USING WARGAMES IN THE CLASSROOM
TO TEACH HISTORICAL THOUGHT

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The brigade moved stealthily along the trees preparing to enter the broad span of pastoral fields that separated them from two entire corps of Union infantry. There was not too much to see as the artillery barrage had left the field almost entirely enveloped in a shroud of smoke. Yet, as occasional puffs of wind blew columns of haze so that a brief glimpse of the opposing ridge could be seen, the commanders were having second thoughts. The Confederate commander expressed <u>her</u> opinion: "Perhaps General Longstreet was correct and we would have been better off attacking around their left flank. Move the army towards Little Round Top as we did on the 2nd and let's try our luck there." Thus, the Battle of Gettysburg changed entirely on that fateful day in <u>March 2006</u>.

As you read this brief account, you probably started to develop an image based on the little information I provided. You might have had some inkling even that the battle being described was the Battle of Gettysburg during the American Civil War. Your thoughts, however, probably began to falter as you saw "<u>her</u> opinion" and the reference to a call by James Longstreet to go around the flank of the Union Army. While the battle students "fought" in my classroom had a much different outcome than the historical event of July 1863, the students were engaged actively in understanding history. This activity required students to fully develop an interpretation of what actually happened before they could embrace a separate and alternative history. The end result was an encounter with primary and secondary sources, an understanding of historical process, and an activity in which students freely explored the discipline of historical thought. Yet throughout the activity students thought they were merely exploring a game to celebrate the successful completion of their unit on the American Civil War.

This essay describes an idea for an interesting teaching strategy for history classrooms. I will provide a brief overview of the history of the wargame, specifically its original developments and also its introduction into civilian life. Next, I will add the idea of historical thought, particularly the idea of historical imagination as proposed by British philosopher R.G. Collingwood. The implications of Collingwood's ideas will then be applied to historical gaming. Finally, I will illustrate how this strategy can be implemented in classrooms and how it can be intertwined with historical thinking.

Before starting down this path, however, a few points need to be provided as disclaimers of information. First, I do not intend to make light of the serious subject of war. As John Keegan has affirmed, it is impossible to describe fully what the individual

soldier would experience during war unless you have been there.[1] While many students who might participate in this activity, primarily adolescent boys and young men, think that the war is "cool" or akin to some glorified Hollywood movie, by the end of the activity many of these emotions have been mollified by the understanding that their losses in reality would have been a tragic number of men. In essence, the activity provides students with the opportunity to grasp how horrible war is. The efforts of this strategy have the benefit of putting a face on the battle, much as Keegan's work did.

Second, this strategy could be implemented in classrooms where instructors promote historical thought and method at almost any academic level, from middle school through high school to college level.[2] Finally, this article is the result of an action research study that I conducted in an eighth-grade classroom of two sections at a rural Midwestern school. The two sections each contained twenty students with a homogenous ethnic composition. I believe that this had a minimal impact upon the general nature of this research, knowing that there are problems unique to the use of this strategy with any student population. Overall I wish to present the strategy as one tool a teacher can use in the classroom to explore the teaching of historical method.

The History of the Wargame

Nobility has treated war as a game since the sixth-century CE innovation of "Shaturanga" in India.[3] In Europe, the wargame developed along with the game of chess. The Scandinavians had a game called "King's Table" that recalled the battles

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[1] John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: Viking Press, 1976). This is an important work that explores what the common soldier would have experienced at three different battles in history: Agincourt, Waterloo, and the Somme.

[2] Some of the current research on the topic of historical thought in lower grade levels comes from Bruce VanSledright of the University of Maryland, Keith Barton of Northern Kentucky University, and Jere Brophy of Michigan State University. Collectively, these authors have had success with different elements of teaching history to young individuals, but all indicate that there will be tradeoffs in teaching historical method to these students. See Bruce VanSledright, *In Search of America's Past: Learning How to Read History in Elementary School* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 2002); Bruce Barton, "'I Just Kinda Know': Elementary Students' Ideas About Historical Evidence," *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 25 (Fall 1997), 407–430; Bruce Barton, "'Bossed Around by the Queen': Elementary Students' Understanding of Individuals and Institutions in History," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*, 12 (Summer 1997), 290–314; and Jere Brophy and Bruce VanSledright, *Teaching and Learning History in Elementary Schools* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 1997).

