

Five stories of snow castles – fantastic war game

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The History of the Game

Next winter, like before, snow castles and palaces designed by architects will be built to attract tourists. At the first snowfall, also castles representing much older tradition will appear in people's backyards. The finest ones will be lit with lanterns of snow, and small canon balls will be made in preparation for battles.

Snow games are interesting traditions, living in children's culture. In this article under scrutiny is how one individual winter game has changed through history. The focus is on snow castles built by children and the snow war games closely linked with these castles.

The article is based on five stories told by persons of various times. The stories don't tell only about the game it self, but also about peoples relations towards winter and childhood.

1st Story - Warrior Training

The earliest account of snow castles and snow wars can be found in Olaus Magnus' classical work *History of the Nordic Peoples*. Olaus Magnus, born in 1490 in southern Sweden, was a cleric who lived in late medieval and early modern times. Olaus Magnus was educated at German universities and he completed his master's degree in 1517. After this, Magnus worked, e.g., as a procurator for the Swedish king Gustaf Vasa and as the last catholic archbishop of Sweden-Finland.

This educated cleric was also interested in the life of peasantry. On his official journeys to northern Finland and Sweden he made observations on e.g. different types of livelihood, customs and beliefs. In his interpretations, Olaus Magnus also paid attention to the geographical and natural aspects that shape the culture of the local people.

After the Reformation in Sweden, Olaus Magnus moved to Italy where his studies on the life of peasantry were published in 1555. The first edition of *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus*, included altogether 815 pages of text and several illustrative woodcarvings. One of the 476 chapters discusses snow castles and the accompanying snow war games. Under the title "Of Young Men's Snow Castles" Olaus Magnus writes:

It is a custom of the Nordic people to train their youth with care and wisdom in various acts and skills of warfare in order to take over a fortress. The youth are encouraged in particular to take part in the kind of preliminary exercises that cause no injuries or fatal threat to their lives but which they still find most entertaining.

Thus in the winter, on the occasion of permanent snow, young men will be urged by their elders to gather on a high spot. Working together with one another, they will pile vast amounts of snow, which, especially on their days of leisure, they will use for building outworks in imitation of walls of a fortress. The walls will be provided with shooting holes and water will be frequently poured over them in hope

of a frosty weather that would freeze the water together with the snow and thus create utterly strong material. With these careful proceedings the walls are strengthened to the extent that they will endure not only lighter charges but also metal balls and battering rams - should there be any need for them.

When everything is ready, the young men will divide into two predetermined teams, one of which will enter the castle and prepare in defence of it, while the other stays outside and prepares for an attempt to conquer the castle. In the sparkling whiteness of the castle there will also be dark and sinister flags and green juniper branches, under which a most intense battle will commence: a battle not for wealth, but mere glory. On both sides, nothing else is used as weapons but snowballs and the balls will be cast at the enemy by hand. For the rules have that anyone who should break against this by concealing a piece of stone, iron, wood or ice in a snowball cast in this manner will receive a penalty of being sunk unclad in icy water.

Furthermore, some besiegers dig tunnels under the snow like hare, and via these tunnels they force their way through the defence of the enemy to drive them away from their holdings. In no time there will be a hand to hand scuffle with bare fists till the flag is seized and the defeated side surrenders, only to celebrate, in turn, their victory another time when the battle is re-enacted in the very same fortress against the victorious team (providing it is still possible).

In these games they act with the same vigour and stamina as if they were in a public combat fighting to their utmost limits for their fatherland, hearth and home. But those who flee or avoid the battle in fright will be punished, if only caught, by shoving snow down their necks between their garments and skin and they will be driven away with humiliating name-calling and slander, so that next time, they would hold they stand with more courage and defend their fortress with more vigour. Some will be punished in terrible frost, by letting icy water drip on their head and neck, drop by drop. All these minor punishments for the recalcitrant and fools are performed as an amusing play. (Olaus Magnus 1973:28-29)

The bishop's account builds a live connection between the young people in play now and in medieval times. But how do the snow games described by Olaus Magnus connect with the reality of their time? We can start by examining snow castles, which even now, in the beginning of the 21st century, are still well known structures. A traditional snow castle is built in the shape of a circle or semi-circle with an open top. A steep ring wall is formed with large snowballs and the wall is finished off with loose snow.

