

“I DON’T WANT TO PUT MY TOYS AWAY”: H. G. WELLS, GAMEPLAYING, AND THE NARRATIVE FLOOR

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AT A PUBLIC celebration of his seventieth birthday hosted by the PEN Club in London in October 1936, H. G. Wells expressed dismay at the experience of getting old. “I just hate it,” Wells told the gathering that included such luminaries as Bernard Shaw, Julian Huxley, G. B. Stern and André Maurois. “I feel like a youngster at a wonderful party sitting on the floor with all my games spread out before me. When you tell me I am 70, it is as if my nurse were coming to me to say, ‘Bertie, it is getting late—time to put those toys away.’ ... I don’t want to put my toys away.” In this startling act of speculative reminiscence, Wells figures himself as a youngster and the toy-covered floor of a child as the material backdrop to his creative activities. “So few of my games are nearly finished,” he continues the metaphor. “Just now I’m playing with films. ... I want to write another novel—” (“Wells at 70”).

This is not the first time Wells had figured the floor as the material backdrop to creative acts of the imagination, and in fact he recalls the floor games of his childhood in earlier works of both nonfiction and fiction. For one, he begins his 1911 hobby book, *Floor Games*, by noting that “The jolliest indoor games for boys and girls demand a floor, and the home that has no floor upon which games may be played falls so far short of happiness. It must be covered with linoleum or cork carpet, so that toy soldiers and such-like will stand up upon it.” Wells sees access to a “floor upon which games may be played” as crucial to the creative development of young children: “Upon such a floor may be made an infinitude of imaginative games,” he writes, “not only keeping boys and girls happy for days together, but building up a framework of spacious and inspiring ideas in them for after life” (9–10). As Gene and Margaret Rinkel note, Wells based *Floor Games* on “lingering childhood memories” of playing with his older brother Freddie on a linoleum floor of their family home at 47 High Street, Bromley, Kent. He and Freddie would play on the floor of Atlas House

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“with soldiers, bricks, boards, and planks. They became captains, lord mayors, and little generals. Bertie [the family nickname for Wells] improvised and arranged cities, railroads, buildings, seas, and boats” (Rinkel and Rinkel 118).

So how did playing floor games as a youngster build up “a framework of spacious and inspiring ideas” in Bertie himself? How did Wells’s love of playing with toys on the floor influence his mode of storytelling? Other scholars have emphasised the scaled-down nature of toys, pointing to Wells’s fascination with miniaturisation. Teresa Trout, for her part, focuses on a single toy—the Uppark dolls house—that Wells recounts playing with in his semi-autobiographical 1909 novel *Tono-Bungay*. Wells encountered this eighteenth-century miniature country house as a child, when he visited Uppark, the life-sized country house in West Sussex where his mother Sarah worked as housekeeper from 1880 to 1892. On Trout’s reading, “In Wells’s work, this eighteenth-century artefact bridges the gap between children’s toys and adults’ models, between make-believe and novel-writing, and between playing and living. Even more seriously, by scaling down, the dolls house defamiliarises the faulty and antiquated paradigms that influence our physical world and worldviews long after they have exceeded our sightlines (88–89). Nor is Trout the first critic to connect the miniaturising impulse in Wells to his childhood gameplaying. Wells’s biographer David Smith observed in 1985 that “the games he played provided some of the imaginative content of such books as *Tono-Bungay*, *The Food of the Gods*, and *When the Sleeper Awakes*. One can almost imagine while reading them that a child’s town served as model for some of the set pieces of the novels, especially the latter work” (“Little” 137).¹

In this essay, however, I argue that, to think about how Wells’s childhood gameplaying influenced his literary storytelling, we must consider not just the toys he played with or the games he invented as a child, but also the material backdrop for these toys and games, the floor. I trace the influence of the indoor games floor on Wells’s early storytelling practice to show how Wells generates drama and tension in his early narratives by staging fantastical happenings on what we might call a narrative floor, that is, a stable, immobile, highly circumscribed, mundane space. Wells’s narrative technique of the spatialisation of time, as I call it, in fact appears in one of his earliest fictions, a handwritten and illustrated text called *The Desert Daisy* that he produced between the ages of twelve and thirteen while living at 47 High Street, Bromley, and which is clearly inspired and informed by the floor games that he played.

I.