[3] See "The Chess Page," http://www.stmoroky.com/games/chess/chess.htm#shaturanga. Some people contend the early form of "Go" can be traced back to the late twenty-third century BCE.

between the Muscovites and the Swedes.[4] Chess was also used as a game to help reinforce basic thinking and critical thinking in war for the European nobility. Eventually one of the variants of chess, "War Chess," inspired a Prussian war counselor to create a new game in 1811 to help teach his son the finer points of war.[5] This game, "Kriegspiel," broke from the traditional chessboard and accepted European chess rules. "Kriegspiel" was played on a large table covered in sand with representative pieces of terrain laid on top. Wooden blocks represented the different parts of a general's army. Counselor Baron von Reisswitz created a set of complex tables to control movement, the imposition of casualties, and other factors. To allow for the unpredictability of the battlefield, a die was used to account for attrition and other random events.[6] The mechanics of the game relied on a referee to adjudicate the game. The players sent their orders to a referee and after consulting the field and the tables, and making any necessary die rolls, the referee informed each side of information only the participants of the battle would know about on the field. The field would be adjusted for the next set of orders and the game continued. Herr von Reisswitz created not only a practical military learning aid, but also broke new ground in game mechanics as well. Reisswitz hoped the game proved useful to his son whom the game was originally intended to teach about the ways of war.[7]

Reisswitz's son utilized his father's game as a way to help train his fellow officers in war as many of them lacked experience. To add realism to the experience, the table of sand was substituted with an accurate map. Upon seeing the game, the Prussian Chief of Staff, General Karl von Muffling, was amazed at its potential for instruction and exclaimed: "It's not a game at all, it's training for war. I shall recommend it enthusiastically to the whole army."[8] The Prussian Officer Corps held a fascination with wargaming and pondered the pressing military questions of their

[4]For more on "King's Table," see "King's Table: Game of the Noble Scandinavians," http://www.pbm.com/~lindahl/articles/kings_table.html.

[5]Frank Brewster, II., "Using Tactical Decision Exercises to Study Tactics," *Military Review* (Nov./Dec. 2002), on-line edition, http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/milreview/brewster.pdf.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Ibid. Reisswitz's son eventually became a Prussian artillery officer. Additionally, Matthew Caffrey noted well that many historians do not credit the invention of "Kriegspiel" to Reisswitz since he only intended the game to teach his son. Matthew B. Caffrey, "A History Based Theory of Wargaming," http://www.galaxy.gmu.edu/ACAS/ACAS00-02/CaffreyMatthew/CaffreyMatthew.pdf.

[8]Caffrey.

recent experiences, specifically how Napoleon defeated the Prussian Army even though the Prussians held numerous advantages over their French enemy.[9]

The visionary foresight of General Hellmuth von Moltke changed the purpose of the wargame from a teaching tool to a theoretical laboratory and a curriculum component of the Prussian War College. Moltke analyzed the potential invasion corridors of enemies and the Prussian army's probable path of invasion into other countries. After having initially studied the theories and visited the site in question, the War College students proposed numerous plans of invasion and theories as to how the "next war" would be fought. The Prussian officers then played wargames on maps designed to bring out the best battle plans from the student body of the War College.

The results of the game were checked for validity and then kept as a manual to fight the next war.[10] The Prussian War Game evolved to include components often used in today's games such as break points or to help determine when a unit would quit fighting in a real war situation. By the end of World War II, Germany had accounted for logistics, Fifth Column fighters, and even industrial capabilities of countries. The innovations created by the Germans led to adoption of the wargame by virtually every industrialized nation's armies by the start of the twentieth century.[11]

While most of the armies played wargames to prepare for the next conflict their state would face, some civilians began to play wargames as a pastime, especially in England. The great science fiction writer, H.G. Wells, deserves credit for the rise in the popularity of the wargame with the publication of a book called *Little Wars*.[12] When compared to the professional wargames of the twentieth century, *Little Wars* tended to be a crude version of a game, but the game provided the first innovation in wargames for a commercial market. It was a playable set of rules for people without military experience as it used small metal soldiers, which represented the units on the

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[9]Michael Kernan, "Outsmarting Napoleon," *Smithsonian Magazine* (September 1999), on-line edition, http://smithsonianmag.com/issues/1999/september/mall_sep99.php.