Building similar structures out of stone became possible during the 13th century when the use of mortar was adopted in Finland. This new construction technique made it possible to build up high stonewalls, and the first masonry towers were erected adjacent to wooden castles. Gradually, also bigger stone castles began to be built to serve in defence of provinces and as centres of administration. In Olaus Magnus' days, there were six large stone castles in Finland. These castles may also have functioned as models for first snow castles.

Medieval warfare was based on the battle for the possession of castles, and with all its missiles, charges and tunnels it resembled the snow war described by Olaus Magnus. Keeping this in mind, it is interesting to note the archbishop's assessment of snow war being a part of warrior training: "*train the youth in proceedings and skills required in war in order to conquer fortresses*". Olaus Magnus also suggests that elder men in particular initiated these snow wars.

If the information provided by the bishop is accurate, snow wars had an educative aim motivated by grown up men striving to pass on those values and activities the society considered important. However, this interpretation of warrior training might be due to Olaus Magnus' "romantic" idea of the peoples of the cold regions being stronger and more valiant than those living further south.

Though the question of the educative function remains open, we can conclude that snow castle building, and the consequent battles, were contest games breathing medieval reality and deriving their content from the imitation of adult behaviour.

2nd Story - Warlike Childhood

Some 300 years after Olaus Magnus, snow games roused the attention of another learned scientist. This time it was Zacharias Topelius who took interest in the topic. Born in 1818 in Central Ostrobothnia Topelius completed his doctor's degree in History in 1847. During his academic career he worked, e.g., as professor of Finnish, Russian and Nordic History and in 1875-1878 he also served as the rector of Helsinki University. In addition to being a well-known scientist, Topelius is also known as a productive author of children's literature and a master of the historical novel.

In his "Biographical Notes" Topelius talks about his childhood in Ostrobothnia and describes, among other things, the war games of his childhood days. *"Walter Scott's Ivanhoe, Virgil's Ennead, Wallenberg's translations of Iliad and Odyssey, novels about knights and outlaws, and finally the history of Gustaf II Adolf had intrigued me to such an extent that I developed a very warlike character. I waged war in every imaginable way... In wintertime, there were knight's castles in my yard bombarding each other with frozen cannonballs, and one time my comrades, another time brave small snowmen, would charge at them."*

Topelius also touches the topic in his collection of stories for children *Lukemisia lapsille*, published in 1866. The third volume of the series includes a story called "Fästningen Hjaltegorg" (The Fortress on Hero Hill), an account of a snow war amongst children. Even though this writing falls in the category of fiction, we can assume that it reflects childhood experiences familiar to the author.

So what did she see? Nothing more than a yard full of schoolboys, and in the corner of the fence, a great snow castle, on the walls of which a flag was being lifted just then; a flag that was a red scarf waving on the tip of a long pole.

- The Turks are coming! Every man to his post! Shouted the advance guard by the fence. Now started a great haste amongst the Christian army. The troops were divided into three divisions. Two of them took their posts by the gate in order to welcome the enemy with a terrible hail of bullets from both sides, and the third division rushed into the castle to arrange the batteries and to fix the wall here and there where the snow was too loose.

- Hurrah! Now the enemy got the first batch of balls hurled at them. – Whim! Wham! - The Turks were caught by surprise and the smallest of them started to weep. But their leader, Genghis Khan, a tall noble, knew to encourage them forward. They launched a frightful shower of snowballs. In vain did

the Christians try to lift their collars, the attack was too powerful: they began to retreat. The enemy stormed in and though the Christians defended their posts in the yard with unparallel valour, eventually, they had to give way before superior force and withdraw to the safety of the fortress walls.

