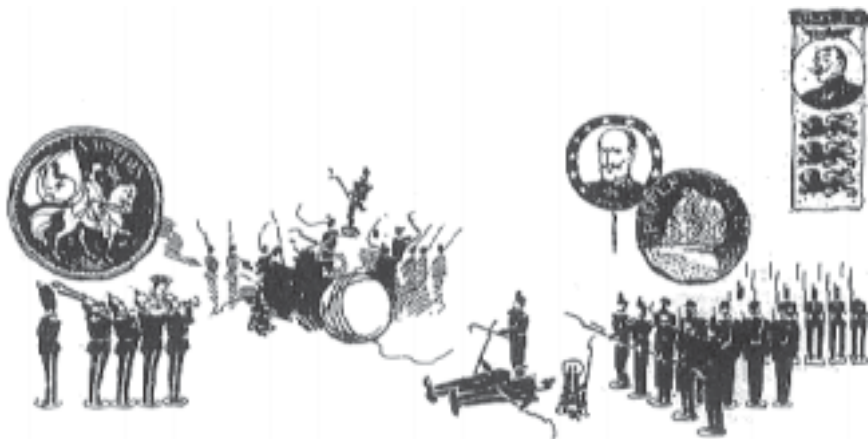


Stevenson at Play



By Robert Louis Stevenson
With an Introduction by Lloyd Osbourne
and a Foreword by Michael J. Varhola

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Austrian Staff Officers Watching the Progress of Battle, Albrecht Adam (1815)

Foreword



Napoleon Watching the Battle of Friedland, 1807, James Alexander Walker (1841-1898)

Scottish novelist, poet, and travel writer Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–1894) is famous for having produced such great works of adventure literature as *Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped*, and *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. He was also, like a number of other literary figures before and after him, a dedicated wargamer.

Indeed, two decades after the work that is the subject of this book was originally published, H.G. Wells, another famous British author, published two books related to wargaming, *Floor Games* in 1911 and the much-better-known *Little Wars* in 1913. Those books garnered Wells the title “Father of Modern Wargaming,” an honorific that, while fitting, also points to the fact that Stevenson’s work on the subject was largely eclipsed by Wells’ and is today almost completely unknown to any but the most dedicated and well-read wargamers. And I joined those ranks only recently, in May 2008, when I met Robert Kocovsky, curator of the Exchange Hotel Civil War Hospital Museum in Gordonsville, Virginia, and he told me about Stevenson being a gamer.

Bringing out of obscurity this relevant work of an otherwise well-known author, and thereby suggesting that we bestow upon him the title of “Grandfather of Modern Wargaming,” is thus one of my motivations for publishing this book. Another is to make it available to the current generation of wargamers in order both that they might have a better perspective on the roots and origins of their hobby and so as to be able to avail themselves of it as a resource. Few works like this were readily available back in the early 1980s when my friend George Sieretski and I were developing our “skirmish” miniatures rules, and we would have been grateful for a copy of it.

The origins of this book predate our own efforts by almost

exactly a century. In 1880, Stevenson married an American woman by the name of Fanny Osbourne, and in so doing acquired as stepson her child, Samuel Lloyd Osbourne (1868–1947), who was at that time 12.

Stevenson suffered from chronic bad health throughout his relatively short life and this could certainly have led him to fulfill any martial inclinations he may have had through his writing — and, indeed, in his wargaming. In 1880, acting upon the advice of his doctor, Stevenson went to convalesce from his tuberculosis in the Swiss town of Davos, where the mountain air was thought to be therapeutic. In his introduction to what would 18 years later be published as *Stevenson at Play*, Osbourne refers to “those days of exile at Davos” and describes the attic they commandeered for their purposes. It is clear from these introductory reminiscences that the wargaming sessions the boy and his stepfather played in together were a positive bonding experience and something the younger man would carry with him throughout the rest of his life.

Stevenson died just 14 years later in Samoa, to which he had moved in 1890, of an apparent cerebral hemorrhage. Four years later, Osbourne discovered amongst his stepfather’s possessions a notebook containing a description, written as if by a war correspondent and various newspaper editors, of one of their elaborate wargames (which, evidence would suggest, must have taken them days or even weeks to play out).

Determining that this unpublished work had merit, and perhaps touched by the memories it evoked, Osbourne wrote a personal introduction to it and had it published in the December 1898 edition of *Scriber’s Magazine* (a publication to which Stevenson had been a contributor). He was, ironically, at that point

30, the very age Stevenson had been when they played their historic game in the attic in Davos.

Much has changed in the 11 decades since then. One of the biggest differences between dedicated wargamers today and those from Stevenson's era was that he and his contemporaries had much, much less available to them in the form of rules, miniatures, and models (and in some cases nothing at all). Early wargamers like Stevenson are thus notable not just for having written about games, but for having developed complex rules systems and quite often their components as well, and in many cases solely for their own use.

Much of what we read in *Stevenson at Play*, of course, does resonate with gamers in any era. Osbourne notes, for example, the cost of his chosen hobby, which required "all the pocket-money derived from my publishing ventures as well as a considerable part of my printing stock in trade." For the diehard gamer, little has changed in that regard (and the age at which I began disposing of my income on toy soldiers and the like may even have predated Osbourne's by several years).

While much can be inferred from the descriptions provided by Stevenson and Osbourne of the game they played, no name is given to it, and whatever rules they used have apparently been lost to the ages. It was, however, clearly a strategic-level game, with thousands of virtual troops on each side and four miniatures representing a single regiment (a term that is historically variable that, depending on the nation and era, might refer to formations with anywhere from a few hundred to as many as 5,000 troops).

