Wargaming in the US Military: Ludic Militarism and the Production of Warfighters

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AGGIE HIRST, MAY 31 2025

After more than a decade of research, it is no longer necessary to make the case for the study of games in IR. It is now established in the field that popular culture, and its various constitutive artefacts, are relevant for a host of global politics' core thematics, from militarism and war to identity, gender, empire, and resistance (Grayson, Davies and Philpott 2009; Caso and Hamilton 2015; Daniel and Musgrave 2017). Catalysed in part by the 21st century explosion of the videogames industry – now the world's most lucrative entertainment medium – the study of games in IR has focused upon the teaching of theory and history in the classroom (Asal 2005; Horn, Rubin and Schouenborg 2015; de Zamaroczy 2017), the place of game theory in analysing global affairs (Snidal 1985; Brams 2000) and, most substantively, the role of war-based videogames in the spread of militarism (Robinson 2012, 2016,; Schulzke 2014, 2017; Ciută 2016; Berents and Keogh 2018).

Frequently centred on first-person shooters and post-9/11 foreign policy misadventures, this literature has examined the politics and productive effects of simulating righteous wars against orientalised others. Grounding itself in the intersection of the commercial and military gaming spheres (Kaempf 2019), it has examined various dimensions of the military-industrial-media-entertainment network (MIME-NET) (Der Derian 2009) or military-entertainment complex (Lenoir 2000), most often with a view to elucidating and critiquing their militarising effects on civilian gamers. Neglected in the main in these debates has been the question of the games played within the military.

While the spread of ludic militarism (I am grateful to Meera Sabaratnam for this framing) to the civilian gamer world has occupied centre stage, the roles and effects of games within the defence establishment has received relatively scant attention in IR. The principal exception to this rule is James Der Derian, whose work mapping the MIME-NET blazed a trail by tracing the place of models, simulations, exercises, and games in US military training and warmaking. Writing candidly, in a policy environment hostile to critique, that 'war with Iraq is not simply a game – it is a stupid game' (Der Derian 2003, 37), Der Derian showed over the course of two decades how virtual technologies enable the 'continuation of war by means of verisimilitude' and thereby create new 'hyperrealities' of war, in which 'actors act, things happen, and the consequences have no origins except the artificial cyberspace of the simulations themselves' (Der Derian 1990, 301). Since the publication of the second edition of Der Derian's landmark book *Virtuous War* in 2009, the military use of games – disaggregated from models, simulations, and exercises – has continued to expand and evolve. However, IR has not paid sufficient attention to these developments. If the field is to more fulsomely understand the effects of games on militarism and the conduct of war, it is necessary to expand IR's focus from military-themed civilian gaming to gaming within the military itself.

Wargaming in the US Military

A wargaming renaissance began in the US defence establishment in 2014. Prompted by DoD-wide memos from then Secretary of Defence Chuck Hagel and Deputy Bob Work (Hagel 2014; Work 2015), the US military has acted to reinvigorate wargaming across the services over the past decade. Identified as a key asset in two major reform programmes – the Defense Innovation Initiative (DII) and Third Offset Strategy (3OS) – wargames played variously on digital devices and table-tops have proliferated across the services' recruitment, training, research, and professional military education programmes. From vehicles and weapons training, language and cultural sensitivity

modules, and strategic planning efforts, games are now routinely played by warfighters across the services and spectrum of rank. In a period of declining enrolment, games and esports have successfully boosted the military's recruitment efforts (Derby 2016). They are played to promote unit cohesion during down-time on base, both at home and when deployed. They feature in the military's reintegration and recovery programmes to help warfighters process trauma and acclimate to prosthetics (Hirst 2021). Games thus play a key role in the production and management of military life, from recruitment to training and through to rehabilitation (Hirst 2022).

At the helm of these military gaming activities is a professional wargaming community of practice (hereafter, CoP) housed variously within military schoolhouses, think tanks, research centres, and consulting firms. Committed to the claim that wargaming saves lives (see also Caffrey 2019; Schechter 2020), these wargaming specialists design, facilitate, and analyse games in order to train and teach service members and to experiment with and analyse operational and strategic plans. Seeking to understand how gaming works in the production of warfighters today, I have spent the better part of the past decade researching these gaming activities, conducing fieldwork at wargames, exercises, and conferences, and generating 100+ hours of interview data with the CoP and those they teach and train. The result is the first academic book dedicated to the study of military wargaming renaissance –*Politics of Play: Wargaming with the US Military*.