- Hurrah! Long live Genghis Khan! Shouted the Turks and charged against the fortress. Past their ears, bullets whizzed in the air like wasps. Now a Turk fell down the wall, now another. Bullets could be used no more, so they started to scuffle, wrestling on top of each other, man to man, breaking the walls, knocking down huge blocks of snow, and here and there, unnoticed, some were at loggerheads with each other, which was against both people's law and fist law as well as martial law. (Topelius 1906:90-96)

The battle of Hjalteborg carries the spirit of Olaus Magnus' accounts of medieval warfare. What is new is the picture of snow castles and snow wars as a yard game played by groups of children. The game itself still seems a pure form of war game connected to real-life events of the adult-world. In Topelius' childhood, the war between Sweden and Russia 1808-1809 on Finnish territory was still fresh in people's minds. The story also reflects the events of the Crimean war that had reached even the Finnish coast. Also castles made of snow had real-life models, in the 19th century world. At least the sea fortress of Viaborg was well known to everyone.

Though the essence of snow wars in Topelius' time was derived from real-life events, snow games began to gain a new kind of ingredient from, e.g., adventure literature. Topelius himself calls the snow castles knight's castles and talks about Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* as an inspiration. Swedish researcher Göte Klingberg mentions the story of Napoleon Bonaparte as another possible source of inspiration for Topelius. It is told that Napoleon started his military career as a leader of a snow war.

It can be assumed that also Topelius' own fantasies were passed on to the children who heard and read his stories. A similar phenomenon took place in Sweden when Anna Maria Roos' children's book *I Önnemo* came out in 1912. The book includes a chapter called "Snöballs krig" that is accompanied by a spectacular illustration of a snow castle that bears close resemblance to a knight's castle. A book that sold over a million copies has surely inspired numerous children to build their own castles in imitation of the picture in the book.

3rd Story - The Construction Project

The information concerning the 20th century is based on the research project "Childhood in Snow" carried out by the ethnological unit of Helsinki University. The fieldwork of the project was concentrated on documenting the snow games and the constructions created in these games. Also the recent history of winter games was explored by interviewing the generations of grandparents, parents and children.

In the first half of the 20th century, building snow castles and fighting snow wars were a very common form of outdoor games. *"I'm familiar indeed with those games. All the kids wanted to take part in building snow castles in the backyards. I participated in the construction with my friends - both girls and boys. Most castles consisted of just one room."* This comment by Jaakko (born in 1938), who grew up in rural parish of Urjala, illustrates the clear view in all the answers: snow castles were small in size

and served as playgrounds for small groups of children.

Only rarely did the castle making reach the level of a most ambitious construction game as remembered by Tauno from city of Helsinki (born in 1911).

"I was there, too, building with the kids and classmates on the block. There were 4-5 boys and, from time to time, there was also a girl. The constructing always took half a day. 6-14 year old kids built castles, but after elementary school, castles weren't built anymore. A school-age thing, so to say. We drew construction plans and held meetings, just like grown-ups. In the corner of a notebook we scribbled what the castle was to be like.

Building snow castles was more of a game for boys, but girls joined in, too. The girls had the last say on how the castle would turn out eventually. They'd come and say "No, no, no! Not like that! That way, there!" And we, the boys, would follow the orders, of course. After all, also we would notice where the window hole was important, where not. We even dragged frames for the windows from construction sites.

The castles were built in a spot where people would see them, for example by a walkway. Schools competed with each other over whose castle was the greatest. People walking by would see the castle and come inside to take a closer look. So we did let people inside for a peep and they'd get all excited like "Take a look at this!" and "See that thing going all the way through like that!"

The story shows the importance of the construction phase and the nature of the game as an outdoor activity for a group of children of different ages. In the beginning of the 20th century, this was still rare, but it became more common especially in the 40's, 50's and 60's when the baby boom generations were out and playing in the urban backyards. The emphasis of the construction process was before all an urban phenomenon. It reflects the abundance of construction sites and the occupation of the fathers working at these sites.