[10]Brewster. After having executed a particular phase of a plan in a wargame, Moltke would review the plan and then decide if it was feasible. If the plans were appropriate, Moltke would then have the primary units involved in the plan execute their assigned maneuvers to ensure what was being asked of the soldiers could actually be done. It arguably led to an ultimate war machine as Prussia met virtually every challenge under Moltke's leadership for over fifty years.

[11]Officers of the United States Army utilized a game called "Strategos." C. Totten, *Strategos: The American Game of War* (New York: Appleton and Company, 1880). This classic of American military thought was available from Kansas State University's Hale Library.

[12]Kernan, "Outsmarting Napoleon."

battlefield.[13] Wells's game originated from games played during his childhood that have been played by children throughout history. Wells and his friends used small toy soldiers and a child's play gun that fired a small projectile to play various games. As he became a bit older, Wells proposed that "if one set up a few obstacles on the floor, volumes of the *British Encyclopedia* and so forth, to make a Country, and moved these soldiers and guns about, one could have a rather good game, a kind of Kriegspiel."[14]

While not the type of wargame the armies of Europe used, *Little Wars* offered a published set of rules to the world. For the first time, civilians could play a structured wargame that addressed movement of the various branches of armies, helped them calculate casualties, and—possibly the most important element of homemade wargames—helped them set up the two forces.[15] This game started a new movement, the playing of wargames for recreation. It had been a diversion for aristocrats of Europe; now ordinary people could recreate wars in their homes sparking a gaming revolution that would grow as an industry throughout the twentieth century, celebrating in particular the wars of Napoleon, the American Civil War, and World War II. Hobbyists became amateur historians and they took their passion seriously.[16] Perhaps, the true value (and attraction) of the wargame can be summed up best in the words of H.G. Wells: "How much better is this amiable miniature than the real thing."[17]

Construction as a Means of Interpretation

Using miniatures in the classroom is designed to develop and spark understanding of the nature of historical thought for novice thinkers, such as intermediate, middle, secondary, and lower-level college students. As a way of promoting understanding, Lynn Speer-Lemisko has theorized using the ideas of R.G. Collingwood in the classroom, particularly the use of the historical imagination as a means of helping students construct historical knowledge. In this method, the teacher would have

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[13]Jim Dunningan, "History of Wargames," http://www.hyw.com/Books/WargamesHandbook/5-histor.htm.

[14]H.G. Wells, *Little Wars: A game for boys from twelve years of age to one hundred and fifty & for that more intelligent sort of girl who likes boys' games and books*: *with an appendix on Kriegspiel* (London: Arms and Armor Press, 1970). Note: this edition is a facsimile of the original 1913 edition.

[15]Ibid.

[16]For a description of the evolution of wargaming in the latter half of the twentieth century, see P. Young and J.P. Lawford, *Charge! How to Play War Games* (London: Morgan-Grampian, 1967), D.F. Featherstone, *Advanced War Games* (London: Stanley Paul, 1969), and C.F. Wessencraft, *Practical Wargaming* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1974).

[17]Wilbur Gray, "A Short History of the Wargame," http://nhmgs.org/articles/historyofwargaming.html.

students utilize three main aspects of Collingwood's understanding of the historical imagination: re-enactment, interpolation, and interrogating.[18] In addition to Speer-Lemisko's idea of utilizing the historical imagination, Collingwood suggested several particulars of what historians do and how they construct knowledge: source analysis and the understanding that everyone is an historian.[19] With these assumptions, the strategy of the wargame is useful to help students understand how historians can develop accounts that are accurate about what actually happened.[20]

Re-enactment is how researchers of history think themselves into the historical situation in order to understand and properly imagine past human activity and thought. This process involves immersing the student of history deeply into the sources available. By thinking about historical events from the perspective of the subjects, it might be possible for the historian to come to conclusions similar to those of the historical figure. Collingwood stressed that re-enactment can be achieved as "far as the historian brings to bear on the problem all the powers of his own mind and all his knowledge."[21] The wargame offers students the opportunity to visit an accurate model of how wars were fought in history, thus giving possible insight to emotions, the human activity of war, and might pose higher level questions such as why individuals would risk so much to fight in a particular war.

