

## War/Game: Studying Relations Between Violent Conflict, Games, and Play

### Bio

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### Approaching the War/Game Nexus

Games and war have always stood in a close relationship to one another. From the ancient Chinese Go, via various iterations of chess to contemporary digital simulation games, or from classical Roman gladiator battles, via martial-arts competitions to today's first-person shooters, the skills employed and the structures limiting participants' actions and perceptions point to a variety of equivalences and connections between the two fields of practice. As van Creveld (2013) observes in his history of war games, games and war exhibit certain similarities. Both, he states, are constituted in and through an "interplay between... two sides" that is "strategic" in kind, that means the aim is "to achieve your objective in the face of an opponent who thinks and acts" (p. 3). In this regard, it does not matter if this opponent is a human being, an institution, or an algorithm. The main point asserted by van Creveld is that both war games and warfare are planned competitive interactions between opponents that are (more or less) structured by rules, and that stretch over time.

Here, of course, most similarities end. With a few exceptions, such as medieval jousting competitions or the gladiator games mentioned above, most acts of play do not willfully inflict bodily harm. Even though a representational layer may suggest that the small figures placed on a map or the actual players moving through a landscape constitute soldiers engaged in fierce battles, hardly anyone is ever killed or seriously wounded playing a war game. After all, besides the elements of rules and competition, a lack of serious consequences is one cornerstone of many attempts to define games and play, from Huizinga (1955 [1938], p. 13) and Caillois (2001 [1961], pp. 9-10) via Juul (2005, p. 36) to Sicart (2014, p. 16) [1].

Precisely because they in general do not deliberately inflict physical harm, yet do, as van Creveld has observed, exhibit some common traits with warfare, games appear well fitted for the purpose of military planning, testing, and training. Furthermore, basic rule systems enable a structuring of interactions between game components and players regardless of the representational skins and the specific real-world settings these might point to (Aarseth & Calleja, 2015). Games are therefore useful tools to emulate a variety of possible scenarios and challenges, and to enable a largely risk-free and repeatable experimenting in more or less realistic settings. Unsurprisingly, many contemporary games – from Go and chess via tabletop role-playing games to the most

recent first-person shooter – have either been developed from, or adapted to, military forms of usage and application (Halter, 2006; Deterding, 2010).

The close relationship between war and games is a recurrent theme in cultural and game studies, but scholarly assessments of its significance are somewhat varied. Writing in the context of a general civilizational discontent of the 1930s, Huizinga (1955 [1938]) for instance laments that “modern warfare has... lost all contact with play” (p. 210) and now resembles a limitless violent activity with no regard for shared rules or humanitarian principles. However, Huizinga continues, without adherence to basic rules, civilization cannot be distinguished from barbarism and will ultimately cease to exist. In 1938 he writes,

real civilization cannot exist in the absence of a certain play-element, for civilization presupposes limitation and mastery of the self, the ability not to confuse its own tendencies with the ultimate and highest goal, but to understand that it is enclosed within certain bounds freely accepted. Civilization will [...] always be played according to certain rules, and true civilization will always demand fair play (1955 [1938], p. 211).

In hindsight, not least the unbound carnage of World War II seems to have proven Huizinga’s prediction right.

Today, critical scholarly discourse on the relation between war and games no longer directs much attention to the possible civilizational and civilizing aspects of a rule-bound play element in politics and culture. Rather, research addresses the way games represent – and indeed frame – wars, and emphasize the often close connections between the game industries, technological developments, and military interests. In such studies, games are often treated as only one element in a multi-medial and multi-modal military-culture-propaganda nexus that has been variably labelled militainment (Stahl, 2010), military-entertainment complex (Andersen, 2006; Andersen & Mirrlees, 2014), or military-industrial-media-entertainment network (Der Derian, 2009). In these overarching studies, attention to the specificity of the game/play dimension of this mediated war culture has often been relegated to a secondary status – with the possible exception of Stahl (2010) who addresses media-specific affordances of games when asserting an imminent transition from the “citizen-spectator” (p. 21) of the classic broadcast era to the “virtual citizen-soldier” of contemporary “interactive war” (pp. 35 -36).

In the discipline of game studies, two critical tendencies in academic treatments of the war/game nexus can be identified. On the one hand, studies highlight historical, institutional, technological, political, and economic connections between the games industry and military interests (Halter, 2006; Dyer-Witford & de Peuter, 2009; Stahl, 2010; Crogan, 2011); on the other hand, scholars have criticized the failures, both at the level of rules and narrative, of generic mainstream games adequately to represent and enact the (historical) realities of war (Schut, 2007; Allen, 2011; Salvati & Bullinger, 2013; Ramsay, 2015; Pötzsch, 2015; Pötzsch & Šisler, 2016; Payne, 2016; Chapman, 2016). It is often argued that both sets of concerns point to how games facilitate a culture-driven virtualization and sanitization of war discourses and battlefields alike, this way implicitly supporting bellicose ideologies, propaganda, and military mindsets.