As the title suggests, the book interrogates the politics and power relations at work in military gaming. Beginning from Jean Baudrillard's (1983) diagnosis of the era of simulation, in which reality has been obliterated by models that function as closed systems, the book shows that in addition to producing (hyper)realities, wargames produce people. They produce people through the operation of closed systems of rules. As David Graeber observes, games are 'pure rule-based action', indeed a 'kind of utopia of rules' (2015, 191). By means of these rule systems, I argue, games work pedagogically to produce warfighters by intervening in their cognitive and affective registers. Showing that military wargaming is frequently directed at the 'human dimension' – i.e. the military players themselves – I trace how games generate learner buy-in and engagement, consolidate lessons through iteration, promote problem-solving thinking, and cultivate information retention. At the same moment, I show how wargaming subjectifies its players through the exercise of uneven power relations between the designer, sponsor, facilitator, and trainee. Insofar as wargames force player decisions and generate synthetic experiences, they target players in ways that circumvent their reflexive capacities. The book shows, then, how players' choices, beliefs, and even identities are deliberately targeted as part of military wargaming.

Driving these cognitive and affective processes of subjectification are two mechanisms: the imperative to win and the spell of immersion. Wargames work by producing and harnessing the pursuit of victory conditions as part of their subjectifying capacity, specifically through systems of reward and punishment, profusive forms of loss and failure, and systematic iterative irresolution. Concurrently, immersion is vital for subjectificatory wargaming because it generates and prolongs player focus, confers game validity, and improves the extent to which the game's lessons are internalised and experienced as 'real'. I demonstrate how immersion can be cultivated through the use of narrative, the (apparent) exercise of choice, and encouraging the player to refer to their in-game persona in the first person. Ultimately, immersive play desubjectifies players by circumventing their self-conscious and self-reflective capacities, while at the same moment resubjectifying them through the cultivation of reflexes.

In order to challenge the smooth running of these subjectifying utopias of rules, the book proposes a new mode of critical analysis: 'deconstructive play'. Drawing on the thought of Jacques Derrida, I argue that deconstructive play can help expose the politics of gaming by disentangling play from game, cultivating a deconstructive player-subject, and operationalising deconstructive play in gameworlds. In doing so, the book operationalises deconstructive play to critically interrogate the capacity of wargames to produce people by introducing fractures into their hyperreal productions. As this suggests, in addition to shifting IR's focus from commercial to military gaming, my aim is to introduce the study of play to IR. From its almost complete exclusion from the field to date, it may be inferred that play is seen as singularly unserious and has no place in IR's solemn topics of war, states, and institutions (Hirst 2019). Against this assumption, the book's wager is that play can operate as a powerful mode of critical thought which can prise open the closed systems and rule sets characteristic of ludic capitalism (Soderman 2021).

Pharmacotic Wargaming

While *Politics of Play* focuses upon gaming within the military, my fieldwork also drew into focus the roles and effects of games in the lifecycle of warfighters before and following service. Here, some unexpected applications and sites of resistance arose. During an interview, former Army Captain Steve Machuga made the remarkable statement: 'videogames saved my life'. On returning home following his two tours in Iraq, he explained, suffering with PTSD caused in part by narrowly escaping a suicide bombing, Steve turned to games to manage his isolation, ongoing trauma responses, and suicidal ideation. As he put it to me: 'I was finding on trash days, Tuesdays, I was having trouble leaving the house because that is a popular place for insurgents to hide explosive devices.' Turning to videogames as a distraction, Steve found that they alleviated his symptoms, reducing his agoraphobia and creating a community of 'nerd goodness' that he credits with having enabled his recovery. Steve found that he was not alone among veterans turning to games for relief. As another veteran put it: 'when the screaming in my head starts, I just pop on a game.'