WHAT IS interesting about the floor as an element of gameplay is that it stands both inside and outside the game. On the one hand, it is the foundation of the game, the stable ground on which gameplayers place their toys—for Wells, this meant bricks and soldiers, boards and planks, clockwork railway rolling stock and rails. The floor

circumscribes the game world and stays the same while the other elements of the game are in flux. On the other hand, the floor is a piece of mundane reality that cannot be entirely co-opted into the game because it belongs to the real world as much as to the game. The linoleum- or cork-carpeted floor keeps the game anchored in mundane reality because it is what is left when the game is packed up. As Wells whimsically concedes in *Floor Games*, “Occasionally, alas! it must be scrubbed—and then a truce to Floor Games” (10). In Wells’s birthday-speech scenario, similarly, the nurse is calling for a truce to Floor Games, that is, for the “young master” to return to mundane reality by returning the floor to its everyday function of walkway. Floor games therefore involve a constant negotiation between the fantasising child who is engrossed in the game and the intervening adult who augurs the intrusion of real-world concerns into the fantastical microcosm.

For this reason, as Wells presents it, the indoor games floor is *simultaneously* a site of fantasy and imaginative worldbuilding for the child *and* a place the child cannot keep entirely insulated from the daily operations of mundane reality. Nowhere do we see this more clearly than in the beautiful account of the child’s experience of playing on the floor that he provides in chapter two of his 1910 autobiographical fiction *The New Machiavelli*.² Here, the novel’s first-person narrator, successful author and Liberal MP Richard “Dick” Remington, recalls that his interest in politics was first activated when he played as a child on the floor of “an enormous bleak room” in his house in Bromstead (a thin fictionalisation of Wells’s birthplace of Bromley):

I dreamt first of states and cities and political things when I was a little boy in knickerbockers. When I think of how such things began in my mind, there comes back to me the memory of an enormous bleak room with its ceiling going up to heaven and its floor covered irregularly with patched and defective oilcloth and a dingy mat or so and a “surround” as they call it, of dark stained wood. ... It is the floor I think of chiefly; over the oilcloth of which, assumed to be land, spread towns and villages and forts of wooden bricks; there are steep square hills (geologically, volumes of Orr’s *Cyclopaedia of the Sciences*) and the cracks and spaces of the floor and the bare brown surround were the water channels and open sea of that continent of mine. (16)

Smith calls *The New Machiavelli* “Wells’s most autobiographical novel” (*H. G. Wells* 112). Wells himself describes it in *Experiment in Autobiography* as “one of my most revealing” (661). We can presume, then, that Wells draws substantially on his own childhood recollections of playing floor games when he gives us those of his fictional character. Certain correspondences between Remington’s account in *The New Machiavelli* and Wells’s account in *Floor Games* confirm the autobiographical nature of the recollections. For instance, in *Floor Games*, Wells recalls his joy at receiving

bespoke oversized toy bricks as a “gift from two generous friends, unhappily growing up and very tall at that; and they had it from parents who were one of several families who shared in the benefit of a Good Uncle.” Wells professes to know nothing certainly about this Good Uncle except that “he was a Radford of Plymouth” (16–17). In *The New Machiavelli*, the rich uncle from Plymouth (in the south-west of England) becomes “a prosperous west of England builder,” who gifts the Remington family bespoke oversized building blocks. “I still remember with infinite gratitude the great-uncle to whom I owe my bricks,” Wells’s character Remington writes. “He must have been one of those rare adults who have not forgotten the chagrins and dreams of childhood” (16).

Anticipating Wells at his seventieth birthday celebration, Remington singles out the floor he played on for attention, explaining that his great-uncle’s gift of many hundreds of bricks meant he could construct an “empire of the floor” (19). “I could build six towers as high as myself with them, and there seemed quite enough for every engineering project I could undertake. I could build whole towns with streets and houses and churches and citadels; I could bridge every gap in the oilcloth and make causeways over crumpled spaces” (19). Even as an adult recollecting the time, it is the floor that stands out in Remington’s memory rather than the various adults that crisscrossed the space:

I find this empire of the floor much more vivid and detailed in my memory now than many of the owners of the skirts and legs and boots that went gingerly across its territories. Occasionally, alas! they stooped to scrub, abolishing in one universal destruction the slow growth of whole days of civilised development. I still remember the hatred and disgust of these catastrophes. (19)

The young Remington is tunnel-visioned, his attention so riveted to the floor as he plays that the adults in his peripheral vision cease to be people and instead become large physical objects endangering the integrity of his miniature constructions. They are sources of “cosmic calamity” (19), less important to him and less real than his bricks and toy soldiers.

