War Games

A History of Influential Strategy Games before the 19th Century

made by R.A.L. Villegas
1. Petteia and Latrunculis
2. Wei Chi
3. Chess and Variations
4. Fox and Geese
5. Alquerque and Draughts
6. Rithmomachia
7. Ouranomachia
8. Metromachia
9. Kriegsspiel diorama
10. Jane's Naval War Game set up
Exhibit Overview

This exhibit proposal will be an exposition of some of the most influential war and strategy games in history. The visitor will be guided through two rooms showcasing ancient, medieval and early 19th century games.

The first room is a simple hall consisting of exhibit cases with the following games in this order: Petteia/Ludus Latrunculum, Wei Chi, Chess and its variations, Fox and Geese, Alquerque and Draughts, Rithmomachia, Ouranomachia and Metromachia.

The second room will show Military practice games that were used during the 1800s and early 20th century: Kriegsspiel, and Jane’s Naval War Game. Near every exhibit case there will be a small screen patrons can interact with to see an animated demonstration of how each game would be played.

A third room will be available with copies of some of the games that were shown in the exhibits along with their respective rules of play. In this manner, the visitor will leave the exhibit with, not only familiarity with strategy and war gaming throughout human history, but experience the games themselves.

Notes on the Artifacts:

Petteia/Latrunulci board and pieces-Manufactured for exhibit, 12x12in.
Black Figure Neck-Amphora- On loan from the Getty Museum, 14 3/16 x 6 3/8 in.
Wei Chi board and pieces-Manufactured for exhibit, 19x19in.
Chess board and pieces-Manufactured/purchased for exhibit, 12x12in.
Chaturaji board and pieces-Manufactured for exhibit, 12x12in.
Courier Chess board and pieces-Manufactured for exhibit, 10x14in.
Tamerlane Chess board and pieces-Manufactured for exhibit, 12x13in.
Lewis Chessmen- Figures on loan from the British Museum.
Alquerque board and pieces-Manufactured for exhibit, 7x7in
Draughts/Checkers board and pieces-Manufactured for exhibit, 12x12 in
Rithmomachy board and pieces-Manufactured for exhibit, 17x9in.
Ouranomachia board and pieces-Manufactured for exhibit, 17x17in.
Metromachia board and pieces-Manufactured for exhibit, 52x33in.
Fred Jane’s Naval Wargame- game set up built for exhibit, 4’x5’
Kriegsspiel game chest- On loan from Palace Charlottenburg in Berlin, 6’x6’
Ancient and Medieval games

The practice of simulating war through a recreational device has been around for much longer than some care to imagine.

In the ancient world, boardgames were used to recreate war scenarios and to reinforce the practices of strategizing, planning, and critical thinking. Some of these games were simple in execution but can still be recognized as war games.

The following are some of the more influential examples of the history of human gaming endeavors.

1) Petteia and Ludus Latrunculorum

Although the details about Petteia are not well documented, we know that it was played in Greece since, at least, the second Century AD. What we know about how the game is played comes to us from mentions in ancient writings. Julius Pollux, a Greek writer of the second century AD wrote about the movements of pieces which is similar to how the rook would move on a chess board.
The Romans played a variation of Petteia called Ludus Latrunculorum or Latrunculi. Although play of this game was almost exactly the same as in Petteia, it includes one additional piece that we can refer to as a general or a king. It is suspected that many variations of the game circulated throughout the empire. Ludus Latrunculorum was first mentioned by Marcu Varro in his book ‘De Lingua Latina.’

2) Wei Chi

Wei Chi, alternately known as 'Go', (meaning encircling game) is an Asian game originating in China more than 2,500 years ago. Stone boards have been discovered that date back to before 200AD. The game is mentioned in many sources, it's earliest written reference being in the historical annal Zuo Zhuan in about the fourth century BC. Other written records suggest that the game was being played in Japan, China, and Korea much before AD1000.

The game has been built in various sizes since its inception, with boards as small as 9x9 to, the now standard size, 19x19. Although the game has had a strong following and popularity through out all of Asia, it's spread into the west did not come into effect until the 19th century, when the German scientist Oskar Korschelt wrote a treatise on the game.
Chess is believed to have originated in India at some point between AD 400 and AD 600. Its earliest form is known as Chaturaji or Chaturanga (meaning four armies). This early form consisted of a grid about 8x8 and the use of dice and the objective remained the same as chess today: to corner the opposing player's king until it has no possible moves.

Unlike Chess however, in Chaturaji you could not move the pieces at will, but rather relied on the use of dice to choose pieces to move. There is also evidence that suggests that this game was played for money.