Yet, as Schulzke (2013) among others has pointed out, many studies that present critical perspectives on the military-game-propaganda nexus suffer from a tendency to merely assume problematic consequences of military games without however adequately explaining “the mechanisms that may produce this harm” (Schulzke, 2013, p. 60). Responding to this criticism, Pötzsch (2015), Pötzsch & Šisler (2016), and Payne (2016), among others, have advocated the empirical investigation both of specific game structures inviting particular perceptions and actions,

and of the performative activation, negotiation, or subversion of these potentials in and through practices of reception, play, marketing, and modification. Only by means of such methodical empirical work at the level of game form, player, and context, can the actual structures and performances underpinning what Payne (2016) terms a “ludic war culture” (p. 10) be adequately addressed and brought to light.

Other research traditions have focused on such issues as the feasibility of games for military planning, training, and rehabilitation (Sabin, 2014; Mead, 2013), examined the potential of peace games or anti-war titles (Morwood, 2014; Kwiatkowski, 2016), or have directed attention to game design and development from both instrumental and critical vantage points (Sabin, 2014; Sisler et. al., 2014; Perla, 2016; Flanagan, 2016). The present special issue comprises contributions adopting perspectives from all the approaches highlighted above, and in this way, we hope, provides a timely update on a constantly evolving debate.

## Locating the Issue

Before engaging each of the contributions included in the present issue, we want to briefly relate our project to previous advances aimed at a mapping of the war/game nexus. A series of recent edited volumes and a special issue have highlighted the connection between games, play, culture, and war from different theoretical and methodological vantage points. Andersen and Mirrlees’s special issue in *Democratic Communiqué* (2014), for instance, provides a useful update on the general debate regarding the varying interrelations between military interests and cultural expressions. However, their issue’s main focus is on Western film and television and only two of the contributions address issues related to digital games and play.

Gerald Voorhees, Joshua Call, and Katie Whitlock’s *Guns, Grenades, and Grunts* (2012) directs specific attention to first-person shooter (FPS) games. Adopting a variety of perspectives, the volume presents a detailed examination of one specific type of war game without, however, drawing lines to other genres, alternative uses of FPS games beyond entertainment/propaganda purposes, or to such issues as anti-war or peace titles. Matthew W. Elliott and Andrew B.R. Kapell’s *Playing with the Past* (2013), on the other hand, directs attention to various game types and genres when it lays out attempts to grasp the interrelation between history and games. Due to their intrinsic connection to past or on-going real-world violent conflicts, war games play a prominent role in their volume. In spite of this, however, no systematic assessment of the relation between war history and games is attempted, and no wider investigation into non-historical aspects of a war/game nexus is conducted in their anthology.

Nina B. Huntemann and Matthew T. Payne’s *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games* (2010) as well as Pat Harrigan and Matthew G. Kirschenbaum’s *Zones of Control: Perspectives on Wargaming* (2016) are collections that more comprehensively address the war/game nexus. Both volumes combine genre and game analysis with historical accounts, provide critical contextualizations of processes of production and play practices, look into varied military uses for planning and rehabilitation, and direct attention to development and design, as well as putting emphasis on anti-war games and practices of counterplay.

The present special issue can be seen as a continuation of all these endeavors. In compiling a series of original articles dealing with such issues as game design, player experiences and practices, game analysis, instrumental applications, and critical genre studies, we hope to contribute to, and further develop, ongoing scholarly debates about the nature and evolution of the war/game nexus.

The articles that have been selected for inclusion present new evidence and open up new insights that hopefully will facilitate further discussion of this important issue.

## The Contributions

The contributions to the present special issue can be roughly divided into two categories that are somewhat characteristic of major directions in game studies. A number of articles emphasize formal features of games at the level of rules, mechanics, and/or narrative, and show how potentials for meaning and (inter)action are created at this formal level (Chapman, Sterczewski, Ford). Other articles included here present empirical research that points to actual player experiences (Jørgensen, Healey, O'Neill & Feenstra, Banks & Cole). The piece by Šisler combines both perspectives, while the article by Guanio-Uluru views the cultural significance of war games through the lens of a different medium.

Distinguishing such tendencies is, of course, a merely heuristic endeavor. Ranging from Aarseth's (1997) notion of "ergodic literature" (p. 1-8) and Aarseth and Calleja's (2015) "cybermedia model" (p. 1) via Sicart's (2009) "ludic hermeneutic circle" (p. 118) to Arjoranta's (2015) distinction between "game hermeneutics and real-time hermeneutics" (p. 59), many scholars have argued that the experiences and meanings afforded by games always emerge at the intersection between form and performance, between game and play, and that they can only be adequately addressed in research that takes heed of both aspects in combination. Games and players constitute one another through reciprocal dynamic processes in varying contexts. What games mean and how they are experienced will necessarily always be contingent and only partially accessible.