There would also seem to be some element of role-playing involved in the game, and a leeway of action not likely allowed

by a set of strategic wargaming rules (e.g., the decision of Osbourne to execute a newspaper editor whose comments annoyed him). And each of the commanders on the opposing sides seems to have various personality traits associated with it. These included Stevenson — i.e., the alter-ego of the player — Piffle, Potty, Pipes, and Delafield on the one side, and Osbourne, Green, Lafayette, and Napoleon — not *the* Napoleon, of course, as is made clear by our war correspondent — on the other.

These features of the game are in keeping with the emphasis on history prevalent during Stevenson's era, which focused both on the strategic level of conflicts and on the personalities and activities of the participating commanders (as opposed to the contemporary historical model, which focuses at least as much on individual soldiers and the conditions under which they operated).

No reason is provided for the war in question — it is simply given that it exists — and there is no indication of even notional nationalities. All we know is that the two aggressor countries are separated by a great river, the Sandusky, and that the major cities include Glendarule, Yolo, and Mar in the territory controlled by Stevenson and Yallobally, Sandusky, Savannah, Samuel City, Scarlet, Glentower, and Cinnabar in the lands administered by Osbourne.

Likewise, no reference is made to any historic period of warfare that may have been depicted in this game. It is not very reminiscent of the action of the U.S. Civil War — the world's largest conflict to that date, concluded just 15 years before the activities described in the author's notebook. With so many references to columnar movement and a number of other things, it does seem somewhat suggestive of the Napoleonic era, but there are also

references to telegraphy, which played its first big military role in the afore-mentioned American war. And it was almost certainly influenced by the most recent major hostilities to strike the European continent, the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71. We should probably thus conclude that the game Stevenson and his stepson played was a historical and combined elements of several different periods and conflicts from the century preceding them.

Stevenson's account of the war skips its first 10 days, which Osbourne explains consisted of little more than the opposing armies maneuvering into position and probing each other's strength. He then covers actions conducted over a period of about two weeks of game time, tying it up within a few days of the defeat of one of Osbourne's primary commanders: "The war was really over when General Napoleon surrendered his sword on the afternoon of the 17th." The conflict a foregone conclusion, he leaves his armies converging upon his opponent's capital and says nothing of the miscellaneous actions that would have comprised the final part of the war (e.g., much as the surrender of Robert E. Lee is often regarded as the last military significant event of the U.S. Civil War).

While most of Stevenson's narrative is written in the form of ongoing news articles and editorial comments, the work is also interspersed with a number of "Notes" written from a historical perspective that include a bit more analysis. These would certainly suggest that Stevenson was enjoying himself by conceiving of his mock war from both a current and a future perspective.

Stevenson does, in fact, seem to be having quite a bit of fun with his correspondence, which is subtly humorous throughout and frequently self-deprecating. He also uses these reports both

as a means of teasing his stepson and, one senses, an indirect device for helping him to consider and revise his strategies.

Four sets of black-and-white images — including a pair of hand-sketched maps that Osbourne found in Stevenson’s notebook — appeared in the original *Scribner’s Magazine* publication of *Stevenson at Play*, and these have all been reproduced here (on pages 1, 29, 33, and 42). Illustrations that appear in the Appendix have been adapted, appropriately I think, from H.G. Well’s *Floor Games* and were drawn for that book by artist J.R. Sinclair.

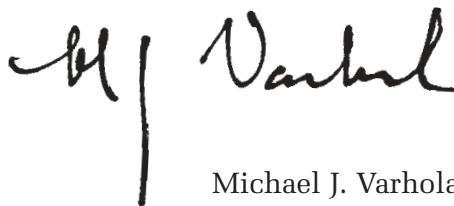
Had he ever chosen or had the chance to have it published himself, Stevenson would undoubtedly have revised and refined the text in his notebook somewhat, and perhaps even expanded into something more akin to a self-standing book like this one, rather than the magazine article it became.

We have lightly edited the text in this edition of *Stevenson at Play* for stylistic items that differ somewhat in our age than in the one during which it was written. Examples of this include combining terms like “note-book” and “war game” into more familiar compound words like “notebook” and “wargame;” some modifications to punctuation; and the addition of paragraph breaks as needed, particularly in Osbourne’s introduction, the original of which includes some very large blocks of text. American standard spellings for some words have also been substituted for British standards spellings in some instances (e.g., “meager” instead of “meagre”). Archaic spellings, constructions, and letters have similarly been replaced with modern ones for ease of reading (e.g., the more familiar “maneuver” for the archaic “manœuvre”).

All such changes have been made purely for purposes of making this material a smoother read for the contemporary reader, and Stevenson’s words have not otherwise been changed, rear-

ranged, or altered. We also have not presumed to do anything even approaching an actual “correction.” And, lest anyone think we are taking away from Stevenson’s literary style by making such stylistic tweaks to his work, this is most assuredly not the case: in his lifetime the great author had editors who applied the styles of their own age and publishing houses to his work, and we would be remiss in not doing so ourselves. We are confident that Stevenson’s attitudes toward these adjustments would fall squarely between approval and indifference.

And we trust that this work will meet the expectations of its current generation of readers and sincerely hope that you enjoy it!

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "MJ Varhola". The "MJ" is written in a cursive, stylized font, and "Varhola" is written in a more formal, slightly cursive script.

Michael J. Varhola
Springfield, Virginia
September 2008