Another version of Chess that was particularly popular in Germany is known as Courier Chess and it dates back as far as the 12th century. Other enlarged Chess games were very popular as well perhaps because of the desire to represent the complexities and realism of war through a recreational activity.
4) Fox and Geese

A game that proved to have a great amount of popularity and resilience is Fox and Geese. A fairly simple game that began during the middle ages and was the inspiration for many other war themed games right to the middle of the twentieth century. At first conceived as a conflict between a fox and seventeen geese, by the beginning of the 1800s it was a representation of a siege on a castle.

Many of its alterations were made into bigger games; soon the fox was exchanged for two officers and the geese into twenty four besieging soldiers. The game was reprinted almost constantly until the mid 20th century. These reprints include German Tactics, Belagerungsspiel and Fortification.

5) Alquerque and Draughts

The game of Alquerque or Qirkat is one whose origins are not known. It is thought to have originated in the middle east, its first mention being in the late 10th century by Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani in the Book of Songs. The game became more influential during the crusades where it reached the Iberian peninsula, where it was mentioned in a manuscript for King Alphonso of Castille in 1283.

During medieval times the game went through some variations and was eventually adapted to a chessboard, creating what we today know as Draughts or Checkers. Since then, Checkers has enjoyed a popularity almost as extensive and influential as that of Chess.
6) Philosopher's Game

The Philosopher's Game (also known as Rithmomachy or the Battle of Numbers) is evidence of the desire for more complex and intricate options when it came to strategy gaming. The origin of the game itself is not well known, but medieval scholars often attributed its creation to Pythagoras. A Cambridge scholar named William Fulke wrote treatises about Rithmomachy, in which he augmented the rules and playing variations.

Although the game was not popular with the masses, it enjoyed a great deal of acclaim and a strong following in intellectual circles and universities of Europe. By the end of the 17th century the game had all but disappeared until it was rediscovered by historians in the early 20th century.

7) Ouranomachia

Ouranomachia or Battle of the Planets was a mathematical astronomical game revived and redesigned by English puritan and scholar William Fulke. Although the roots of the game are not clearly defined, a similar game was described in the manuscript drawn for King Alphonso of Castille in 1283. William Fulke's contributions to the rules and gameplay however, turn the game into his invention.
8) Metromachia

Invented by William Fulke, and inspired by his previous involvements with Ouranomachia and Rithmomachia, Metromachia was a highly complex war game in which two armies faced off across a field in order to siege the opposing army’s castle and claim victory. Although the pieces and the board of the game differ, the complicated methods of capture are very similar to that of the Philosopher’s Game. The game boasted highly detailed rules which tried to portray a more realistic comparison to actual warfare. However, because of this very reason, the game was virtually unplayable and never became popular with scholars or the public.
Through the rise of more complex games, the desire to depict war in a realistic way through the recreational tool of games was taken with more seriousness. Once introduced into the military, war games eventually became not only useful, but mandatory training exercises in some armies.

These games demonstrated their value by educating rookie officers in the complexities of warfare with just a few minute overview of the game's rules. The interest in military usage for these exercises was a dominant factor in the popularity that war gaming earned from the 19th century onward.

9) Kriegsspiel

One breakthrough that established war games as a serious aid in military training happened in 1811, when a civilian named Herr von Reisswitz was invited to the castle in Berlin to demonstrate a war game he invented to Princes Wilhelm and Friedrich. This was an early form of the game ‘Kriegsspiel’. In 1812 Reisswitz presented a more complete version of the game to King Wilhelm III. By 1824 the popularity of the game had spread to the generals of the Prussian Army, who praised the game’s military worth as well as its entertainment value.
General von Mueffling stated in an article that previous attempts at representing war in a way which is entertaining yet practical for military use had ‘always left a large gap between the serious business of warfare and the more frivolous demands of a game.’ He commended Reisswitz however in presenting a game which was simple enough to be understood by anyone who had not been engaged in similar practice before.

By 1837 Kriegsspiel became a permanent feature of the Prussian army for the rest of the century. At the end of the Franco-Prussian war in 1871, the game and its influence had spread throughout most of Europe.

10) Jane's Naval War Game

In 1898 Fred Jane, the editor of the magazine 'All the World's Fighting Ships' published the rules of a naval game he invented. The rules were described as a form of 'Sea Kriegsspiel' and soon became extensively popular with naval officers in England. As soon as 1912, a second iteration of the rules was published. The game received wide acclaim and was used as a practical exercise in predicting the outcome of future military procedures by the Russian, Japanese, English and American military.