The central protagonists of Wells’s early scientific romances, *The Time Machine* (1895) and *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), find themselves similarly isolated in a small, defined space, so consumed by the extraordinary experience they are undergoing that they relegate the surrounding cast of characters to the status of vague and even threatening forms in the perceptual background. Consider Wells’s first and perhaps most unforgettable protagonist—*The Time Machine*’s Time Traveller, who, in fantastically travelling into the future, consigns each of his surrounding cast members (the Psychologist, Filby, the Provincial Mayor, the Medical Man, and the Very Young Man) to the role of mere witness to his incredible feats and adventures. We can think of these bystander characters as occupying the position of adults watching on from

the periphery of the game as the fantasising child (the Time Traveller) plays alone on the floor with his toys.

However, the Time Traveller is also himself a witness; his confinement to one place renders him a captive witness to the impossible. While he travels to the year 802,701 CE and then even further into the future to witness the death of the sun, Wells’s Time Traveller remains in the same spot he started: in London, on the Earth. His “bicycle/time machine never moves in space, only in time” (Plotz 176). By allowing the Time Traveller to move about freely in time, while absolutely restricting his movement in space, a combination of movement in time with non-movement in space, Wells creates the spooky effect that the Time Traveller remains connected to the narrator’s, and reader’s, mundane reality, even as he undergoes a truly fantastic experience.

That Wells’s early fiction combines the realistic with the fantastical is well noted in the scholarship. As John Plotz writes in his recent book *Semi-Detached*, “Wells is fascinated by fiction’s capacity to represent experience that belongs simultaneously inside and outside of the known, everyday world” (176). Joseph Conrad famously titled Wells “Realist of the Fantastic” (qtd. in Plotz 178) in a letter dated 4 December 1898. But there remains much more to say about how Wells’s scientific romances manage so successfully “to rotate readers into another world or another dimension without ever leaving the bare ordinary earth behind” (Plotz 178). Part of the trick is achieved, I suggest, by Wells restricting the story’s, and the character’s, action to a particular geographical or topographical location. Wells’s early characters are, in some sense, captive witnesses to the impossible. These characters paradoxically find themselves rooted to a spot of mundane reality (what I’m calling the narrative floor), even as they undergo a thoroughly fantastic experience.

In his next novel, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, Wells uses a similar technique to intensify the central protagonist’s experience of the fantastic. After the ship on which he is travelling sinks, first-person narrator Edward Prendick is rescued by a passing schooner, only then to be forced to disembark on Moreau’s “biological station” (90) by the schooner’s drunkard captain. I read Moreau’s island as another narrative manifestation of the indoor games floor in Wells. The island is a highly circumscribed, mundane space that both restricts Prendick’s physical movement and facilitates his fantastic experience of the Beast People. Moreover, Wells plays with the temporal axis in *Moreau*, while leaving the spatial axis unaffected, much as he does in *The Time Machine*. However, in this case the temporal axis is evolution. At first, Prendick thinks Moreau has been vivisecting humans into animal form, somehow bestialising the human. Later, Moreau explains that the Beast People are in fact animals he has vivisected into human form. Robert M. Philmus draws a parallel between the dramatic scenario of *Moreau* and the fourth book of Jonathan Swift’s 1726 text *Gulliver’s Travels*: “In effect, [Wells] ‘darwinizes’ the Yahoos and Houyhnhnms. The beast man evolved *from* and the more nearly rational creature he may evolve *into* become the temporal

boundaries of *Moreau's* universe” (6, emphasis added).³ What makes the island psychologically so disturbing for Prendick is that it is a perfectly mundane space where Prendick experiences the nightmare of different and incompatible evolutionary times clashing with one another in the same spot. Prendick’s limited first-person narration intensifies the mysteriousness of the Beast People. Thus, like the Time Traveller, Prendick experiences the disorientating and uniquely Wellsian combination of non-movement in space with movement of time. Both protagonists see different times from the same vantage point.

There is a related tendency in Wells, we might say, to spatialise time or to treat time as another kind of space. This is the *au courant* scientific idea that the Time Traveller explains to his incredulous dinner guests at the beginning of *The Time Machine*: “Scientific people ... know very well that Time is only a kind of Space,” he tells them. When one of his guests—the Psychologist—objects, “You *can* move about in all directions of Space, but you cannot move about in Time,” the Time Traveller responds: “But you are wrong to say that we cannot move about in Time. For instance, if I am recalling an incident very vividly I go back to the instant of its occurrence: I become absent-minded, as you say. I jump back for a moment. Of course we have no means of staying back for any length of Time” (7). The Time Traveller has made a similar point earlier in the conversation: “*There is no difference between Time and any of the three dimensions of Space except that our consciousness moves along it*” (6). According to the Time Traveller, we time travel when we recall an incident very vividly and go back to the instant of its occurrence.