Interpolation refers to the process of deciphering what the sources provide the historian. This might be a difficult task as the sources might not say specifically what the author of the source meant.[22] In addition to clarifying what sources say, interpolating refers to the filling of gaps. Interpolating also helps promote the historical imagination, as the historian must use imagination to fill the gaps. As Collingwood noted, not only is this desirable by the historians to help construct a more accurate picture, it is required if history is to be recorded or the study completed.[23]

The critical thinking involved in evaluating sources composes the interrogating of sources. According to Collingwood, to accept sources at face value is a grievous error. Not only does the failure of interrogation prevent the appropriate connection

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[18]L. Speer-Lemisko, "The Historical Imagination: Collingwood in the Classroom," *Canadian Social Studies*, 38 (Winter 2004), online edition,
http://www.quasar.ualberta.ca/css/Css_38_2/ARhistorical_imagination_collingwood.htm.

[19]R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, Jan van der Dussen, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946).

[20]Speer-Lemisko.

[21]Collingwood, 215.

[22]Speer-Lemisko.

[23]Collingwood, 241.

between sources, but also it might provide a false sense of the story. A source taken out of context could skew a story in the wrong direction and result in an inaccurate version of the imaged story. Interrogation is a critical component of Collingwood's source analysis and provides further understanding into the world of the historian: The interpretation of sources, then, is the formal element of history, counterbalancing the material element that is the source itself. Without these two elements, there is no history. And whereas the sources themselves have to be found, collected, and assembled by the historian as data that limit the field of his activity, the work of interpreting proceeds according to principles that he creates out of nothing for himself; he does not find them ready-made but has to decide upon them by an act of something like legislation. The "receptivity" of the historian towards his sources is counterbalanced by his "spontaneity" in respect of the principles by which he interprets them.[24] At its heart this formal element of history is accessible to everyone.

Collingwood argued that history is the attempt to understand the present by analyzing the past and predicting how it might be useful in the future. History is similar to problem solving and can be considered one of the most significant modes of thought and in general is common to all. While this example does not necessarily promote the use of the wargame, it is important to keep in mind that any time historical thought is in use, an individual understands further how to solve problems. These problems not only reflect on finding and using information, interpreting sources, and presenting information, but every time a student looks back on how someone has completed something, it requires an individual to look at how a similar problem might have been solved. In the words of Collingwood, "everyone is an historian."[25]

The Wargame and Historical Thought

With the considerations regarding the nature of historical interpretation in mind, a connection between the historical imagination and the wargame can become a natural strategy for use in the classroom. The question becomes what role this strategy should play in instruction. In considering this role, one should understand that this strategy takes a considerable amount of time and resources to implement successfully in class. This limits its wide-scale implementation on a regular basis in most classrooms. The three roles identified as meaningful uses of the strategy are celebratory, exploratory, and historiographical.

The celebratory aspect of the strategy would be useful to provide closure to a unit, allow for enrichment for those interested in the subject matter covered in the unit, and provide a reward system for effort and work during the unit. This aspect provides a worthwhile academic reward as opposed to a celebration not related to subject matter.

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[24]Collingwood, 368–369.

[25]Collingwood, 422.

In a similar vein, the exploratory element of the wargame strategy allows students to make initial forays into a unit or subject matter that would serve as a wonderful motivating set for kinesthetic and active learners, which accurately describes many students. In addition, the exploratory viewpoint would be useful for students who desire to go more in-depth in studying an historical event or time period.[26] The historiographical aspect of the strategy involves the teaching of historical thought and method. As noted earlier, VanSledright, Brophy, and Barton have all produced valid arguments for elementary-level students and older to be involved in historical thought.

