

POLITICS OF PLAY: WARGAMING WITH THE US MILITARY

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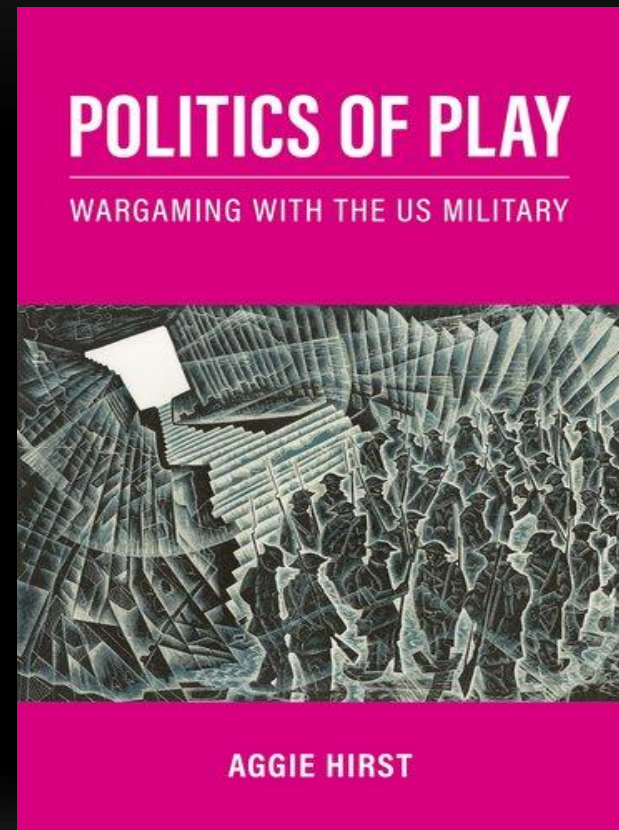
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POLITICS OF PLAY: WARGAMING WITH THE US MILITARY

- Main research project since 2017
- Funded by grants from Leverhulme Trust and British Academy
 - 100+ hours of interviews with US military gaming community
- Core aims – shifting IR's focus
 - From recreational to military gaming
 - Introducing the study of play
- Articles published:
 - [Pharmacotic Wargames](#) with Larry George (SD), [Wargames Resurgent](#) (ISQ), [Videogames Saved My Life](#) (IPS), [Play in\(g\) International Theory](#) (RIS), [States of Play](#) (CMS)

POLITICS OF PLAY: WARGAMING WITH THE US MILITARY

- Published with Oxford University Press, 2024
- First scholarly book mapping the first decade of the military wargaming renaissance
- Combines new theory of play with 100+ hours of interview data generated with professional wargaming CoP
- Shows how wargames work in the production of warfighters



BOOK CONTENTS

- Introduction
 - Chapter 1 - Conceptualising Wargaming
 - Chapter 2 - The State of Play
 - Chapter 3 - A Genealogy of Play: from the Ancients to the Moderns
 - Chapter 4 - The Play of Postmodernity: Deconstructive Play
 - Chapter 5 - Play as Pedagogy: Gaming the Cognitive Dimension
 - Chapter 6 - Playing the Player: Gaming the Affective Dimension
 - Chapter 7 - For the Win
 - Chapter 8 - The Politics of Immersion
 - Conclusion
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WHAT IS A WARGAME?