To return to my starting point, is this not what Wells does in a speculative way in his seventieth birthday speech: namely, time travel by going back to the instant he used to play games on the nursery floor? I find it fascinating that Wells here uses the same narrative technique in a public speech that he uses in his early novels *The Time Machine* and *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. First, he establishes a circumscribed, stable, mundane space on which the action occurs—the indoor games floor—and then he plays fantastically with this space along the temporal axis by projecting different versions of himself onto the floor: the original youngster playing with his toys and the sentimental old man revisiting the scene, still feeling young at heart and not wanting to pack up his current “toys” or artistic projects. In his birthday speech, the old Wells demonstrates the same tunnel vision, the same unwillingness to accede to the demands of mundane reality, as the young Remington playing floor games in *The New Machiavelli*.

II.

BUT WE do not have to wait until the mature fiction to find Wells writing narratives inspired by children’s games, staged and bounded by a narrative floor, and exploring the spatialisation of time. According to Smith, Wells wrote “several strip cartoons as

an adolescent, most of them apparently with adventures. Several survive, although only one [*The Desert Daisy*] is available to be seen” (“Little” 137).⁴ Described by Wells in the “Preface to the First Edition” as “a romance of the olden time” (1), *The Desert Daisy* tells the irreverent, laugh-out-loud story of the war between the King of Clubs, King Groggenose, and the King of Spades, Methusala the Great. War breaks out between the two nations after Heralds of the King of Spades accuse Groggenose of mortally embarrassing their sovereign:

“You did send men or a man in the darkness of night into the Laundry of our Sovereign Lord Methusala the Great! King of Spades & Governor General of the World, with the intent to do grievous harm upon our Sovereign Lord aforesaid by ripping up the stitches of our Sovereign Lord’s best britches or breeches (as some hath it) when hung out to dry, thereby causing our said Sovereign Lord to imperil the future welfare of his soul by wearing his Everyday Britches (or Breeches as some hath it) on the Lord’s day. We do demand herewith payment of the sum of twopence halfpenny (being the sum charged for renewing the stitches in said Britches (or Breeches as some hath it) or we do declare immediately War against thee & th—”⁵

But before the first Spade Herald can even finish his sentence, the Club King, who has been gradually removing his royal vestiture, “suddenly sprang at him with the fierceness of a tiger.” An all-in brawl ensues—and “All was confusion for nearly an hour” (5–8).

In introducing the 1957 facsimile of the original manuscript of *The Desert Daisy* in the University of Illinois Library, Gordon N. Ray observes that the text anticipates certain stylistic features of the mature Wells: “The skeptical and irreverent habit of mind that made [Wells] with Shaw the most damaging critic of Victorian institutions, conventions, and opinions shows itself in his attitude towards royalty, government, the army, and the church” (xv). *The Desert Daisy* also reflects Wells’s childhood fascination with war games. As Claire Tomalin notes in her recent biography, *The Young H. G. Wells*, “Reading and solitary war games remained his chief entertainments” (10) at the age of eleven. Wells vividly describes these “solitary war games” in his 1934 *Experiment in Autobiography*:

I had reveries—I indulged a great deal in reverie until I was fifteen or sixteen, because my active imagination was not sufficiently employed—and I liked especially to dream that I was a great military dictator like Cromwell, a great republican like George Washington or like Napoleon in his earlier phases. I used to fight battles whenever I went for a walk alone. I used to walk about Bromley, a small rather

undernourished boy, meanly clad and whistling detestably between his teeth, and no one suspected that a phantom staff pranced about me and phantom orderlies galloped at my commands, to shift the guns and concentrate fire on those houses below, to launch the final attack upon yonder distant ridge. (100–101)

The Desert Daisy is clearly inspired by Wells's experiences of walking about the streets and countryside of Bromley as "a small rather undernourished boy," with a phantom staff prancing about him and phantom orderlies galloping at his command. Here is how Wells describes the assembling of the Club army:

Next morning the army was called out & divided thus.

Infantry of the line: two men.

Skirmishers (irregular): that boy.

Cavalry: The Butcher Boy.

Artillery: The Beggar.

It was decided also that the Cavalry should go on foot under the name of the 'Dismounted Cavalry' because Horses happened to be scarce at the time, & that the Artillery should not be allowed guns because guns were so expensive. (18–19)

Wells here satirises the idea of war through a two-pronged rhetorical strategy of miniaturisation and subtraction. He depicts the Club army as so undermanned (it consists of two boys and three men) and so ill-equipped (it has no horses or guns) that it cannot really be called an army at all.