4th Story - War Is Cruel and Trade Ruthless

In the 1960's and 70's, snow castle architecture was thriving especially in the suburbs. Amongst other things, snowploughing equipment, which was gradually becoming more and more common, provided castle builders with new possibilities. Olli from city of Kuopio (born in 1963) writes the following about the snow castles and snow wars of his childhood days:

"--they were built every winter in the "tiny" wood next to the block of flats as well as in the huge piles of snow that had been ploughed from the streets. The boys in the building formed the construction team; there were 20-25 of us, 7-11 year old boys, living in the same building at the same time (1968-75), so there was no shortage of friends. Girls you would not find in those activities. In my opinion, the golden years of the activity were the first few years of the 1970's in particular

No one taught us how to build snow castles; I suppose those skills were one of the many childhood games that were passed down as legacy from older children to younger children. The older boys would, naturally, be the leaders. Castles were built mostly out of snow, either by rolling snowballs or

by digging great piles of snow. The smallest castles were round in shape, fortresses or camps separated by simple walls, and there would be several of these in the same forest.

On the outskirts of the very same forest, the city would pile a mountain of snow collected from the streets throughout the winter, and towards the end of the winter, a massive fortress would be built there. In addition to a wall of defence, the Great Castle contained hallways and rooms that served as the main hall, dungeon and snowball storage. I recall cardboards being picked up from the dumps behind the corner shop to cover the floor, and candles being used to light up the castle.

-Of course castles got broken! War was cruel and trade ruthless. One country might conquer another or several others, take the defenders of the conquered castle as their war slaves and warriors and continue their conquering mission in a bigger group. Some others might form an alliance against a country that had grown too powerful and go on a joint-attack. All in all, the battles could go on for the whole day or even the whole winter holiday week (naturally, we would go home to sleep and eat every now and then).

Thinking back to those games now, they actually contained even rather complex strategic and tactic manoeuvres and “superpower politics”. Breaking the constructions was generally avoided, though. But then again, there were the boys from neighbouring buildings, who every now and then tried to demolish the castles. However, the boys in our building had such an outstanding superiority in strength – in quality as well as in quantity - that the others dreaded our possible raids of revenge. As I remember, we did go on a few of those raids and they ended with celebrations of the triumph of our building (see Asterix and lessons on classical Latin).

As a parent and the father of a young boy, it has later crossed my mind how surprising it is that nothing more serious ever happened. The defeated warriors were thrown down the walls without a blink. Still, there were no more serious injuries than black eyes, bleeding noses and lips and swollen joints. In a way, I am a bit sad that in the area where we live (Pirkanmaa) there is not enough snow nowadays, not even for building a proper snow castle.

Olli's analytical account is significant. Clearly he has played the same game as the young men Olaus Magnus knew 500 years before. But now the activity has the nature of a kind of combined constructing, acting, competing and war fantasy game. The contents of the game are derived from juvenile literature but also partly from the real world conveyed through media. The snow war, rich in experience, also fed on itself and was repeated year after year already for the adventure alone.

5th Story - The Princesses in Their Knight's Castles

Even though snow wars are regarded as a game primarily for boys, there is plenty of information about girls taking part in the battles, too. However, in girls' own games, snow castles are given slightly different functions. *“Our group consisted of girls only. For us snow wars were never an actual end. Building castles was a game as such, and during the construction process we didn't give much thought to what kind of games would be played in the castle. We might go on an excursion there, in the sense that we would bring snacks and have sandwiches and juice in the castle. Often the castle would serve as a playground for home games after a few days.”* (Leena, born in 1963).

In next story Anu from Hyvinkää (born in 1975) gives a vivid account of her snow castle memories. Her story reflects, in an interesting way, the nature of game on the threshold of a new millennium.

Normally, we would build a snow castle in my home yard every winter, at least until I started secondary school. That castle usually lasted the whole winter, from the very early snow till the spring thaw. The castle was usually built around the first proper snowfall, so that rolling snowballs would leave green marks on the ground. We mainly played with the neighbours' girls in the residential area, and I can't really remember being acquainted with the castles built by other kids'.

We made constructions of snow together with my mom and dad, so we got our ideas by following their example. Normally, we would form the castles with simple snow balls that were arranged next to one another and finished off with snow. In window making, I think my dad instructed us on how to use a board above the hole between two snowballs so as to make a reasonably big-sized window. Dad also helped us with the roof constructions for the greatest castle. I think my mom gave us various ideas for design solutions. The snow castle was quite often located on the same side of the yard, rather in the backyard than on the street side.

