‘Wargames: From Gladiators to Gigabytes’
By Martin Van Creveld
Review by Rob Morgan

Hello! I wondered what I’d find when I picked this book up -- a review copy, and one not properly placed in any section of the library as yet. This is a fascinating book, very broad in what it covers. Yet it has a value for every wargamer, solo or in any society or club, and gaming in any period, on land, air or at sea.

It’s a tale of how, why and where. From the concepts of hunting, and of combat sport, and indeed of the ‘combat of champions,’ the book moves to the war games of emperors and gladiators. The author moves on seamlessly, to the complex medieval concept of ‘trial by combat,’ the rise and fall of the tournament, and indeed the slow development of the duel up to modern times is dealt with and remarkably well too!

The early board war games and chess to the introduction of miniatures by the Prussian father and son team von Reisswitz in Bonaparte’s time are dealt with, and this is a long section which thoroughly -- and I do mean thoroughly -- examines the splendid, effective German developments in war games during the 19th century. Until I read this volume, the detail of the legendary Militar-Wochensblatt of Prussia, publishing a weekly wargame scenario from the 1820s onwards, was little more than a whisper of possibility. In this section of the book, there’s a must-read chapter entitled ‘By the Throw of the Dice.’ Here the book broadens slightly to the political-military games of the 20th century states, but is interesting nevertheless.

By the way, few pages in this book go without a note or a reference on a volume, article or magazine linked to the subject. This is superbly well-written material.

Some of the information on military and naval manoeuvres, especially in the run-up to 1914, and between the great wars, was delightful, in one or two places
it was hard not to laugh out loud! This section is entitled Toil & Sweat (But no Blood!). On the book goes, and I wondered at this point if anyone amongst our readership has encountered a best selling volume entitled A Handbook of Infantry Tactics for Paintball? Setting the potential outcomes aside, this might be worth a glance. I wondered if it owed anything to Rommel’s classic on the subject? Van Creveld also deals very neatly with re-enactment and re-enactors (well, they are wargamers after all).

The section Enter the Computer, dealing with post-1945 wargame developments -- that both historical and contemporary games, of course -- is to my mind not the best of Van Creveld’s text, but its facts and its accuracy are not to be denied. Incidentally, as far as wargames reads are concerned, the author mentions one book Ender’s Game by Orson Scott Card (1977) which is perhaps the ultimate computer war game book so far published. The final chapter The Female of the Species is apt. It links women and games of war, utterly true in every respect, but he makes one simple mistake. Women can both wargame and play the game of war. And win, of course.

This is a superb all-embracing book on the world’s second oldest pastime. I won’t call it a hobby! I recommend it to every one of you. My only criticism is that though there are vast footnotes and comments on most pages, and ample references, there is no bibliography. That’s a shame, as it would or could have presented a vast canon of written work on games of war, and a canon developed and published over centuries.

Excellent!

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