The Desert Daisy is as much the narrativisation of a children's game—and a celebration of children's creativity—as it is the story of a war. The text begins with the King of Clubs in his council chamber playing push pin with The Prince Bishop of Deuceace (the villain of the piece, who will soon make off with his sovereign's crown, sceptre and robes) and the Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy, General Edieotte. "To those who are ignorant," the first-person narrator adds cheekily in parentheses, "I will explain that the Game of Push Pin is a very simple game suitable for ordinary children, Idiots or Kings" (1–2). As this narratorial aside makes clear, Wells's playful intention in *The Desert Daisy* is to reduce the adult to the level of the child. His juvenile text functions like the game of push pin to erase the social distance between children and kings. Wells begins his 1913 hobby book *Little Wars*, which bears the long subtitle, "A Game for Boys from twelve years of age to one hundred and fifty and for that more intelligent sort of girl who likes boys' games and books," by noting, "'LITTLE WARS' is the game of kings—for players in an inferior social position" (7). Child writers are in the same position as players of games like *Little Wars*. Starting from an inferior social position, they try to lower the status of "kings" by parodically imitating adult literary and social conventions. The young

Wells even uses the paratextual material of *The Desert Daisy* to cut certain literary “kings” down to size. In the burlesque “Notices of the Press,” he extracts the following praise of his work from the *Naily Dews*: “Charming book! Beats Paradise Lost into eternal smash! Will be read when Shakespear is forgotten—but not before” (iv).