We didn't really fight snow wars, at least not using snowballs - it could be that our parents had made it strictly clear that snowballs were not to be thrown at other people. Snow castles served, especially in my early childhood, as homes, or there could be princesses, knights and witches living in them. I also used to play in the snow castle just by myself. Action was not as crucial then as wandering around, while the conversations and actions took place in my imagination.

I remember particularly well a winter in the mid 1980's, when we had a considerably large castle, with windows and all, in the yard. At that time, the arms race was the centre of discussions, and I had read about the destructive power of nuclear warheads and about nuclear winter. While playing in the castle I contemplated a situation, where our houses would have been burnt down and only the people in our house would have managed to escape to the safety of the snow castle. In my visions, we lived in the castle for years, even long enough to grow up to be adults.

In the last year of snow castles 1987-1988 (an excellent snow castle - and it truly was greater than the earlier ones, not just greater in my memories, because it was the last - it melted away after New Year's when the slush period began) I was excited about the French Revolution, and I remember how I would stand on the second floor of our huge castle with my best friend, quoting some elevated words, because the guillotine awaited us (or something along those lines). So our games were rather history and adventure oriented, but also highly imaginative and concentrated more on the atmosphere than fighting actual battles.

Anu's account draws a picture similar to the one that emerged as a result of the field studies of 2001. Nowadays, snow castles serve as playgrounds for groups of only a few children and they are found mainly in sheltered locations, e.g., in the backyards of detached and terraced houses. In the research data, this can be seen, for example, in that most of the castles documented are small in size, only a few square meters' basic castles with walls and doorways.

At the start of the 21st century, snow castles are being made more and more often just for the fun of

building. Fighting snow wars is, however, still mentioned as a common purpose for a castle, but the actual snow war is only seldom linked with the events of war in real life. They are rather understood as their own game category that is, parallel to water fights in regard to their contents. Also, the grown ups do not disapprove of snow wars as an actual war game. In addition to this the warlike ingredient in snow castles has become weaker and they are mainly associated with knight's castles of the fairy tales or just as places for playing home.

Part of our day's phenomena is also the strengthening of parents role as children's playmates. Parents themselves see snow castles and, e.g., building snowmen mostly as a hobby that fathers and children can share. Amongst reasons given for this is that rolling and lifting heavy snowballs requires substantial strength.

Our Yard

At the turn of the 21st century the discussion on childhood often conveys worry about children spending more and more time with videos and computer games. There is a fear of active and creative communal games that develop social skills being lost. Marjatta Kalliala writes in her doctoral thesis the following: "Traditional yard games have diminished considerably. Age segregation and lower birth rate have led to a situation where there are not enough playmates in the yard even at prime playing time. In addition to this, television and the increased number of hobbies fight for their share of children's time".

It can be assumed that outdoor games, in the winter in particular, are sensitive in reflecting this kind of development. The research of winter 2001 suggests that the changes in playing culture reach snow games also. Based on a preliminary analysis, it can be concluded that the age distribution of children building snow castles has narrowed down and the groups of players grown smaller.

How drastic is then the regression of yard games and what was the period like that the present situation is compared to? The 1950's and the following decades are often mentioned as the golden age of playing culture. This was the time when the baby boom generations were in their play-age. Children had plenty of their own time, since it had become more common for mothers to work outside the home and communal day-care was not highly developed yet. After school, friends could be found outside in the yards and the situation was ideal for playing group games.

When estimating how yard games are being set aside, it has to be kept in mind that this was a special period in the history of childhood and the conditions for a rise of playing culture were exceptionally favourable. The generations that have grown up by now remember exactly this peak period, which makes the present situation look disappointingly poor. However, when taking a longer period under examination the situation evens out. Today's snow castles and the number of children playing around them seem to have recovered rather close to the situation of the early 20th century.

As a conclusion, it can be said that although the ways of playing have changed and gained more variety over time, today's children are as familiar with snowballs, snow castles and hands numb in cold in winter as their age mates of medieval times. Still, history shapes children's world and the signs of our times manifest themselves also in snow games. Thus the great snow castles in the backyards may have disappeared, but snowmen built by children, together with their mothers and fathers, are more popular

than ever.

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