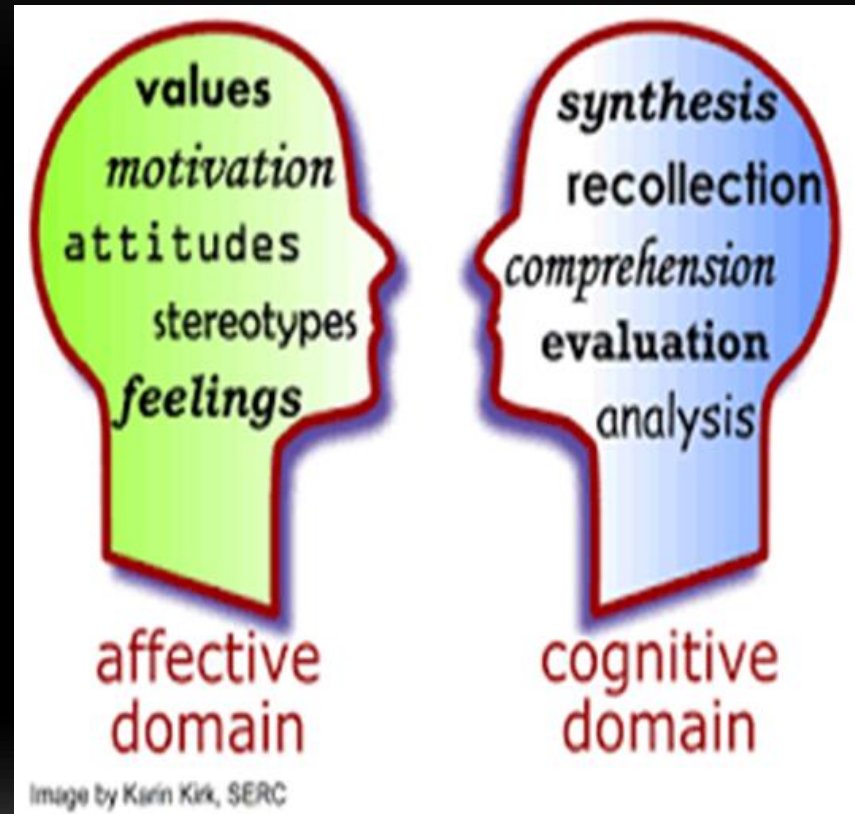
- Lack of consensus among community of practice (CoP)
 - Game, sims, exs
 - Manual vs digital
 - Commercial vs military
 - Deterministic vs open-ended
 - Product or process; skills or experience?
 - Purposes
 - Research, analysis, experimentation, teaching, training
 - All wargames are 'edutainment' (Koster)?
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WHY USE WARGAMING IN THE MILITARY?

- ‘Wargaming saves lives’ – axiomatic claim among CoP
 - Cost effective
 - Replicable and ‘safe to learn/fail’
 - Draws on skills and interests of ‘digital native’ generation
 - Increases attention and retention
 - Introduces fun/enjoyment into training environment
 - Multi side-benefits – diplomacy, unit cohesion, transferable skills
 - ‘Offloads some of the cognitive burden’ (Gee)
 - ‘Performance before competence’ (Gee)
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WHY USE WARGAMING IN THE MILITARY?

- Bloom's 'Taxonomy of Learning Domains'
- 'Wargaming is a cost-effective means to provide experience-based learning with emphasis on cognitive and, increasingly, affective training domains' (Roman and Brown)



WHY USE WARGAMING?

- Military view
 - Learning objectives coded into game to form victory conditions (winning, not losing, losing under x conditions)
 - Realisation of learning objectives is criterion of success
 - Seek deeper and long-lasting immersive play by suspending trainees in flow state
- But focus on efficacy elides important questions:
 - Politics of utilising ostensibly unserious, unreal artefacts to cultivate real-world lethal force
 - Effects on players recruited, trained, treated

WARGAMING AS PEDAGOGY

- Key distinction
 - Play: an exploratory human capacity or ability
 - Game: a system or structure which apprehends and directs play
 - In the case of using games as teaching tools, we are harnessing play for particular pedagogical ends
 - Game always designed/selected for specific purpose/aim/objective
 - True whether teaching in civilian or military context
 - Key claim: All wargames teach their players, whether intended for education or not
 - Challenge conventional distinction between education and analytic/research gaming
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UNDERSTANDING PLAY

- To understanding gaming, need to understand play
 - Often considered frivolous or juvenile
 - Children, animals, time off
 - But scholars emphasise it is vital for life
 - Essential category of existence, how we grow, learn, socialise
 - ‘What makes life lifey’ – without play, just survival
 - Complicated
 - Both truth and illusion, real and non real, phenomenon and subjectivity
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THE SERIOUSNESS OF PLAY

- Understood as behaviour, action, motivation, attitude, experience, existential condition
 - A powerful form of communication and metacommunication
 - Tells us about what it communicates
 - Bateson's wolf cubs – 'this nip is not a bite'
 - Highly absorbing – 'autotelic'
 - Decreased sense of self, self-forgetfulness
 - Exists in own spatial and temporal zone - in and outside reality
 - Self-renewing desire to continue
 - For its own sake, an end in itself – though can be harnessed for extrinsic ends (Csikszentmihalyi)
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CAN PLAY 'SAVE THE DAY'?