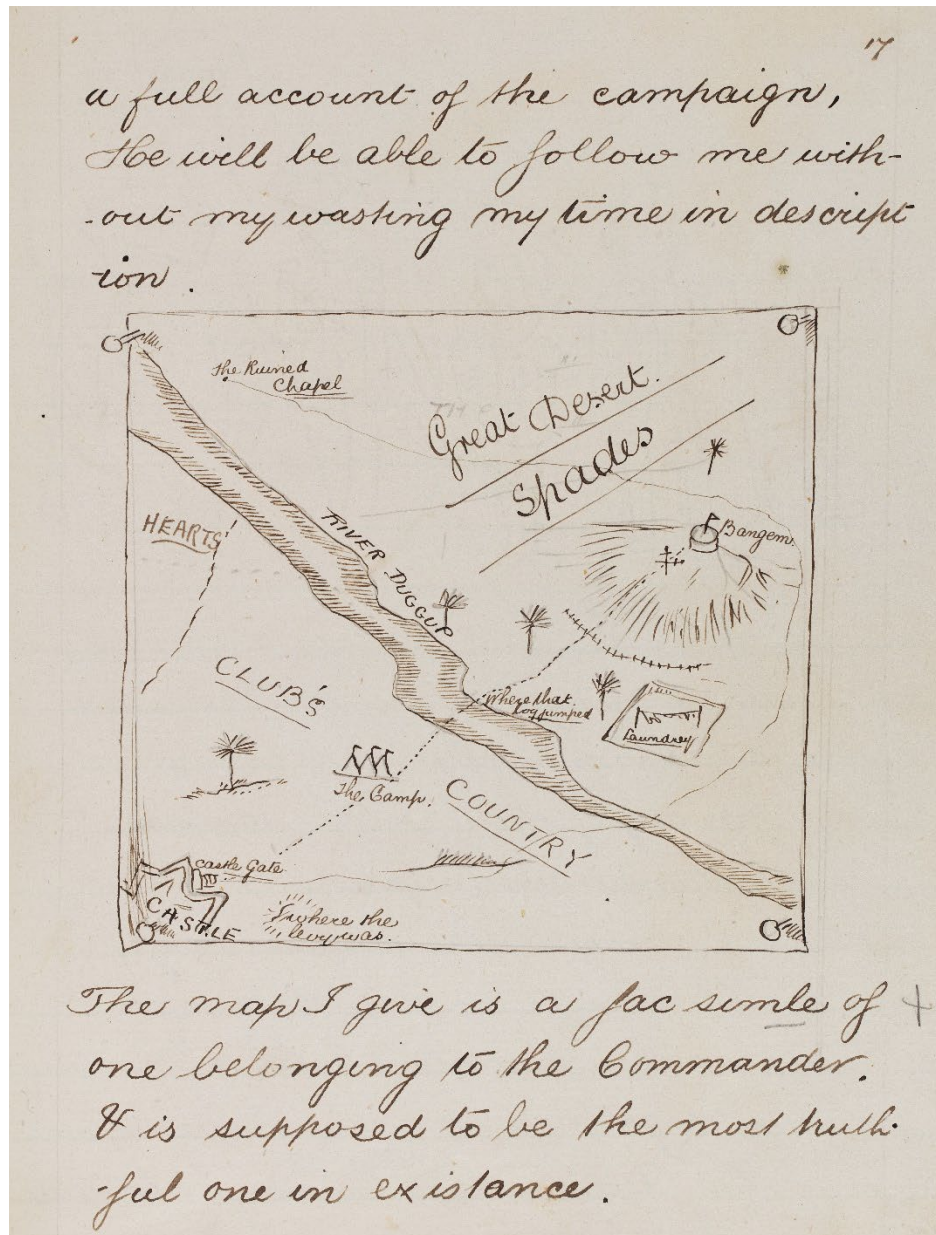


Figure 1. Map of the countries of the Clubs, Spades and Hearts, illustration by H. G. Wells, from *The Desert Daisy*, p. 17. The Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Wells builds the story world of *The Desert Daisy* out of various objects of his imaginative game play. The text's main protagonists are named after playing cards (King of Clubs, King of Spades, Prince Bishop of Deuceace). Its countries bear the names of suits of cards (Clubs, Spades, and Hearts). One of the Spade Heralds insults the Club King at the beginning of the text by referring to him as "the ace or ass of Clubs" (4). Later, the narrator interrupts himself to provide a detailed map of the Kingdoms of the Clubs, Spades, and Hearts (Figure 1): "& talking of maps I may as well give the reader a map; so that when I come to giving a full account of the campaign, he will be able to follow me without wasting my time in description." This map, we are told, is "a facsimile of one belonging to the Commander & is supposed to be the most truthful one in existence" (16–17). I read this detailed map of *The Desert Daisy*'s story world as an early prototype of what I'm calling the narrative floor in Wells. Like the indoor games floor, the map delineates the highly circumscribed space of a wargame. (It is easy to imagine the diagonal line of the River Duggup that cuts the map in two as corresponding in reality to a crack on the floor of Wells's house.) Moreover, as Wells's narrator is the first to admit, the map also reduces the burden of scenic description on him so that he can focus more intently on what happens to the characters. In chapter two of *The New Machiavelli*, Remington recalls one day finding in his attic "a very old forgotten map after the fashion of a bird's-eye view, representing the Crimea, that fascinated me and kept me for hours navigating its waters with a pin" (21). Given the prominence of a bird's-eye view map in *The Desert Daisy*, it is tempting once again to collapse the difference between character and author and speculate that Wells himself found a map in the attic of his house in Bromley one day as a young boy and that playing with this map gave him the idea of writing a story. Wells's playful inclusion in the drawing of the detail of the four modern-day pins used to fix the map to the wall certainly encourages us to see the map as belonging as much to him qua author as General Edieotte qua character. This metaleptic detail connects the map to Wells's mundane reality and shows the young author mixing fantasy and realism.

Wells not only sets up the story world of *The Desert Daisy* as a kind of indoor games floor, but also treats his characters as toy soldiers that can be toppled and then reinstated in the game. This game-like feature of the text is most evident in the storyline of the Commander of the Club army, General Edieotte. When the General leads his army to the edge of the river Duggup, he discovers to his chagrin that there are no boats with which to cross over to the other side. Ordering his troops to stay put, he goes down the riverbank in search of boats. He returns empty-handed a few hours later only to find to his astonishment that his "army had disappeared!"

Controlling a violent impulse to bolt, he proceeded to the place where he had left them, to find a clue by close investigation.
 Around lay all the marks of a violent struggle.
 The grass was trodden down in many places.

Hoof marks were deeply indented in the soft grass. Suddenly his eye caught something in the grass.
At first he thought it a piece of some unfortunate, chopped to bits.
Nearer investigation proved it to be a pork chop.
Suddenly before him rose a figure out of the ground.
At first he thought it an ambush but nearer & clearer views shewed it to be “that boy again.” (23–26)

The boy explains to his commander that the Club troops had scattered in all directions when they realised an angry bull was charging at them. Just as the boy is recounting the frenetic episode, the angry bull strikes again, this time charging the general: “A trampling of hoofs, a bellow a sharp stinging sensation behind & the Commander in chief of the Army of Clubs was in the air. He caught one glimpse of the earth, which appeared flying rapidly away from him. There was a blow on the back & all was oblivion” (31–32).

