Killing in the Age of Drone Warfare

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During the War on Terror, the United States military has been conducting an increasing number of foreign campaigns by remote control using drones—also called unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) or remotely piloted vehicles (RPV)—to extend the reach of military power and augment the technical precision of targeted strikes while minimizing bodily risk to American combatants. This increasing reliance on drones has reshaped the nature of war, as operators fly weaponized drones over the Middle East. Viewing the battle zone through a computer screen that presents them with imagery captured from a drone-mounted camera, these combatants participate in war from a safe distance via an interface that resembles a video game. This increasing participation takes the form of targeted killing.

Despite their relative physical safety, in 2008 reports began mounting that kids who control the ground, many drone operators seek the services of chaplains or other moral health professionals to deal with the emotional toll of their work (Associated Press; Schachtman). Questions about the nature of the stress or trauma that drone operators experience have become a trope in news coverage of drone warfare (see Bumiller; Bowden; Saleeby; Ave). This was exemplified in May 2013, when former Air Force drone pilot Brandon Bryant became a public figure after speaking to National Public Radio about his remorse for participating in targeted killing strikes and his subsequent struggle with post-traumatic stress (PTS) (Greene and McIvers). Stories like Bryant’s express American culture’s struggle to understand the role screen-mediated, remotely controlled combat in shifting the moral landscape of warfare. This is due to the nature of the drone operators’ experience, based on their own understanding of right and wrong. Historically, one of the primary ways that psychiatry has conceptualized combat trauma has been as combatants’ psychological response losing sense of their moral agency on the battlefield (Lifton). This antedates the popular science fiction novel Ender’s Game as an analytic lens through which to examine the ways that screen-mediated warfare may result in combat trauma by investigating the ways in which it may compromise moral agency. The goal of this analysis is not to describe the present state of drone operators’ experience (as Aarons), but rather to compare and contrast contemporary public discourses on the psychological impact of screen-mediated war with the way it is represented in one of the most influential science fiction novels of all times (The book won the Nebula Award in 1985, the Hugo Award in 1986, and appears on both the Modern Library 100 Best Novels and American Library Association’s “100 Best Books for Teens” lists). In so doing, the paper aims to counter prevalent modes of critical analysis of screen-mediated war that cannot account for drone operators’ trauma.

For decades, critics of postmodern warfare have denounced how fighting from inside tanks, the cockpits of planes, or at office desks has removed combatants from the experiences of risk and endangerment that historically characterized war (see Gray; Levitt; & Robinson). They suggest that screen-mediated combat eliminates not only physical but also cognitive and emotional distance from the violence of war-fighting by circling it in a “magic circle.” Virtual worlds scholars adopted the term “magic circle” from cultural historian Johan Huizinga, who described it as the membrane that separates the time and space of game-play from those of real life (Salen and Zimmerman). While military scholars have long recognized that only 2% of soldiers can kill without hesitation (Grossman), critics of “video game wars” suggest that screen-mediation puts war in a magic circle, thereby creating, as Jentz and Zinn explained, a “cyborg human-machine assemblages capable of killing in cold blood.” In other words, these critics argue that screen-mediated war distorts agency between human and machines in such a way that human combatants do not feel morally responsible for killing. In contrast, Ender’s Game suggests that even when virtual warfare technology is used to create weapons control interfaces, screen-mediation alone ultimately cannot blur the line between war and play and thereby psychically shield cyber-soldiers from combat trauma.

Orson Scott Card’s 1985 novel Ender’s Game, and the 2013 film adaptation—tells the story of a young boy at an elite military academy. For seven years, after a terrible war between humans and an alien race called the buggers, the novel follows the life of a boy named Ender. At age 6, recruiters take Andrew “Ender” Wiggin from his family to begin military training. He excels in strategy and tactics, yet concludes that when they attacked us. It wasn’t your fault. It’s what had happened.”