- Soderman – 'Against Flow'
 - While play is often considered frivolous, childish, or useless, it has also been argued that 'play will save the day', relieving us from the dehumanisations and violences of (post)modern life
 - 'It is not enough to liberate play from games' because the former is part of neoliberalism's attention economy, functioning to prevent us from 'noticing capitalism's teeth in our necks'
 - But, I wager play as mode of critical engagement can subvert from within by creating tensions and cracks in closed systems
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A GENEALOGY OF PLAY

- Develop a genealogy of play from Heraclitus to Derrida
 - Nagel: the 'malediction of play' in Western philosophy
 - Heraclitus - anarchic play
 - Plato and Aristotle - ordering play
 - German Idealism (Kant, Schiller) - malediction of play
 - Nietzsche - the return of anarchic play
 - Huizinga - Homo Ludens
 - Heidegger, Gadamer - Phenomenological play
 - Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida - Poststructural play
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THE DIALECTIC OF APOLLONIAN AND DIONYSIAN PLAY

- Apollonian Play
 - Plato, Aristotle, German Idealism
 - The ‘malediction of play’ in modern Western philosophy (Nagel)
 - Play frivolous and in opposition to reason – a hinderance to learning
 - ‘The explicit goal of the first *Critique [of Pure Reason]* is to replace the ‘mere play’ of the imagination and thought... with the seriousness of scientific investigation’ (Spariosu, *Dionysus Reborn*, 1989)

THE DIALECTIC OF APOLLONIAN AND DIONYSIAN PLAY

- Dionysian Play
 - Pre-Socratic, post-Idealist – Heraclitus, Nietzsche
 - Subordinates reason to aesthetics
 - Play is a dance between creativity and nihilism
 - ‘The maturity of man [sic] - that means, to have reacquired the seriousness that one had as a child at play’ (*Beyond Good and Evil*).

NEW THEORISATION: DECONSTRUCTIVE PLAY

- Drawing on Derrida's framing of deconstruction and/as play
 - Inherits from Dionysian tradition – freeplay, process over order, subjectivities as becoming
 - But integrates ongoing mechanisms and demands for reflexivity
 - Moves away from Nietzsche's playful hero-warrior to autodeconstructive player subject
 - This move mounts resistance to the win imperative and the power of immersion
 - Can be mobilised to introduce cracks in the closed system of any given game, exposing and contesting its hidden assumptions, politics, and power relations

RETHEORISING PLAY

Type of Play	Era	Figures	Subject	Motivation	Features
Dionysian	Presocratic; Nietzschean	Heraclitus, Nietzsche	Aristocratic hero-warrior, child, dancer	End in itself	Disorder, frenzy, affect, libido, aesthetics, spontaneity, affirmation, creation
Apollonian	Socratic to Modern	Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Huizinga, Schiller, Gadamer	Rational man, philosopher	Productive; directed towards end	Order, reason, law, moderation, sobriety, morality, civilisation, control
Deconstructive	Postmodern; Poststructural	Derrida	Produced through play; reflexive and auto- deconstructive	Disruptive; of hierarchies, power relations, norms, assumptions	Perpetual motion, production and disruption of meaning, truth, values