At this point in the story, we presume (along with his Club compatriots) that General Edieotte is dead. But at the end of the text, Wells revives the Commander in Chief so that he can intervene at a crucial juncture. A final battle is taking place between the Clubs and Spades and Edieotte comes back to life just in time to turn the tide in favour of the Clubs:

The Commander in Chief who had been left for dead on the banks of the Duggup, had in reality been only insensible & so after laying a couple of months on the field he had recovered & hurried back in time to take part in the final struggle.
Dashing into the thick of the fight he soon turned the scale. The King of Spades was sliced in half, the Prince Bishop cut in two, The King’s Son in law chopped into inconceivably small bits & the second Cook banged as flat as a pancake in three seconds & ere one minute had passed the whole of the Spade army was slain & the rest fled in confusion. (91–93)

This comical, cartoonish battle scene illustrates Wells’s tendency, even as a juvenile author, to play with the temporal axis of the story, while leaving the spatial axis unaffected. General Edieotte lies like a fallen toy soldier insensible on the games floor until his author, Bertie Wells, decides to fantastically revive him for the final battle.

Like many of his contemporaries, Wells continued to play with toy soldiers well into his mature adulthood. “Toy soldiers used to be flat, small creatures in my own boyhood,” he reflects in *Floor Games*, “in comparison with the magnificent beings one can buy to-day. ... Now they stand nearly two inches high and look you broadly in the face, and they have the movable arms and alert intelligence of scientifically

exercised men” (23–24). *Floor Games* is for this reason not just an instruction manual for future gameplayers but also a tender record of some of the games Wells played with his two sons George Philip and Frank Richard, who feature in the text as Captains G.P.W. and F.R.W. In *Experiment in Autobiography*, Wells connects his early war fantasies to his adult love of playing with toy soldiers:

For many years my adult life was haunted by the fading memories of those early war fantasies. Up to 1914, I found a lively interest in playing a war game, with toy soldiers and guns, that recalled the peculiar quality and pleasure of those early reveries. It was quite an amusing model warfare and I have given its primary rules in a small book “for boys and girls of all ages” *Little Wars*. I have met men in responsible positions, L. S. Amery for example, Winston Churchill, George Trevelyan, C. F. G. Masterman, whose imaginations were manifestly built upon a similar framework and who remained puerile in their political outlook because of its persistence. I like to think I grew up out of that stage somewhen between 1916 and 1920 and began to think about war as a responsible adult should. (102)

Wells was not alone in his obsession with toy soldiers. As historian Kenneth D. Brown notes, “Certainly there was something of a craze for toy soldiers among leading literary and political figures of the day” (241). Robert Louis Stevenson, Jerome K. Jerome and G. K. Chesterton were other leading literary figures of the Victorian and Edwardian era who shared Wells’s love of toy soldiers. The Liberal politician C. F. G. Masterman recalled visiting Wells one day and finding him playing miniature war games with his fellow cabinet minister, Sidney Buxton. Masterman wrote that Buxton, the President of the Board of Trade, was “sprawled full length on the floor and with unerring accuracy picking off the flower of Wells’s Imperial Guard, which he thought he had concealed and protected in a thick pine forest” (qtd. in Brown 241).

Historians now ask whether the Edwardian craze for playing with toy soldiers on the floor in fact encouraged militarism and enthusiasm for war, and this is a question that also concerned Wells. Wells’s game of *Little Wars* is actually an adaptation of *Kriegspiel*, the German tabletop wargame that the British military used for teaching battlefield tactics; “*Kriegspiel* enjoyed considerable popularity in Edwardian military circles and H. G. Wells was one of a number of writers who attempted to adapt it to the nursery floor” (Brown 244). According to Brown, “It seems likely that the Edwardian toy soldier boom both by its scope and implicit nature was an important part of the web of educative influences which helped to create and sustain the militarism which ungirded that initial enthusiasm for war [in 1914]” (247). However, Wells ends *Little Wars* by asserting the opposite:

You have only to play at Little Wars three or four times to realise just what a blundering thing Great War must be. Great War is at present, I am convinced, not only the most expensive game in the universe, but it is a game out of all proportion. Not only are the masses of men and material and suffering and inconvenience too monstrously big for reason, but—the available heads we have for it, are too small. That, I think, is the most pacific realisation conceivable, and Little Wars brings you to it as nothing else but Great War can do. (100)

Playing his game leads to a “pacific realisation,” not to militarism.

Yet even if we grant this somewhat strained argument for the pacifying benefit of playing *Little Wars*, it remains the case that the thought of war dominates Wells’s imagination. “I think there is no natural bias towards bloodshed in imaginative youngsters,” Wells remarks in *Experiment in Autobiography*, “but the only vivid and inspiring things that history fed me with were campaigns and conquests” (75). As Brown recognises, the importance of the variety of miniature war games played during the Edwardian period is that “implicit in all of them were the ideas of enemy and conflict” (245). Think of the Morlocks and the Eloi in *The Time Machine* or the Beast People and Moreau in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. Wells’s 1898 scientific romance *The War of the Worlds* tells the story of an interplanetary invasion of Earth by Martians. At the beginning of this novel, the first-person narrator wonders if the Martian invasion of Earth will devastate the planet’s human population in the same way as European colonisation of Tasmania devastated the population of First Nations peoples living there: “The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants, in the space of fifty years. Are we such apostles of mercy as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit?” (43).