Even though game-centric and play-centric approaches surely should be combined, not every study will have the capacity to adopt both points of view. Often a somewhat selective focus on one of the two dimensions will have to suffice and it is beyond doubt that such studies produce important and valid results. What is required, however, is a certain humility on the part of the researcher regarding the inevitably partial and contingent nature of the presented findings. In other words, triangulation does not necessarily have to happen within each study, but can be a valuable asset when correlating the data and results of different studies adopting different and apparently competing methods. Establishing such productive dialogues across scholarly divides was one of the objectives of this special issue.

Thematically, history is an important emphasis of this special issue. Five of the nine texts direct attention to how war history is represented, enacted, and understood in games. We will start by introducing these five contributions.

Opening the present issue, Vít Šisler critically examines how videogames can deal with contentious and emotionally challenging historical experiences and events. After a brief critique of established conventions of mainstream war games, and of the limited perspectives on the past these usually invite, Šisler turns to a detailed study of the design process behind a serious game on contemporary history, *Czechoslovakia 38–89: Assassination* (Charles University and the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, 2015) that deals with the assassination of Deputy Reich Protector Reinhard Heydrich in Prague in 1942. In particular, the article discusses tensions between authenticity and fiction, between realism and schematization, as well as between narrative and procedure, and details how game design can successfully respond to and negotiate these dimensions. Finally, Šisler addresses the question of how the game and its historical content were

received in the Czech Republic both by the general public and in the context of formal school education.

Also focusing on history and Central Europe, the contribution by Piotr Sterczewski compares and contrasts three Polish games that deal with the Warsaw uprising of 1944 – a key event in the collective commemoration of World War II in the country. Sterczewski’s analysis brings together digital games and board games, critically investigates the interplay between narrative and gameplay, and contextualizes the findings with reference to Polish culture and politics. Employing the concept of “mnemonic hegemony” (Molden, 2016), he investigates how the three games relate to established historical discourses and reiterate received notions of heroism and national sacrifice.

Arguing for the salience of videogames as a historical form on a par with films or novels, Adam Chapman investigates how World War I is presented in the war-game genre. His article shows that received imageries such as trench warfare, gas attacks, or artillery shelling – despite being characteristic of popular memory of the events in other media – only play a minor role in historical games. One reason for this, Chapman suggests, is that due to, among other things, a fear of trivialization, games are often still perceived as an unsuitable medium for a sensitive treatment of tragic and traumatic events. A second reason is that the ambiguous nature of World War I, an event that cannot be neatly packaged in terms of good versus evil, complicates a ludic engagement that fares far better with morally disambiguated narratives such as those connected to World War II. In conclusion, he argues that, particularly in times of resurgent chauvinism and militarism, critical studies of how we represent, and possibly sanitize, the past are of major importance – regardless of whether the focus is on novels, films, games, or any other media.

Employing post-colonial theory to critique the presentation of history and historical processes in *Civilization V*, the article by Dominic Ford directs attention to large-scale simulation games and to how these frame practices of exploration, expansion, exploitation, and extermination as the most crucial factors driving global developments. Criticizing the way this 4X genre adopts a Western-centric outlook and naturalizes specifically Western values and perspectives at the level of rules, goals, and mechanics, the article suggests that the genre silences alternative voices and viewpoints, and in this way narrows down possible understandings of world history and global politics. Even though, as the author eloquently puts it, “*Civilization V* might not be breeding a generation of ruthless imperialists, ... it may well be reinforcing notions of history that focus on the West and champion war in a way that celebrates singular events to the detriment of their contexts”. This critique is particularly timely, Ford suggests, as the *Civilization* series has acquired a certain currency in schools for its alleged educational value.

The final contribution dealing with the issue of war history in games and play is the article by Kevin O’Neill and Bill Feenstra. Shifting focus to an analysis of player responses, the authors present findings from empirical research that examines the position of videogames in players’ trust hierarchies of accepted sources of historical knowledge. The small-scale qualitative study with 12 participants playing the D-Day mission in *Medal of Honor: Frontline* (EA Games, 2002) addresses their perception of realism and potential for historical learning in war games. O’Neill and Feenstra suggest that players were skeptical toward the game as a legitimate source of factual knowledge about the past and that, in the absence of historical knowledge with which to evaluate the game’s degree of realism, they relied on observations about game mechanics and speculation about the developers’ motives.

Of the remaining four contributions, three deal with player experiences of war games and play, while a final paper addresses the question of how contemporary literature responds to the salience of games and play in contemporary culture.