DECONSTRUCTING THE DRIVERS OF WARGAMING

1) For the Win

- Players must play to win
 - Fairly easy to realise as winning is fun; noone likes to lose
 - Winning key to military socialisation
 - Necessary for validity
 - Often framed as natural or spontaneous by the CoP, but actually has to be continuously cultivated
 - A win state usually irrelevant. What's important is pursuit of conditions – systematic iterative irresolution
 - Creates perpetual motion training machine
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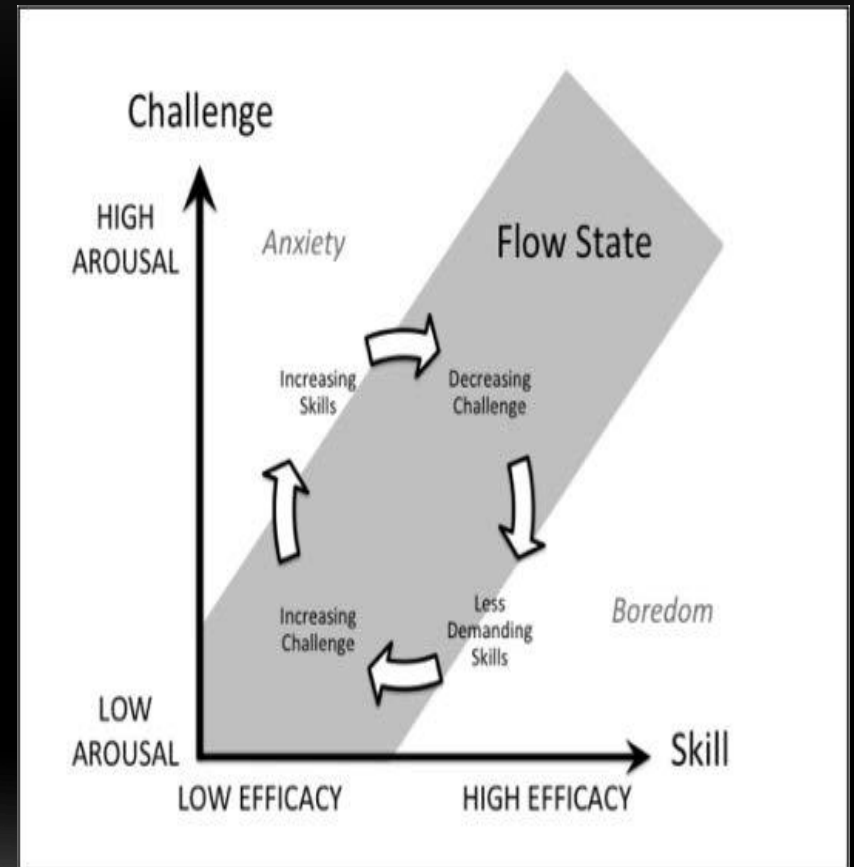
DECONSTRUCTING THE DRIVERS OF WARGAMING

2) The spell of immersion and focus of flow

- Where do we go when we play? (h/t Debbie Lisle)
- Pleasure of game generated by experience of immersion
 - Inner critic switched off, 'chronoslip' occurs
 - Feedback loop of cause and effect
 - Symbiosis of action and reaction
 - Also necessary for validity, according to some
- But, spell can be broken
 - If conscious thought occurs, condition is lost
 - Back to reality, often with a bump

HOW DOES WARGAMING WORK?

‘Flow is an optimal state of consciousness, a peak state where we both feel and perform our best. We become so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you’re using your skills to the utmost.’ (Csikszentmihalyi)



IMMERSION AS A NON-REFLEXIVE STATE

- ‘Animals do not consider the world; they are immersed in it’ (Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*).
 - Immersion circumvents reflexivity
 - The player becomes the *object* of the game, rather than its subject
- ‘All playing is a being-played... The attraction of a game, the fascination it exerts, consists precisely in the fact that the game masters the players... The real subject of the game... is not the player but instead the game itself. What holds the player in its spell, draws him into play, and keeps him there is the game itself’ (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*)

SO, WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

- How do we avoid becoming the passive objects of gameplay?
 - Break the spell of immersion
 - How might we do this?
 - Prioritise play over game
 - Play a force, mode, or capacity
 - Game a structure that contains and arrests play
 - Play game playfully. Game the game. *Do* fight the scenario
 - What matters is not *what* we play but rather *how* we play
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DECONSTRUCTIVE PLAY

- Critical thinking and engagement
 - Punctuate immersion with critical reflection
 - Play deconstructively – keep the play in play
 - The game is a text to be read
 - What are its rules?
 - What story is being told, and from whose perspective?
 - Who are its heroes and villains?
 - What acts am I being rewarded/punished for?
 - What are gendered/racialised/colonial tropes at work?
 - Modding/hacking/counterludic identities
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