss some of the motivations for this. Wargames are often used as signifiers to suggest fairly broad tropes such as the villain who plays chess (a clever tactician who will almost certainly be caught out in the end by the hero), or the soldier who takes part in a team game before war begins (rather like Clover's "final girl" (1992), this will doom him from the moment he picks up his cricket bat). 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 LARP, Re-enactment or airsofting are often taken further within popular culture to connote deviance and criminality. This chapter tries to unpack some of these ideas, and asks whether popular culture has any inclination to portray wargaming and its participants in a more nuanced light, an element I will return to in the final case studies of this chapter.

I then turn to several case studies exploring how games can be used to suggest or discuss warfare in literature and other popular culture. First, I examine the ways in which chess is used as a "quick and dirty" signifier to connect metaphors of warfare and games. As one of the most popular games in the world, chess provides a familiar example to the reader, although it is surprisingly also rather semiotically bland; rarely moving beyond this binary connection or making in-depth points about the situation depicted. A necessary section presents some of the dominant wargame-as chess-as-metaphor examples, and discusses their importance as cultural signs.

Although it is unusual to see the wargaming subgenre mentioned directly, some notable examples have been used to discuss social, political and cultural constructions in popular literature and media. These final case studies examine the surprisingly fleeting examples of wargames in literary texts. Predominantly, this occurs through the creation of fictitious war/socio-political games such as *Azad* in Iain M Banks' *The Player of Games* (1988), the worldsphere of *Ender's Game* (Card: 1985) or "Global Thermonuclear War" in the film *Wargames* (1983), however after examining these texts in more detail, I turn to two final examples which challenge this representation. Michael Foreman's book *War Game* (1993) is an illustrated children's story about the

1914 Christmas Truce. It presents an alternative perspective of play and games during a wartime situation; in this case, the unification of troops through a football game. Finally, I examine the HBO series *Game of Thrones* (Benidoff and Weiss 2011-present), based on the long-haul fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R. R. Martin (1992-present). Here the ideas of wargaming and "war as a game" are used in a more subtle manner, and perhaps point to more sophisticated ways 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.

(Wells 1913: 3)

There is a long-standing tradition of wargames told through the medium of storytelling. The Bronte 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 continued to work on the Gondal Saga throughout their lives and Emily produced over seventy Gondal poems. Although Charlotte 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 mimics this structure and creatively retells a *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign played by the authors and their friends at TSR in the early 1980s. *Dragonlance*, which was based on a series of *D&D* modules of the same name, went on to become a hugely successful franchise of fantasy books and game modules. "Dungeon Crawl" novels are still popular, and echoes of these can be seen in many fantasy series including the Harry Dresden books (Butcher 2000-present); where the characters clearly become stronger as they progress through the novels, or in more directly obvious tales such as *The Copper Promise* (Williams 2014), where the main characters quite clearly represent an adventuring party moving through various encounters and ultimately fighting an epic battle against an invading horde of dragon people:

> …even 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 Bronte's, 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 rules of *D&D,* in order to give their war story voice. Around this evolved a rich narrative where 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 transitionary wargame literatures – the "Example of Play". In tabletop roleplaying 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 roleplaying with the more technical aspects of combat. The *Call of Cthuhlu* rulebook has a an infamously bad example of this, where the fictitious players mix actions interchangeably between roleplay, 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.

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 negotiated unique social cues – of each individual group (Fine 1983 and Fine 1979: 734). Fine sees wargames as different from roleplaying 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 roleplaying game world, which often contains warfare and is frequently referred to using military terminology (eg. "campaigns" are lengthy story arcs), shows that there is considerable, although often blurred crossover between the two.

Although the example of play given above is deliberately fictitious, Matthew 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 in Harrigan and Wardruip-Fruin 2009: 357). These 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 roleplay in response to this.

H.G Wells' *Little Wars* (1913) is regarded as a core moment in the development of wargaming (as discussed elsewhere 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 play-testing 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 a number of literary 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, whilst *Little Wars* and the "example of play" in *Call of Cthuhlu* 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 roleplaying games after the event, which narratize 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 narratized 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, where 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 roleplaying group. Whilst 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 way of representing wargaming in literature, but they also suggest rather fuzzy edges. Whilst tabletop games contain extensive campaigns that often lead players into war, they might not always be termed "wargames". However, as Wells has show, 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 Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* (2011), which contains core plot elements devoted to *Dungeons & Dragons*, the videogame *Joust* and the film *Wargames*. The book itself 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 of each scenario, but suggests a more direct war against the villainous employees of the ISP IOI. It is this sort of complexity, whereby wargame, wargame narrative and narratives which contains wargames overlap, that must be taken in consideration when considering the narrative potential of this subject.

