One hundred years ago, H(erbert) G(ordon) Wells published the classic Little Wars. Wells is best known for his scientific fantasies The Time Machine (1895) and The War of the Worlds (1898).

In January 1913, war was looming in Europe and Little Wars was both an expression of Wells’ passion for toy soldiers and his fears about the coming slaughter. Those fears manifested themselves in Little Wars. In his own words, “You have only to play at Little Wars three or four times to realize just what a blundering thing Great War must be.”

In Little Wars and its companion Floor Games (1911), Wells developed a set of rules for playing with toy soldiers. Inspiration for Little Wars came from a friend who was visiting for lunch. The friend was drawn to five W.Britain toy soldiers aligned on a table top, along with a cannon. He drew a chair to the table, sat down, and proceeded to load the cannon with a match stick. He then methodically aimed the cannon, released the spring in the breech, and hit one of the soldiers. As Wells put it, “He fired a shot that still echoes round the world.”

The game that developed was based on the spring breech-
“The War of the Worlds” was broadcast as a Halloween radio drama on the Columbia Broadcasting network on October 30, 1938. The program was narrated by actor Orson Welles. The first two-thirds of the 60-minute broadcast were presented as a series of simulated news bulletins, which suggested to many listeners that an alien invasion by Martians was actually in progress in New Jersey. Crowds that gathered at the landing site were reported to be incinerated by the space craft’s “heat-rays.” Immediately following the broadcast and for days following, there was widespread panic among certain listeners who had believed that the events described in the program were real. This, despite Welles’ reminder at the end of the broadcast that the program was a Halloween concoction. As he put it, it was the equivalent “of dressing up in a sheet, jumping out of a bush, and saying Boo!”

Recently discovered archives reveal that Wells, Kaiser Wilhem, and two other gentlemen played a game of Little Wars in 1913. The two “other gentlemen” were not identified by their full names, but were referred to as “General von M.” (Moltke?) and “Lord K.” (Kitchener?) Wilhelm refused to use the large W. Britain 4.7 inch naval guns in the Wells’ toy collection for fear that his beloved miniature soldiers would be damaged by the wooden dowels used as projectiles.

The Kaiser won the game and credited his triumph to strategic movements and bold decisions. Wells was horrified. Instead of demonstrating to Wilhelm the futility of war, the game had given him false confidence in his ability as a military tactician. Wells was heard to say “What have I done? I wish I could invent a time machine, travel into the past, and take measures to avoid this entire affair!”

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