The game provides the student with a viable framework to begin the imagination process. By allowing students to explore uniforms, rules, and scenarios of a particular period, the student can place events in context. An example from the annual American Civil War battle fought in my eighth-grade American history course illustrates this point. The rules award a bonus when the Confederates charge in a battle prior to 1864 and another bonus for the firing of any Union unit. These bonuses are based on historical evidence citing a better Confederate esprit de corps and also better Union technology. By comparing historical sources with these rules, a realistic picture can be developed by students studying history. Additionally, students can analyze different types of sources. Whether it is a report from the *Official Records of the American Civil War* or a biography of a soldier of the war, students now must use the skills of historical imagination to establish a firm foundation for understanding.

Implementing the Wargame in the Classroom

Teachers need to acquire several items to implement the game successfully and should be prepared for some financial commitment and a greater time commitment. It is important for teachers to explore exactly what periods would be worthy of study and how to complete the activity in the classroom. Teachers need the following components as a minimum to get started: large tables or a sheet of plywood, a set of rules to guide gameplay, and either miniatures or paper soldiers to manipulate on the board. Beyond these basic requirements, other items add to the aesthetic effect of the experience.

A playing surface about the size of a piece of plywood allows students to recreate almost any battle from history pending the rules set used. I use a piece of plywood reinforced on two desks. Originally the plywood was covered in a green blanket that subsequently has been replaced with a green thick paper sheet intended for use in railroad dioramas. A simple board painted green could be used as well. The key element is to have a sizable table for students to gather around as well as play the game.

Rules can be acquired from different places. On the Internet, a simple set of rules can be found by searching for "free wargame rules" on a search engine. This will

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[26]Matt Fritz, http://www.juniorgeneral.org. Fritz's website is especially useful for novices in wargaming. In addition to wonderful introductory materials, Fritz has free downloads to help someone get started with basic wargaming.

provide several different choices based on time period and the type of game to be played, whether a recreation of a small scale battle or a grand tactical battle such as a corps-level re-enactment of Gettysburg. If desired, teachers can acquire a commercial set of rules to fight a battle. Several sets of commercial rules also provide further instruction in how to set up terrain, paint miniatures, and improve games, both in terms of realism and aesthetics. While searching on the Internet for sources to consult, a simple request of information from an established gamer should elicit a good amount of assistance and some great advice to help a teacher set up a game in class. Furthermore teachers who have access to a hobby store would be well worth the time to visit for ideas.[27]

Finally, a gamer will need to decide what pieces to use. A teacher just starting out might want to consult the Internet to locate paper soldiers that can be printed out for free, plastic miniatures that can be purchased rather cheaply, or pewter miniatures that are probably the longest lasting and most aesthetically pleasing to use. Paper miniatures are the cheapest and offer the least amount of time preparation. However, the issue of durability might cause teachers to consider having to redo these each year. Plastic miniatures have a small cost, but they also will require some painting and maintenance to last for an extended time. My preference is pewter miniatures. These pieces create the finest look on the table, have a rather durable quality to them, and give a remarkable level of realism for the student looking over the board.[28]

Conclusion

In this article, I have detailed a brief history of the wargame, discussed historical thought processes, described a rationale for how the wargame can be used in relation to historical thinking, and offered a brief explanation of what teachers would need to do to incorporate the wargame into their classrooms. The idea is relatively in its infancy and further research should be done to find ways to promote historical thought in the students. Presently, there is a call among historians to promote the teaching of history in an applied manner rather than through the recitation of facts. This call should not go unheeded as much more can be done to promote history among our students. The net result of this strategy is promotion of student thought and interest in history. If completed successfully, the classroom lives up to the promise of being a laboratory of history.

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[27]For my American Civil War game, I use a commercial set of rules: "Fire and Fury." This is the leading large-scale miniature rules for that period. For other periods, I have found free rules on the Internet and have had a great amount of success using them.

[28]I get Civil War miniatures from Stone Mountain Miniatures in Brighton, CO, http://www.historicalminiatures.com. For other periods, since I do not regularly game those periods on my own, I use either plastic for my annual Middle Ages game or paper for spontaneous gaming at school. One key to choosing successfully is to network with other gamers.