"All Part of the Plan": The Metaphor of Warfare.

Later, this chapter will return to specific texts and examples, detailing how wargames are used as thematic elements to make specific cultural and political arguments. In these texts, the wargame is usually very apparent and plays a central role in the narrative. However before this, it is also worth examining how wargames are used in popular culture in a more general way – to represent tropes or ideas to an audience who, like Wells' readers, may not be familiar with its conceits.

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; perhaps to suggest skill or intelligence, without an underlying qualifier of danger or degenerative tendencies. An interesting example of this comes from the TV show *CSI New York*. In the episode "Fare Game" (REF), a man is shot at a graveyard and yet no bullet is found in his wound; it turns out to have been with a blank and the velocity of firing the gun is what killed him. 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 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 getting instructions and 'hits' from an organizer known only as

the 'Supreme Commander'. The detectives trace contestant and suspect Jordan Stokes, who is 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 window and to avoid detection). Although the 'violent videogame' trope is not trotted out her (it makes several appearances in other CSI episodes), the wargame itself is seen as a peculiar, antisocial activity.

Other incidents within this trope show wargames being used in a more omnipotent manner, where characters in books or series are trapped within the 'game' of an adversary, and forced to play by specific 'rules' in order to escape. Examples of this might include the film *Tron* (Lisberger 1982) or the *Sherlock* episode 'The Great Game' (Gatiss 2010).

In the film, *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 Dillingers' 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, where Holmes must solve a number of cryptic riddles sent via text message before an allotted time runs out. 'The Great Game' also conforms to the next 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 will detonate regardless of Holmes' actions.

Cheating, or playing 'unfair' seems to be tied to a literary semantic that also suggests that war itself is unjust and cruel. Wargames in literature fall particularly foul of this as it creates a strong twist if the game proves to be something other than it pretends to be, or simply being played by different rules. *Ender's Game*, which I will return to, is a very strong example of this, when Ender ultimately discovers that the game he has been playing has been the real war all along, but more generally this trope is used in a variety of different literary texts, again to suggest that villains perhaps understand the viciousness of warfare better than the more 'sporting' protagonists. In the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* (2004-present), the Medivh or "Chess" encounter within the Karazhan raid instance 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, however 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.

A final example from this trope is also one of the most direct. In the James Bond film *The Living Daylights* (1987), the final encounter takes place between James 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 Ghengis Khan. Whitaker is using a wargames table with automated

figures and special effects such as miniature explosions to reenact the battle of Little Round top 'as I would have fought it'. He tells Bond that the battle 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 wargames table, he explodes a statue of the Duke of Wellington next to him, knocking Whitaker onto another diorama. 'He met his Waterloo', he says grimly, when asked what happened later. Although rather comic, the obvious parallels between playing at war and a lack of 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.
>
> (Munn et al. 1859: 1)

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. Chess is used frequently; as a game that has an abiding cultural footprint already viewers are

familiar with the game and its semiotic meanings. The website *Chessvibes* contains a montage of several hundred examples of chess used in film and television series, spanning everything from domestic drama to space opera (and sometimes both). Surprisingly however, the examples tend to be very similar, and present rather bland expressions which are not often used in much depth. The example above from *The Scientific American* is extremely unusual as chess is seen as a negative activity for those with weak minds (rather unfairly pilllorying 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.

A number of distinct tropes emerge from within this formation: here I examine the ones that specifically deal with warfare or conflict[i]:

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 whilst 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. This most often happens in more comic situations. In a nod to Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957), when Terry Pratchett's characters Death and Granny Weatherwax have to play chess-alike Thud! against each other (Pratchett 2004), they both decide to play cards instead.

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 in similar ways 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 lifesized stone pieces that look rather similar to those of The Viking Game (circa 400 AD), standing on a black and white chequered game board. The interplay between the character 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 versions of "A game like chess", 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 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 foreshadow one about to take place. Tavi from the *Codex Alera* series (Butcher 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 and the two play ludus whilst this happens. The game is used to imply Nasaug's tacit support for Tavi against the insane ritualist Sarl. In *The Thing* (Carpenter 1982), MacReady pours whiskey into the computer chess game, foreshadowing his frustration with technology and science when in dealing with the conflict between the creature that is slowly killing everyone and the helpless members of the research outpost. The most famous example of this is probably *Star Trek*, however, which often includes tri-dimensional chess in recreational scenes where the crew discuss the events going on or beat visiting members with secondary, more martial agendas.

