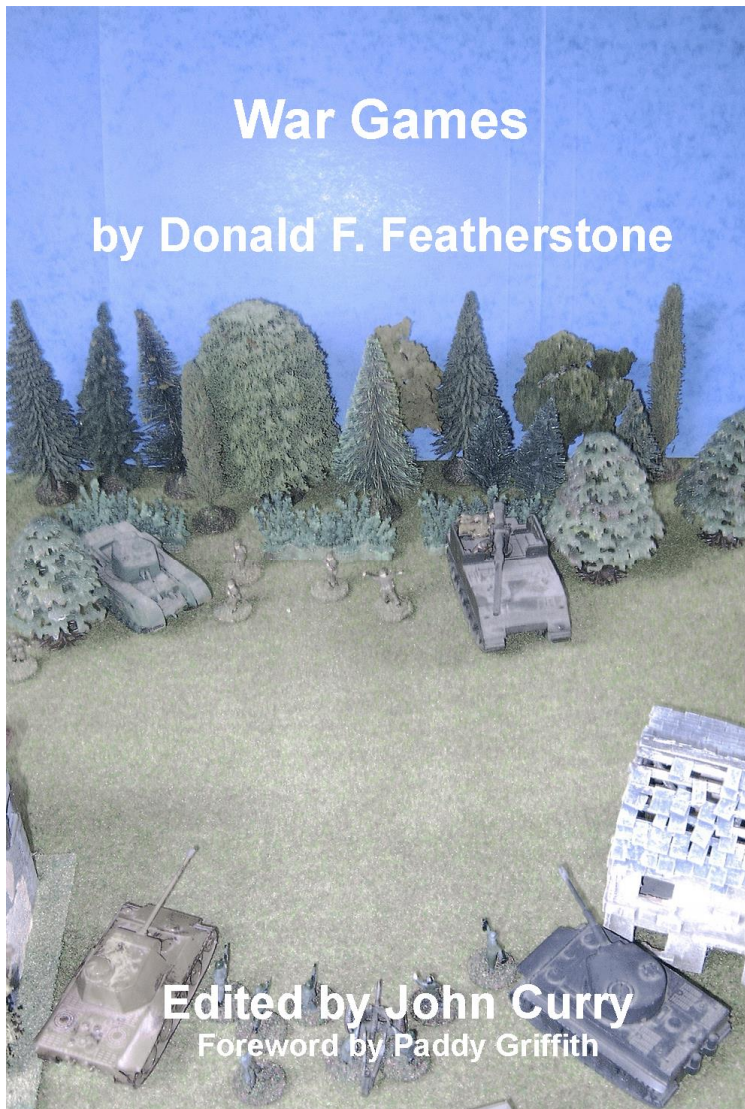


'War Games'

By Donald Featherstone

Review by Paul Le Long

Well what can I say about this, the book that started it all for modern wargaming? Let me start by saying that under review here is the original from 1962; there is a reprint by John Curry as part of his History of Wargaming Project but since I don't have that I don't know what, if anything, is different in the new edition. (The cover illustration, however, is of the John Curry reprint. Ed.)



It seems odd to review this grand old masterpiece of wargaming in the same way as the other classics, given its significance and influence. I'll start by just saying what's in the book before moving on to consider the book as a whole and its place in the hobby.

The first chapter is What Are War Games? This is a basic (to modern readers at least) description of the hobby and its roots. This is followed by a chapter on model soldiers ó the only figures available at the time were 54mm, 40mm, 30mm, OO gauge, and flats. Then we move to a chapter on terrain which again shows its age and illustrates very well the comparative paucity of materials available to the wargamer in 1962.

Chapter 4 ó Organizing a Campaign is also very basic, concentrating on linked battles and some simple

advice on using maps. This is followed by a very short chapter How to Start a Wargame which again offers some very simple advice that modern readers would take for granted but that in 1962 was revolutionary.

Then we have a series of chapters on rules and battles. There is a set of rules for Ancients, Horse and Musket and Modern Warfare. Each is very simple ó roll xD6 (did any other dice even exist in 1962?) and for every score of 4+ you kill an enemy soldier. Alongside each set of rules is a battle narrative ó the Ancient rules are described by a battle set in Tony Bath's Hyboria setting, Horse and Musket by an ACW battle and the Modern rules by WWII British and Germans.

The final chapter is Solo War Games ó only a few pages but nevertheless nice to see it represented even if soloists are depicted as unlucky friendless people forced by circumstance to fend for themselves. Here we have some brief advice on map campaigns and chance cards and some words of wisdom on soloists being able ó with only themselves to please ó to fight skirmish battles and picket actions that would otherwise be of little interest to time-limited normal gamers trying to fight the battle of Austerlitz in time to get the last bus home from an opponent's house. There is even some early advice on play by mail here.

The book is rounded off by a set of appendices ó rules for "close" wars (skirmishes set in close terrain) is a bit out of place here. The other appendices are sources of model soldiers, further reading, war games literature and further aids for war games, as well as the equally out of place "Lionel Tarr Periscope."

These appendices are almost laughably out of date now and that brings me on to the second part of this review. As a book on war games, the modern gamer will learn nothing here, the advice is basic and terribly dated. The rules and scenarios have a simplicity and charm that is hard to define but if you are looking for a good introduction to the hobby, you will find much better elsewhere.

But that is not the point really. What struck me when re-reading this book is that there was nothing before it. This book was truly ground-breaking. It is clear from its pages that the author was blazing a trail ó there was for example a real dearth of figures available at the time ó most of the scales described are museum pieces or a novelty backwater now ó there were no 28 (or even 25!) mm figures, still less, 15mm, 10mm or 6mm. Even 20mm Airfix figures which the modern gamer will consider very old, were not yet available except for a very few of the very earliest sets. The author's German tanks featured in the book are home-made with plaster of Paris! And if you wanted terrain you had to either buy railway modeller's terrain or build it yourself. And what could you read? In the section on wargames literature there isn't anything(!) just a few books on uniforms.

It is very striking when reading this book that wargaming in 1962 was a new concept. This book was the fountainhead for the hobby as we know it today ó what had gone before was HG Wells and the games played by professional general staffs. Here for the first time was a game for ordinary people using figures and terrain that they had probably had to construct themselves, using rules that we now consider old-school but which then were cutting edge.

It would be very easy, taken out of context, to criticise this book. Does it offer anything to the modern gamer? No. But it embodies the history of our hobby and this lends it a charm and a value that stands independent of its actual contents. It is an instructive read for the jaded modern gamer used to the ready availability of figures, terrain, rules and much else.

Recommended as a piece of history.

Details:

- ☐ **Paperback:** 158 pages
- ☐ **Publisher:** lulu.com (7 Aug 2009)
- ☐ **ISBN-10:** 1409216764
- ☐ **ISBN-13:** 978-1409216766

This is the John Curry reissue currently selling for £11.66 on Amazon.