

# The Games of War

By

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War is the great game; it is played for keeps. But it is learned from play, as most complex behavior is. Watch the wolf pups, the lion cubs, and the human children tussle for dominance. War, a behavior that is almost exclusively practiced by primates and social insects, is more complicated, and so play focused on learning war is correspondingly complex; it is games.

Ancient war games, Chess and Go, continue to fascinate many, including military practitioners (as soldiers style themselves these days), but operationally the focus has turned to the electronic (narrative and virtual) and hybrid (embodied play with technological enhancements--deadly Disneyland). While games have always influenced real war, in the last few stages of war's development the influence of the imagined combats of games on the blood and gore of actual battlefields has become significant.

Modern War, with its rationalistic pretensions, its commitment to technological progress, to decisive battle and war as an extension of politics, found a natural affinity in complicated rule-based simulations. Training evolved into complex war games on boards and terrains, moving pieces, real war machines, and men. Not that games trumped dreams. Japan's attack on the U.S. and Hitler's Battle of the Bulge offensive both gamed out failures, but the attacks were made none-the-less. This continues in postmodern war. After all, the U.S. invasion of Iraq was defeated in the games by a U.S. Marine Corp. General. So the rules were changed and the results changed in the game. In real war, changing the rules is harder.

But self-deception aside, in many other respects postmodern war is different than modern war. Because ultimate battle is precluded by the power of weapons of mass destruction, appearances are less easily imposed. Hearts and minds cannot all be killed, some must be won over. At the same time technology produced the weapons of mass destruction that made total war impossible, it also created the digital machines that are transforming war and almost everything else. In war this is the shift from steel on target to information dominance that lies at the heart of postmodern war. The Low Intensity Conflicts and Operations Other Than War that make up the postmodern war system engage in conflict as if it were a game, with complex modeling in simulation (war games) and reality (Human Terrain modeling in Afghanistan). Cyberwar is both at once.

The mass media covers all this with two parts entertainment to one part news. The game industry takes the same reality and morphs it into fun, even obsession, for millions of fanboys and fangirls worldwide. The military recruits these fans to run drones, the latest social media, although not so friendly when used to assassinate targets or for the operators who often suffer from posttraumatic stress. As a physical extension of human sociality, we can expect drones to proliferate beyond the military sphere into most aspects of culture, just as textual and image based social media platforms have. Just as games have.

Games are designed to addict the players, their affordances constantly being tweaked for maximum seductiveness not unlike how war games are often massaged to give the results the game

planners' desire. The battle simulations are stimulations for new ways of thinking and making of war. After all, men (and a few women) make war as wars make them; wars shape techs and techs shape wars. In postmodernity the line between war and peace is unclear, so it is no surprise the line between games and war seems to be dissolving as well. For example, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) have gamified their web site, with many little web games and offering prizes to the fans who spread IDF talking points around the interweb. After all, as the US military has recognized since their defeat in Vietnam, the homefront, the public debate, the social context, is the first front that must be won. Propaganda (from white to black) is a crucial part of this and now the IDF gets children to spread theirs. It turns out the frontier between real war and its playful simulations is far from clear.

### **Works Used:**

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