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 with an absent or non-existent

opponent. Sherlock Holmes plays chess with himself, and Lord Vetinari of the Discworld novels plays Thud! (see below) 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). In the 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 H*arry 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 complimentary 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 via an argument. Here the effect is often comedic, but used to symbolize a lack of tactical prowess, differences between opponents. In *Going Postal* Crispin Horsefly's understanding of Thud! signifies his stupidity. A comedic example of this in the sitcom *Friends* 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 concluding "Chess!" (2001). This very quick scene is not only a typical use of chess in a very fleeting manner to make a quick point, but builds on the "nice but dim" nature of Joey and the eccentricity of free spirit Phoebe. As an avowed pacifist and a rather stupid beefcake, 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 *Through the Looking Glass* (Carroll 1871) 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) is still popular – in Scott Lynch's *Red Seas Under Red Skies* (2007), nobles play a variant of human chess whereby every time a game piece/person is captured, the opponent is allowed to enact any punishment besides death on them. The excessive nature of this example implies heavily that the human peices are ultimately powerless "lions" led by uncaring "donkeys", as well as drawing attention the disparities between class and power during conflict. (cf 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, and the examples would also start to deviate from wargaming. 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 turn to media texts which specifically deal with the wargame as a central narrative theme.

Iain Banks: *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.
>
> (Banks 1988: 76)

One of the most prolific wargame writers is Iain Banks (or, whilst wearing his
Science Fiction hat, Iain M Banks). Banks uses games in several of his books,
including *Complicity* (*Despot*) (1993), *Consider Phlebas* (*Damage*, *Hazard*) (1987)
and *The Steep Approach to Garbadale* (2007), 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 videogame
Civilization (Meier 1991), and Banks frequently described its inclusion in the book as
a justification for the huge amount of time he spent playing it. The initial description
and play style of Despot anticipate 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.

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

However, probably the most famous iteration of Banks' wargames is *Azad*, the titular game from *The Player of Games* (1988). The protagonist of the book, Jernau Gurgeh Morat, is a renowned games player from The Culture (Morat means 'game player' in The Culture's language, Marain). Bored of playing the same games and the lack of challenge they contain, Gurgeh is recruited by Special Circumstances, the covert arm of The Culture, to play *Azad*, a game so complex that it forms the basis of an entire society. 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 societial structure and ethics. Banks' typically socialist approach can be seen in the way that Gurgeh ultimately wins the game by playing more like The Culture than assimilating the aggressive, reductionist

tactics of the Azadians. Gurgeh's naivety at 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. When Gurgeh wins the game, the xenophobic Empire collapses:

> 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.

(296)

The Player of Games epitomizes some of the issues with representing fictional games through non-visual media. There are several apparent contradictions, 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 boards (perhaps like terrain) and that the pieces are organic:

> 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 ho hard the whole game was going to be.

(104)

As an example of this, *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. Towards 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 remits of a complex wargames, and many board games can be played between 2-6 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 Salwowoski and Richard Hopkinson both drew their covers of *The Player of Games* to suggest an alternate variant of chess.

Azad is clearly representative of a morally bankrupt society; in fact the parallels made throughout the book are often rather clumsy and overstated. As a result, *The Player of Games* has been called unsophisticated in comparison to many of Banks' other Culture books (Roberts 2013, MacGillivray 1996), and is known for being one of the more straightforward Culture novels in terms of plot and narrative style. It is interesting that here, the inclusion of a wargame seems to have made the narrative more direct, rather than reflecting a game as complicated as life itself.