Ender grabbed MAzer’s uniform and hung onto it, pulling him down so they were face to face. “I didn’t want to kill them all. I didn’t want to kill anybody. I’m not a killer. [(C)] but you made me do it, you tricked me into it!” He was crying. He was out of control. (Card 297–8)

The novel up to this point has led us to believe that Ender at the very least understands that what he does in the game will be accounted for in real life. His tragic response to learning the truth reveals that he was in the magic circle. When he finally realizes that Ender is a child, that he alone commands a fleet, that he thinks he is playing a game, succeeding is a matter of ego: he wants to be the best, to live up to the expectations of his trainers that he is humanity’s last hope. When the magic circle is broken, Ender reconsiders his decision to use the Little Doctor. Tactics he could justify to win the game, reframed as real military tactics, threaten his sense of himself as a moral agent. Being
Card wrote the novel during the Cold War, when computers were coming to play an increasingly large role in military operations. Historians of military technology have shown that during this time human behavior began to be defined in machine-like, functionalist terms by scientists working on cybernetic systems (see Edwards; Gallow; Orr). Human skills were defined as components of large technological systems, such as tanks and anti-aircraft weaponry: a human skill was treated as functionally the same as a machine one. The only issue of importance was how all the components could work together in order to meet strategic goals—a cybernetic problem. The reasons that Mazer and Graff have for lying to Ender suggest that the author believes that as a form of military simulation, screen-mediation can be used to evacuate individual moral agency and submit human will to the command of the larger cybernetic system. Issues of displaced agency have also surfaced in the drone debates. Government and military leaders have attempted to depersonalize drone warfare by assuring the American public that the list of targets is meticulously researched: drones kill those who we need killed. Drone warfare, media theorist Peter Asaro argues, has “created new and complex forms of human-machine subjectivity” that cannot be understood by considering the agency of the technology alone because it is distributed between humans and machines (25). While our leaders’ decisions about who to kill are central to this new cybernetic subjectivity, the operators who fire the weapons nevertheless experience at least a retrospective sense of agency. As Asaro notes, in the wake of wars fought by modern military networks, many veterans diagnosed with PTSD still express guilt and personal responsibility for the outcomes of their participation in killing (Protevi).

Mazer and Graff explain that the two qualities that make Ender such a good weapon also create an imperative to lie to him: his compassion and his innocence. For his trainers, compassion means a capacity to truly think like others, friend or foe, and understand their motivations. Graff explains that while his trainers recognized Ender’s compassion as an invaluable tool, they also recognized that it would preclude his willingness to kill.

It had to be a trick or you couldn’t have done it. It’s the kind we were in. We had to stay a commander with so much empathy that he would think like the buggers, understand them and anticipate them. So much compassion that he could win the love of his underlings and work with them like a perfect machine, just as perfect as the buggers. But somebody with that much compassion could never be the killer we needed. Could never go into battle willing to win at all costs. If you knew, you couldn’t do it. If you were the kind of person who would do it even if you knew, you could never have understood the buggers well enough. (298)

In learning that the game was real, Ender learns that he was not merely coming to understand a programmed simulation of bugger behavior, but their actual psychology. Therefore, his compassion has not only helped him understand the buggers’ military strategy, but also to identify with them.

Like Ender, drone operators spend weeks or months following their targets, getting to know them and their routines from a God’s eye perspective. They also watch the repercussions of their bombings and fly away, drone operators use high-resolution cameras and fly much closer to the ground both when flying and assessing the results of their strikes. As one drone operator interviewed by the Los Angeles Times explained, “When I flew the B-52; it was at 30,000 to 40,000 feet, and you don’t even see the bombs falling… Here, it’s like it’s right there, that’s the way it seems” (Zucchino). Brookings Institute scholar Peter Singer has argued that in this way screen mediation actually enables a more intense experience of violence for drone operators than airplane pilots (Singer).

The second reason Ender’s trainers give for lying is that they need someone not only compassionate, but also innocent of the horrors of war. The war veteran Mazer explains: “And it had to be a child, Ender,” said Mazer. “You were faster than me. Better than me. I was too old and cautious. Any decent person who knows what war is knows that warfare can never go into battle with a whole heart. But you didn’t know. We made sure you didn’t know” (298). When Ender discovers what he has done, he loses not only his innocence but his sense of himself as a moral agent. After such a trauma, his heart is no longer whole.

Actual drone operators are, of course, not kept in a magic circle, innocent of the repercussions of their actions. Nor do they otherwise feel as though they are playing, as several have publicly stated. Instead, they report finding drone work tedious, and even low pressure (Dao). However, Air Force recruitment advertising makes clear analogies between the skills they desire and those of video game play (Brown). Though the first generations of drone operators were pulled from the ranks of flight pilots, in 2009 the Air Force began training them from the ground up. Many drone operators, then, enter the role having no other military service and may come into it believing, on some level, that their work will be play.

