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"War as a Game"

With the emergence of so-called military-industrial-media-entertainment networks, war in the early 21st century is rapidly acquiring the attributes of a game, or so James Der Derian has argued. Today, we explore the implications of this growing overlap for international relations and security.

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Over the past two days we have considered how virtual environments (such as video games and cyber-ranges) are being used as training devices by the world's militaries. Today we take a contextual step back and reflect on the broader implications of the enmeshment of virtual and physical realities. Paul Virilio, for example, has explored the idea that contemporary technological conditions –and what he calls the "pace" of modern life -- are moving us into a fundamentally new social and political era. Applying Virilio to International Relations, James Der Derian, has also written about the implications of games and the creation of virtual realities for (post-) modern warfare. In *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial Media Entertainment Network*, Der Derian argues that we are witnessing a disturbing phenomenon of "not just the confusion but the pixilation of war and games on the same screen." Today we explore these arguments and their implications for international relations and security. But first – to whet your appetite – is the book's viral teaser:

For Der Derian, war, in the early 21st century, is rapidly acquiring the properties of a game. One of the main reasons for this, he argues, is the nature and prevalence of actual war games. Though war games have been around for centuries, Der Derian argues that the nature of war games today is actually causing a real confusion between war and games. One of the key factors driving this confusion are technological developments in war gaming. Beginning in 1958 when the US Naval War College closed down its "old tiled war gaming room" (replete with "toy soldiers and cardboard ships") and replaced it with the computerized Navy Electronic Warfare System (NEWS), there have been quantum leaps in the realism of military war gaming. According to Der Derian, however, "the improvement produced an ironic outcome: the better the simulation, the higher the risk of confusing war as game."

Leading the way in the 'hybridization' of war and games is what Der Derian calls "virtuous war," – a 'way,' or culture, of war which "projects a technological and ethical superiority … to deter, discipline and if need be, destroy the enemy." In his inimitable style, Der Derian contextualizes this

phenomenon of virtuous war as follows:

Designed by the Pentagon, auditioned in the Balkans, and dress-rehearsed in Afghanistan, virtuous war took center stage in the invasion of Iraq. [...] Ethically intentioned and virtually applied, drawing on the doctrines of just war when possible and holy war when necessary, virtuous war is more than a felicitous oxymoron. After 11 September, as the United States chose coercion over diplomacy in its foreign policy, and deployed the rhetoric of absolute victory over evil, virtuous war became the ultimate means by which the United States intended to re-secure its borders, assert its suzerainty, and secure the holy trinity of international order – free markets, vassal states, and preventive wars. It became the only game in town.

Trademarks of this culture of "virtuous war" include low levels of military casualties but high ratios of friendly-fire casualties and of civilian casualties to military casualties. Virtuous war also tends to be characterized by the increasing use of precision munitions and unmanned platforms on the battlefield. Most of all, however, it is characterized by the properties of games: i.e., "high production values, mythic narratives, easy victories and few bodies." For soldiers, policy-makers and the media-saturated public alike, this phenomenon of 'virtuous war' makes war into a game.

Highlighting the extent to which the confusion between war and games penetrates military thinking, Der Derian reports a famous interview, during the First Gulf War, with General Norman Schwarzkopf on ABC news. The general was asked by the interviewer, in light of the video-game-like appearance of the war on television, whether there was "any sort of danger that we don't have any sense of the horrors of war—that it's all a game?" He responded as follows:

You didn't see me treating it like a game. And you didn't see me laughing and joking while it was going on. There are human lives being lost, and at this stage of the game [sic] this is not a time for frivolity on the part of anybody.

To a post-structuralist like Der Derian, this self-contradiction is damning evidence indeed. It reveals just how deeply seated the 'war as game' confusion was at the very top of the US military establishment at the time.

Since then, Der Derian argues, the confusion of war and games has only become worse and more widespread – at least in the United States. Technological advances in the 'realism' of military war simulations have been amplified by the saturation of mass media with images and narratives that promote the 'virtuous war' culture (not excluding commercial video games themselves, some of which now also provide impressively 'realistic' military simulations for a mass audience). During the Iraq War, Der Derian observes, the military-media offensive was obvious: "retired Generals and flag officers exercised full spectrum dominance on cable and network TV." "FOX News alone," he tells us, "had enough ex-military to stage their own veteran's day parade." These media phenomena all contributed, in Der Derian's view, to bringing the culture of "virtuous war" – once ensconced only in the military establishment – to the wider public for whom war is also becoming increasingly indistinguishable from a game.

Though Der Derian believes the 'war as game' phenomenon is quite pronounced, the consequences of being unable – as a society – to properly distinguish between war and games are unclear. On one hand, at least from a military perspective, the lower levels of military casualties that seem to accompany the confusion of war and games might be welcomed, perhaps even when higher ratios of friendly fire and civilian casualties (as long as they too remain relatively low) are taken into account. On the other, the current (8:1) ratio of civilian to military casualties that Der Derian reports is, for most people, unacceptably high.

From a broader societal perspective, the proposition is at least as intriguing as it is disturbing. War is perhaps too often viewed as akin to a natural phenomenon, rather than as something that is within our power to shape. Certainly, we would have to master our confusion about war and games – and try to alter the rules rather than mindlessly reproduce them – but thinking of war as a game could be the first step to changing war for the better. As Kenneth Waltz said, "asking who won a war is like asking who won an earthquake" -- the point being that there are no winners. With games, on the contrary, winning is often possible.

Click here to read Der Derian's article, "War as Game."

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