Ender's Game

> Whereas most exciting controversial novels include one or two hot-button topics at most, Card's novel is composed of nothing but a half-dozen hot-button issues wrapped in a *bildungsroman*.
>
> (Broderick and Di Philipo 2012: 16)

Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* (1985) is a dramatic contrast to *The Player of Games,* since the political and social mores extolled in the book present an exact opposite to Banks' rather cheerful utopianism. *Ender's Game* is excessively dystopian, but the solutions that Card provides have caused considerable controversy and disquiet amongst scholars and critics (Kessel 2004, Radford 2007). Ender, a young boy from a violently dysfunctional family, is trained from a young age to become a military general alongside a group of children who are 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 programme extolls bullying and violence to determine strong leaders, and 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 murders 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, who have been involved in two intergalactic wars, presumably over territory. At the pinnacle 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 caused a genocide of the Bugger race; every Bugger in the vicinity died at the same moment as their Queen. Ender is horrified by what he has done, but the

government consider him a war hero. Later books chart Ender's attempts to reconcile these events.

Ender's Game has disturbed critics because of Card's unrepentant cruelty in the novel, as well as the Final Solution enacted upon the Buggers at the culmination of the novel. Card's underlying homophobia (implied in the racial nickname for the Buggers, but expressed more specifically elsewhere) is also accompanied by suggestions of racial superiority and misogyny throughout his writing. Card's depiction of a real event dissembling as a wargame points to one of the perennial issues with science fiction; the expression of politicized ideologies within a fantastical sphere. As with T*he Players of Games*, *Ender's Game* demonstrates that once again, and despite being a core component of the novel, the game is not really the thing. More, it is a metonymic plot device to underlie the manipulative nature of the civilization 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.

Wargames

Wargames (Badham 1983) is a Cold War thriller produced at the height of the Star Wars project in America. College student David Lightman (Matthew Broderick) is a typical slacker teen, more interested than playing videogames than studying. When he breaks into an unlisted computer called WOPR, the AI "Joshua" gives him a list of

options, ranging from Chess and Backgammon to *Theaterwide Biotoxic* and *Global Thermonuclear War*. Out of boredom, and to impress his girlfriend Jennifer Mack (Ali Sheedy), he chooses the last, unaware that the computer has 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 videogames – the graphics used to depict the NORAD war room are deliberately very similar to those of *Galaga* (1981), which Lightman is seen playing in the first scene of the movie; paranoia that distinguishing between real war and simulation/game was becoming increasingly difficult – NORAD are repeatedly fooled by Lightman and then WOPR; the 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 at 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 who pay little attention to the subtleties of their real world lives. This has little to do with the wargames aspect of the film and it is perhaps interesting that this message shares equal weight with that of warning us against the perils of

videogames themselves. As a result of Lightman's choices, both at the beginning on 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.

Changing Wargames

> There's a breathless hush in the Close to-night—
>
> Ten to make and the match to win—
>
> A bumping pitch and a blinding light,
>
> An hour to play and the last man in.
>
> And it's not for the sake of a ribboned coat,
>
> Or the selfish hope of a season's fame,
>
> But his captain's hand on his shoulder smote
>
> "Play up! play up! and play the game!"
>
> (Newbolt, "Vitai Lampada" 1892)

The last two examples in this chapter show how depicting wargames can move beyond simplistic literary representations to more complex discussions elsewhere. Here, games are used to reflect the adversarial nature of political machinations, but

develop in novel ways. In the first, Micheal Foreman's *War Game* (1993) discusses how war is quite specifically different from sporting competition, and in the second, the HBO series *Game of Thrones* (2011-present) assumes that the audience are sufficiently aware of the "war as game" trope, and all its manifestations, to move past it.

Micheal Foreman's *War Game* is a children's book about the First World War, painted in cheery watercolours and later the subject of an animated cartoon (Foreman and Nicholson 2001). Both film and book have won numerous awards. The story depicts four soldiers from the same rural village football team who take part in the Christmas Truce of 1914. On December 25th, 1914, an unofficial ceasefire in many areas of the French and Belgian Western Front, allowed soldiers to briefly emerge from the trenches and liaise with their opposite counterparts. Troops collected their dead, exchanged gifts, sung carols together and took part in several football matches along the lines. One of these football is still on display in the Imperial War Museum in London. Foreman's tale depicts four young Englishmen from the same village football team (named after Foreman's uncles, who all fought in the war), who sign up in 1914, and take part in the Truce and one of the football matches. The book gives a fairly straightforward retelling of the First World War, using the idea of the wargame to counterpoise the "Play Up and Play the Game" ethos of early recruitment drives (the book uses thematic sporting posters and propaganda as part of the text) with the reality of trench warfare. However, where it varies from most traditional WW1 narratives, which tend to be unremittingly awful from this point onwards, is by demonstrating how a game ultimately represented a simple point of commonality and brought both sides together. When the soldiers meet in No Man's Land, language

barriers prevent them from communicating effectively, however the game of football helps dissolve these. An common trope of war literature; the idea that the common soldier is not so different from his adversary, is demonstrated through the enjoyment and friendly rivalry that takes place during the match.