Kristine Jørgensen's article presents the results of a qualitative study investigating player responses to uncomfortable content in the critical anti-war title *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development, 2012). Bringing an established body of research on the design and narrative of the game into dialogue with an assessment of actual player experiences, she shows that the game affords feelings of "positive discomfort" and in this way facilitates critical reflection and introspection. Providing empirical evidence about how the game has been played and understood, Jørgensen's findings support the argument that play in essence is about more than "the fun and the safe" in that it gives rise to a huge variety of emotional and affective responses that point beyond rational forms of engagement.

Gareth Healey's contribution directs attention to gaming cultures when reporting on the performances of a group of 11 adolescent males engaged in player versus player combat scenarios in the multi-player mode of *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (Treyarch, 2010). Through an analysis of recorded gameplay sessions and interviews with the players, he assesses a series of verbal and performative strategies through which they constitute, negotiate, and distinguish a hegemonic masculine identity on what he terms the "proving grounds" of the game. In these processes, Healey observes, classical characteristics of hegemonic masculinity such as sexual prowess and physical strength are replaced by a focus on in-game expertise and player proficiency. The article shows how this emerging hegemonic masculine group identity is policed through the strategic deployment of sexualized language denigrating poor in-game performances and other deviations through the application of homophobic terminology.

The article by Jamie Banks and John G. Cole presents an empirical study on the role of war games and avatars in military veteran gamers' self-coping strategies. Arguing for the usability of everyday gameplay for the reduction of stress-related pathologies among military personnel, the authors show how coping practices such as escapism/diversion, managing physical/psychological maladies, receiving social support, and connecting with civilian life can be enhanced by gameplay in informal settings.

In the final contribution to the special issue, Lykke Guanio-Uluru addresses the relations between ethics, war, and games in three literary works written in the past three decades – Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* (1977), Terry Pratchett's *Only You Can Save Mankind* (1992) and Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008). Viewing the changing role of games and play in culture and politics through the lens of a different medium, she shows how all three works problematize distinctions between "played war" and "actual war", and by these means explore ethical challenges connected to screen-based and game-like war and combat. Interrogating the specific war/game/player nexus in each narrative, she identifies a trend that increasingly brings the impacts of advanced military technologies on human bodies into focus.

## Conclusion

The contributions summarized above show that the nexus between war, play, and games constitutes a complex and dynamic terrain open for a variety of inquiries combining different methods and theoretical frames. The present special issue received a huge number of submissions and only a handful of them made it through a thorough double-blind peer review



process. We hope that the authors whose contributions could not be included here will also keep up their important work. Too many valuable perspectives and findings could not be included this time and too many questions and problems still remain underexplored. At present we are glad to be able to present a snapshot – a freeze-frame – of ongoing debates and scholarly work that, we hope, helps to map the field and inspire new critical inquiries.

After all, wars are prepared and justified in the cultural field. As Judith Butler (2009, p. 53) writes, “normative frameworks establish in advance what kind of life will be a life worth living, what life will be a life worth preserving, and what life will become worthy of being mourned. Such views of life pervade and implicitly justify... war”. Or, in the words of James Der Derian (2002, p. 110), “more than rational calculation of interests takes us to war. People go to war because of how they see, perceive, picture, imagine, and speak of others; that is, how they construct the difference of others as well as the sameness of themselves through representation”.

It is our contention that, due to their growing cultural currency, games increasingly matter in such processes. As Payne (2016) writes, games and play are not located in a socio-political vacuum. Rather, “the virtual realm of games and the physical world exist in a complex... coevolving dialectic” (p. 4). As part of a rapidly expanding militainment complex, he argues further, mainstream military and war games tend to “proselytize on behalf of state mythology” (p. 9) and connect “the citizen’s identity to the national imaginary and its military power fantasies” (p. 208). Not least because of such aspects, we believe that the war/game nexus merits our continued critical attention.

## Acknowledgement

First and foremost, we would like to thank the authors and anonymous reviewers who have made this special issue possible. In addition, we would like to express our gratitude to Jessica Enevold for organizing and seeing through the extensive double-blind peer review process and to Espen Aarseth for constructive and critical feedback on the submitted manuscripts and the present editorial. A final thank you goes to Christian Beyer for formatting the final manuscripts.

## Endnotes

[1] This notion of games and play as somewhat isolated from “real life” is of course a debated issue. Drawing upon Wittgenstein’s famous example, Aarseth and Calleja (2015), for instance, not only question the possibility of a distinction of games and play from their respective contexts, but also argue that games cannot be defined at all. We acknowledge such critical advances, but would nevertheless like to highlight the role a delimitation of games and play from more serious activities has played in actual attempts to define games. For our part, we are in agreement with for instance Payne (2016, p. 4) who assumes a complex dialectical relationship between games and play and their varying contexts.

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