Despite its irreverent attitude towards adult institutions, *The Desert Daisy* is also about mortal combat between enemies. I am thinking here not just of the main storyline of the military campaign between the King of Clubs and the King of Spades, but also of the subplot involving the rampaging bull. In one of the most interesting illustrations for *The Desert Daisy*, which depicts Lionel Geffory de Thompson Smythe, “a youth of noble blood & uncommon tall aspirations” (35), about to defeat the bull (Figure 2), Wells allegorises what Brown terms “the ideas of enemy and conflict.” According to his narrator:

’Tis perfectly useless to describe the fight; the artist may perhaps be more successful in drawing it. Ah! that I was Homer! If I was, De Smythe would not have long to wait for someone to immortalize him.

As it is he has three pictures devoted to the subject.

The picture on page 44 is allegorical & represents: In the centre, De Smythe in triumph. To the right; “The Present” viewing the scene with astonishment from the fastness of a Fir Tree. To the left; Posterity looking back amazed. There are also a few dozen angels & heathen goddesses scattered about, not to mention a distant view of the Great Desert & a few other trifles which we leave to the reader to discover. (42–45)



Figure 2. “Allygorical” picture of Lionel Geffroy de Thompson Smythe killing the bull, illustration by H. G. Wells, from *The Desert Daisy*, p. 44. The Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

This “picshua,” as Wells called his witty cartoons, presents the very Wellsian situation of an isolated and spotlighted central protagonist undergoing a fantastic experience, while a host of bystander characters look on in amazement in the background. In this case, the bystander characters in the background are not the adults watching “Master Dick” Remington play on the floor of his house in Bromstead or the fellow Londoners “watching” the Time Traveller venture into the future on his fantastic time machine, but rather personifications of various nonhuman entities such as the sun, Jupiter, angels, heathen goddesses, the present and posterity watching de Smythe perform his “heroic” act of killing the bull. As de Smythe engages his nonhuman adversary in

battle, the present looks on in astonishment from the safety of a tree and posterity looks back from the future in amazement. It is as if Wells has decided here to personify the history that he later complains in *Experiment in Autobiography* only fed him with vivid stories of military campaigns and conquests.

As Trout has recently noted, “Toys are much more than a guiding metaphor for a birthday speech: they helped to direct Wells’s literary masterpieces and to structure his social critiques well into adulthood” (105). Without disputing the importance of toys to Wells’s imagination and narrative technique, in this essay I have tried to show the significance of the physical and material space on which Wells, as a boy, played with those toys. We can think of Wells’s early narrative worlds, whether *The Time Machine*, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, or *The Desert Daisy*, as game floors, that is, as stable, circumscribed, mundane spaces upon which the isolated protagonist experiences something fantastical. And I argue that a distinctly Wellsian type of storytelling, in which different times coalesce spookily in the same place as a central protagonist embarks on a fantastic adventure, emerges directly from Wells’s childhood experience of playing with his bricks and soldiers on the floor.

NOTES

- ¹ Fritz also links Wells’s gameplaying to his fascination with miniaturisation.
- ² It was after reading *The New Machiavelli* that publisher Frank Palmer asked Wells to write a book on games for children (Smith, “Little” 131). Wells ended up writing two books for Palmer: *Floor Games* (1911) and *Little Wars* (1913).
- ³ *Gulliver’s Travels* deeply influenced Wells. According to Tomalin, it was one of several books he read at Uppark that “impressed themselves on his thinking and imagination with their ideas, their political statements and their imaginative flights” (24).
- ⁴ Tomalin identifies another, nonextant piece of Wells’s juvenilia, a daily news sheet that Wells wrote as an adolescent at Uppark in 1880: “That first Christmas of 1880 at Uppark Wells also decided to write a daily news sheet for the servants, for his own amusement and theirs. He called it *The Uppark Alarmist*—and since an alarmist is someone who frightens people with false information, it allowed him to make jokes. No copies have survived—a pity, as his jokes about what he saw of life at Uppark would be worth reading” (25).
- ⁵ The text is a facsimile of Wells’s manuscript and thus includes original spelling (and misspellings) and punctuation.

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