In *War Game*, the football match is seen as a unifying moment, with the competition it engenders a natural useful part of socialization. The realization by the recruits that war is certainly *not* a game is underscored by their regret when they part, and their exchanges of gifts and courtesies such as handshaking when the meeting ends and they have to return to their trenches. Racial otherness, which tends to be a strong element in "the opponent is devious" tropes, is deliberately removed, and Foreman's illustration of the match in the trenches is almost identical to the one shown earlier in the book of the young Englishmen playing together on the village green, with both Germans and English soldiers appearing as equals.

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

'QUOTE game of thrones *Kushiel's Dart* (Carey 2001) (note to editors – I have ordered a physical copy of this as only have it on the Kindle).

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 to see multiple perspectives of the same conflict. The frequent betrayals, assassinations and conflicts amongst 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 first book in *A Song of Ice and Fire*; *A Game of Thrones* (Martin 1996), uses a relatively generic phrase from fantasy literature to describe political intrigues. Jacqueline Carey uses the same term in *Kushiel's Dart* to describe politicking in the D'Angeline court (2003), and Robert Jordan uses the phrase "Game of Houses" in *The Wheel of Time* (Jordan 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 arc throughout the books.

A Song of Ice and Fire has been adapted by HBO into their most popular television series to date; renamed *Game of Thrones* (Benioff and Weiss 2011 – present) from this first book. The change of name places a stronger emphasis between wargame and warfare, rather than the more ambiguous "ice" and "fire" (variously discussed by fans to mean everything from relations between specific characters to a fight between dragons and the undead, both of which feature in the books). In the television series, *Game of Thrones* retains the emphasis on split narratives, although frequently edits

Martin's chronology in order to introduce a more coherent narrative to the watching 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 in the books they may have been interspersed throughout several books). *Game of Thrones* continues the motif of play in a global conflict through various means, the most notable of which is the opening credit sequence of the show. In this, the viewer takes a bird's flight across a steampunkesque 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 also 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 representing by a world tree still growing in the ashes.

This opening sequence directly connects a wargame 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 becoming 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 with the power to decide that, as Cersei Lannister asserts "When you play the game of thrones, you live, or you die. There is no middle ground" (Benioff and Weiss, 2011: 1.7).

Game of Thrones portrays a sophisticated response to wargaming; one which demonstrates a knowing relationship with the viewer. It does not matter if this 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 also contains other strong metaphors such as the encapsulation of the whole world within that of an orrery. 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 or overt. The books and series play true to this theme – despite the nuances of most characters, and a blurring between obviously "good" or "evil" characters, the political landscape is played out as a cut-throat, aggressive game.

Conclusion: "The only winning move is not to play".

The most memorable quote from *Wargames*; "The only winning move is not to play" 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 examples of wargaming in more popularist or well-known examples show wargaming in a negative light. Thousands of examples exist for the use of chess, most of which present the players as pursuing secondary agendas or involved in unsavory power struggles. 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. Some positive examples exist – Michael Foreman's *War Game* sees the game played within the wartime situation as a positive, unifying event, and HBO's *Game of Thrones* deliberately uses the idea of a

wargame to underscore the excitement and drama of the series in its opening sequence, but these more sophisticated uses of wargames are relatively unusual.

It is difficult, therefore, not to see the use of wargames in popular culture as a rather negative trope. Their inclusion certainly does nothing to disabuse traditional moral panics about games, seeing as they are often tied to undercurrents of violence or deviance. This trope is also rather trite, usually included to make a very simple point and appearing as a rather lazy shorthand in many texts. At the start of this chapter, Kirshenbaum suggested that wargames can be read as narratives, and subsequent examinations of wargaming writing have 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, looking towards readings like combat reportage and play examples as an alternative way to investigate more complex readings of wargaming in popular culture. 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; used to suggest political situations or relationships, but rarely drawn further into actual descriptions of functioning games themselves. Perhaps, then, this is as far as wargames can, or should go as representative tropes, but 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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[i] An exhaustive list that goes into a great deal more detail and examines many other representations of chess in popular culture is maintained at the link below. For this chapter, I have stuck to more martial examples. http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/TabletopGame/Chess