Drones and Video Games

There are now many criticisms and objections to the use of drones. One of the most interesting from my perspective–as a researcher interested in popular culture and world politics–has been the argument that the use of drones fosters a 'Playstation Mentality' amongst drone operators, distancing them from the consequences of their actions and enabling a consequence-free attitude towards the use of kinetic force–the final act of the 'kill chain'. The idea that piloting drones is as mindless as playing a video game has become a popular line of criticism. While well-meaning, this objection to drone warfare is based on an ill-informed understanding of video games. It also ignores the extensive empirically-based literature on how it becomes possible for people to kill one another in combat and fundamentally misunderstands the experience of piloting drones in relation to the experience of playing video games. As a result, the 'Playstation mentality' critique does not just miss the target, but it also produces collateral damage by trivialising the complex dynamics underpinning technologically enabled killing and what makes drone strikes possible.

First, the 'Playstation mentality' argument is, at best, needlessly dismissive of what video games do and how they work. Video games are not numbing agents geared towards mindless pursuits. As Timothy Crick has argued, they are immersive, not just psychologically but also physiologically. The best games embed players into worlds that become meaningful to them. Video games foster strong attachments and enmities to player and non-player characters alike. They can create a sense of place and familiarity, if not home. They produce feelings like pleasure and anxiety as well as emotions like elation and sadness. They can bring otherwise dispersed individuals together by establishing a common goal or sense of purpose. As Jose P. Zagal has shown, they can produce ethical quandaries that require careful deliberation. There are even norms for behaviour within some games and gaming communities, though violations may not produce consequences of the same magnitude as other forms of prohibitive behaviour. The point is that while video games may be virtual, they produce a sense of presence, a feeling that the player is, in reality, 'there' and that what transpires has meaning. If video games were unable to generate a sense of attachment and meaningful consequences for players within the world of the game, or even beyond, few would play them.

Second, the 'Playstation Mentality' argument is premised on the belief that detachment and dehumanisation are the primary causal mechanisms that enable killing in modern warfare. This is an assumption for which there is little empirical justification. In her extensive study on killing in war, Joanna Bourke demonstrated that the need for soldiers need to be socially detached in order to kill does not necessarily hold when one looks more closely at how combatants have understood killing. As her historical survey indicates,

what is striking is the extent to which combatants insisted upon emotional relationships and responsibility, despite the distancing effect of much technology (Bourke, 1999, p. 7).

Her point is that the relationship between distancing technology and violence does not necessarily lead to the dehumanisation of the enemy or a disregard for the consequences of force. Disturbingly, Burke shows that soldiers can conceive of the enemy as a human being much like themselves and still kill, a finding that has been corroborated in recent research on snipers.

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Third, the importance of the interplay amongst emotion, responsibility, expertise, and pleasure in creating attachments is apparent when one reads first-person accounts from drone pilots. As Derek Gregory has argued, although physically located thousands of miles away, drone operators are embedded into the battle-space, albeit in particular ways by the audio-visual and telecommunications technologies that constitute the drone. For example in his memoir of his time as drone pilot over the skies of Afghanistan and Iraq, Major Matthew Martin relates:

Flying the Predator allowed me the extraordinary perspective of being not only a "combatant", albeit from 7,500 miles away, but also an observer with a broad overview. I saw the war firsthand day after day as it unfolded. It seemed I was always watching in real time, hovering above, sometimes swooping down to join it like the predator I was (Martin and Stasser 2010, p. 77).

Thus, while their experience of combat may be mediated by sensing technologies and video screens, drone operators are not detached from the battle-space and often must view the results of their actions for a sustained duration and level of detail not common to other forms of combat. For example, after an incident in which he launched a missile attack on a vehicle containing a suspected militant, Martin reported that

nobody in the GCS uttered a word. We merely watched the video, mesmerized, both awed and horrified by the carnage and this guy's dying effort (Martin and Stasser, 2010, p. 239).

What becomes clear from the excerpts above, and other accounts from drone operators, is that the presence of the battle-space and their sense of being embedded within it, is, in part, produced by seeing. While presence for drone operators is enabled by technology that expands the geographical range of what can be seen in real-time, the prominence of a way of seeing in generating a sense of embeddedness is not new. Bourke (1999, p. 26) demonstrates that during WWI, WWII, and the Vietnam War, combatants often 'interpreted their battleground experiences through the lens of an imaginary camera.' This not only positioned combatants as the chief protagonists in a personal (re)production of war, it also helped them to position their own actions and feelings within codes that had been normalised through cinematic and photographic representations of combat. But what is different, is that drone operators are now interpreting their experience through perspectives offered by video games. For example, Major Martin recalls how

The suddenness of action played out long distance on computer screens left me felling a bit stunned. A surreal experience. Almost like playing the computer game *Civilization*, in which you direct units and armies into battle. Except with real consequences. (Martin and Stasser 2010, p. 31).

The evidence that drone combat is being understood from the point of view and from experiences offered by video games is not trivial. It demonstrates how badly the 'Playstation Mentality' critique misses the mark. Primarily, it is not that drone warfare creates a sense of callous detachment that enables killing by dehumanising the enemy. Rather, it is that drone warfare creates forms of attachment that enable killing through a particular way of seeing. This is a way of seeing that is also prominent within video games. Many video games provide viewing perspectives from which all that is relevant to the task at hand can be accurately seen, whether from the 'god's-eye-view' of games like *Civilization* to the markers used in first-person shooters to differentiate allies from enemies. The drones-eye-view offers the illusion of the former but does not (yet) offer the latter. The impacts of the variegated ways of seeing and the forms of embeddedness they produce is evidenced in both the volume of civilian deaths from drone strikes and the rates of post-traumatic stress disorder amongst drone operators–which are higher than other pilots. Thus, the use of kinetic force does not require the dehumanisation of the enemy or a disregard for the consequences of drone strikes. What is necessary, however, is faith in visual omniscience, that at the pivotal moment, one can clearly see all that needs to be seen. Challenging this way of seeing–and how we are socialised into believing that visual omniscience is possible–ought to be the line of critique for anyone opposed to drones.

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