Recent military studies of drone operators have raised doubts about whether drone operators really experience high rates of trauma, suggesting that the stresses they experience are not related to occupation stress but to what they are trying to do (Dao). However, Air Force recruitment advertising makes clear analogies between the skills they desire and those of video game play (Brown). Though the first generations of drone operators were pulled from the ranks of flight pilots, in 2009 the Air Force began training them from the ground up. Many drone operators, then, enter the role having no other military service and may come into it believing, on some level, that their work will be play.

This paper has illustrated how a science fiction story can be used as an analytic lens for thinking through contemporary discourses about human-technology relationships. However, the US military is currently investing in drones that are increasingly autonomous from human operators. This redistribution of agency may reduce incidence of PTSD among operators by decreasing their role in, and therefore sense of moral responsibility for, killing (Axe). Reducing mental illness may seem to be a worthwhile goal, but in a world wherein militaries distribute the agency for killing to machines in order to reduce the burden on humans, societies will have to confront the fact that combatants’ trauma cannot be measured in terms that are human.

References
Alston, Philip. “Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary, or Arbitrary Executions, Addendum: Study on individual is held accountable for killing and morality is measured in lives taken, not rates of mental illness. To understand war in such a world, we will need new, post-humanist stories where the cyborg assemblage and not the human agent’s combat trauma serves to remind us that even when their bodies are physically safe, war is hell for those who otherwise feel as though they are playing, as several have publicly stated. Instead, they report finding drone work tedious, and even low pressure (Dao). However, Air Force recruitment advertising makes clear analogies between the skills they desire and those of video game play (Brown). Though the first generations of drone operators were pulled from the ranks of flight pilots, in 2009 the Air Force began training them from the ground up. Many drone operators, then, enter the role having no other military service and may come into it believing, on some level, that their work will be play.

While critics worry that warfare mediated by a screen and joystick leads to a “’Playstation’ mentality towards killing” (Alston 25), this paper has illustrated how a science fiction story can be used as an analytic lens for thinking through contemporary discourses about human-technology relationships. However, the US military is currently investing in drones that are increasingly autonomous from human operators. This redistribution of agency may reduce incidence of PTSD among operators by decreasing their role in, and therefore sense of moral responsibility for, killing (Axe). Reducing mental illness may seem to be a worthwhile goal, but in a world wherein militaries distribute the agency for killing to machines in order to reduce the burden on humans, societies will have to confront the fact that combatants’ trauma cannot be measured in terms that are human.

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Keywords
Enders’s Game; post-traumatic stress; drones; war; videogames; screen-mediation

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Lovesick Cyborg: There’s a lot to cover when we’re talking about modern drone warfare. Given the film’s lean running time, was there anything you didn’t get to include that you wish you had? We wanted to offer different perspectives through different characters involved in these drone operations and leave the audience a bit like a jury to draw their own conclusion. What I do feel like is you could pause the film at any moment and you could talk about drone pilots and post-traumatic stress disorder, the response of different pilots, the ability to compartmentalize, and have a whole discussion. Or did we take the wrong individual out because our intelligence was bad? And that question applies whether you’re using a drone, a sniper’s bullet or a guillotine. So this is my pet sort of thing, really. Although mistakes were made, in an age when the United States led the world in the use of drones, these weapons appeared to offer a simple and unrivaled solution to the complexities of war. In the post-Obama era, however, the drone landscape has changed. Not only has American dominance over the use of drones eroded—with a plethora of state and non-state actors acquiring drone technologies—but with the rise of a new presidential administration, the American search for just and proportionate precision appears to have been called off. Despite some high-profile incidents in which civilians were killed, Secretary of Defense William Cohen declared Kosovo to be “the most precise application of air power in history.” Editor’s Note: Drone warfare is often caricatured as remote-control fighting, more akin to playing a video game than real warfare. In an unusual Foreign Policy Essay, Dave Blair and Karen House take on this myth, detailing the costs to the operators and the conditions that increase the risks to their well-being. Before he went downrange for the first time, he asked himself the warrior’s sine qua non questions about killing and dying, and within a few weeks, he knew the answers. The other co-author, Karen, served as a counselor to Predator and Reaper (remotely piloted aircraft, or RPA) crews who were deployed-in-garrison under SOCOM’s Preservation of the Force and Family program.