Convinced of the power of games to help warfighters and veterans, Steve set up the charity Stack Up in 2015 to supply games and console care packages, run community events, and provide a 24/7 suicide prevention programme, supporting thousands of former and active service members to date (At the time of writing, Stack Up has thirteen chapters across the US, and further groups in the UK and New Zealand). Counterintuitively, Steve found that the majority of them requested first person shooters like *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield.* While one might suppose games set in theatres of combat would be the last thing a person with war-related PTSD would want to play, interviewees told me time and again that they function as a form of immersion therapy. As a former Army Sergeant who lost both arms in an IED explosion in Iraq explained, such games can help warfighters process traumatic events: 'You get angry, you know, pissed off at the world. Why are we here? What are we doing? We lost people we love. And then you quasi relive it through a videogame and it helps you deal with those emotions rather than bottling them up and letting them fester and poison you.' So important have games been in her recovery that she learnt to play them with her feet.

And yet, the military has been widely criticised for using wargames as a recruitment tool, drawing people into service to suffer precisely the harms that Stack Up seeks to alleviate. Leveraging the skills of civilian games designers, the free-to-download first person shooter *America's Army* series was created by the US Army as a strategic communication device to give young gamers a taste of life in the infantry. As its development director, Michael Zyda, explains, 'the Army needed people who could actually play and operate video game consoles and the controllers that came with consoles as future weapons systems were being designed with such interfaces. He continues: 'The Army was looking for young Americans between the ages of 11 and 14 to play this game. The Army knew that if a young American between those ages played this game, when they turned 18, they would be twice as likely to consider a career in the Army as young Americans who knew nothing about the Army' (Zyda 2022, 113-114). Between its launch in 2002 and its cessation of activities in 2022, *America's Army* has proven to be the most successful recruitment tool ever developed by the US military, with one study concluding that 30% of Americans between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four had a more positive view of the Army from playing the game (Edery and Mollick 2009, 141).

In the intervening period, critics have argued that using games to recruit young people is unethical and preys disproportionately on racialised and economically deprived groups. In 2020, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez filed an unsuccessful amendment to the House Appropriations Bill to ban online recruitment gaming on esports platforms like Twitch: 'it's incredibly irresponsible for the Army and the Navy to be recruiting impressionable young people and children via live streaming platforms… War is not a game'. Scholars have similarly argued that gamified recruitment portrays a sanitised version of military life and primes recruits for the harm caused by combat. As Derby (2016) summarises, '[b]ecause America's Army successfully recruits adolescents who likely would never consider joining the military otherwise… and because war results in disability, including chronic PTSD, America's Army indirectly leads to the eventual impairment of some players'. There is, thus, a pharmacotic logic – wargames function paradoxically to entice, harm, and cure military personnel (Hirst and George 2023).

Conclusion

The study of the uses and effects of games in the military remains in its infancy. However, in recent years, scholars in

and around IR interested in military wargaming have begun to establish an academic community. Reflecting these efforts, a handful of articles have been published focusing in the main on wargaming methodology (Pauly 2018; Lin-Greenberg, Pauly and Schneider 2022; Banks 2023), but an academic (sub)field is yet to be firmly established. Among the areas needing scholarly attention are the ethics of wargaming as a research method, in addition to further exploration of wargaming as an object of study.

While wargaming is continuing to proliferate globally, at the time of writing it has become apparent that the Trump administration is cutting funding for wargaming initiatives within and beyond the military. In addition, it is removing human security concerns – including protection of civilians, women, and minorities – from gaming initiatives, and PhD theses focusing upon wargaming have been removed from military college databases. Whether this signals a dip in wargaming's sine wave of popularity identified by Peter Perla (1990), or professional gaming communities outside the US manoeuvre to take the lead to maintain wargaming's position in global military institutions and practices, remains to be seen. What is clear is that efforts to make wargaming more diverse and humanitarian are being rolled back. Insofar as gaming – along with simulations and exercises – have a role to play in the formation of policy and operations, this increases the risk of homogenised views, bias, and group-think of the kind that have in the past led to disastrous misadventures like the 2003 invasion of Iraq (Hirst 2013).

I hope *Politics of Play* provides a useful text in the promotion of scholarly knowledge about military wargaming. While it is critical of many elements of military gaming, its message is not one hostile to gaming as such. Rather, its core aim is to emphasise that *what* we play is less important than *how* we play. In making the case for the return of play to push against the enclosures of hyperreality by reintroducing contradiction, tension, and difference into seemingly closed models, I seek to present games as texts to be interrogated and deconstructed. By means of a deconstructive play mode, it is my hope that we can glimpse something of the ways our games produce our realities and ourselves.

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