Cyborg Agency and Individual Trauma: What Ender’s Game Teaches Us about Killing in the Age of Drone Warfare

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 (RPVs)—to extend the reach of military power and augment the technical precision of targeted strikes while minimizing bodily risk to American combatants. As drone operations have expanded throughout the world, 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 increasingly remote form of participation takes the form of targeted killing.

Despite their relative physical safety, in 2008 reports began mounting that like boots-on-the-ground combatants, many drone operators seek the services of chaplains or other mental 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; Salzman; Aye). This was exemplified in 2015, when former Air Force drone pilot Brandon Bryant launched a public pilot 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 McIver). Stories like Bryant’s express American culture’s struggle to understand the role screen-mediated, remotely controlled combatants play in shaping the “signature wounds” of modern military conflict, 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 their sense of 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 (see Aaser), 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 war 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; Wilson). They suggest that screen-mediated engagement enables users to think not only physical but also cognitive and emotional distance from the violence of war-fighting by circumventing 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 (Salem and Zimmermann). 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 cyborg human-machine assemblages capable of killing in cold blood. In other words, these critics argue that screen-mediated war distributes agency between humans 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 military analysts use video game aesthetics to create weapons control interfaces, screen-mediation alone ultimately cannot blur the line between war and play and thereby psychically shield cyborg 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 who, 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 academically and as a military strategist, and eventually becomes the commander of an interstellar fleet against the alien buggers. The novel explores Ender’s emotional development as he navigates the challenges of his new life. Ender faces numerous challenges, including isolation, loneliness, and isolation, as well as conflicts with other cadets and instructors. Despite these challenges, Ender perseveres and ultimately becomes a successful military leader.

Ender’s mentor, war hero Mazer Rackham, brings him to a room crowded with high-ranking military personnel in order to take his final test on the simulator. In order to win Ender opts to launch a massive bomb, nicknamed “Little Doctor”, at the buggers home world. The image on his screen of a ball of space dust where once sat the enemy planet is met by victory cheers. Mazer then informs Ender that since he began officer training, he has been remotely controlling his performance. The real video game was, “Real. Not a game!” (Card 297); Ender has exterminated the bugger species. But rather than join the celebration, Ender is devastated to learn he has committed “xenocide.” Screen-mediation, the novel shows, can enable people to commit acts that they would otherwise find heinous.

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 asked of him in real life. But his traumatic response to learning the truth reveals that he was in the magic circle. When 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 military tactics, threaten his sense of himself as a moral agent. Being...


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individual is held accountable for killing and morality is measured in lives taken, not rates of mental illness. PTS. To understand war in such a world, we will need new, post-humanist stories where the cyborg assemblage and not the

their country's wars are those of their own combatants—not only about their deaths and physical injuries, but their suicide and

measure the morality of wars. Too often in the US media, the primary stories that Americans are told about the violence of

be a worthwhile goal, but in a world wherein militaries distribute the agency for killing to machines in order to reduce the

fight.

to confront themselves as individual moral agents and bear their responsibility for ending lives. In both these scenarios, a

reality as well. While drone operators do not work shielded by the magic circle—and therefore do not experience the trauma of

itself, create emotional distance or evacuate the killer's sense of moral agency. In order to kill, Ender must be distanced from

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

bombers 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, you're a lot closer to the actual fight, or

attacks that are not the way it seems” (Zucchino). Brookings Institute scholar Peter Singer has argued that in this way screen mediation

bomber home world: “You had to be a weapon, Ender. Like a gun, like the Little Doctors. Function perfectly but not knowing what you were aimed at. We aimed you. You're responsible. If there was something wrong, we did it” (298). Questions of distributed 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 cybersubjectivity, the operators who fire the weapons nevertheless experience at least a retrospective sense of agency. As phenomenologist John

Protevi notes, in the wake of wars fought by modern military networks, many veterans diagnosed with PTS 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 have 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, 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 couldn't have understood the buggers well enough. (298)

In learning that the game was real, Ender learned 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, you're a lot closer to the actual fight, or that's the way it seems” (Zucchino). Brookings Institute scholar Peter Singer has argued that in this way screen mediation actually enables a more intimate 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 old and cautious. Any decent person who knows what war is 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 some even play video games for fun (Asaro). 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. 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 seated instead in occupational issues like long shifts (Osuna, Chappelle, and Salinas; Chappelle, Psy, and Salinas). But several critiques of these studies have pointed out that there is a taboo having no other military service and may come into it believing, on some level, that their work will be play.

References


Cian Westmoreland, a US Air Force veteran who helped set up the drone data communications system over southeastern Afghanistan back in 2009, puts the matter bluntly: “There are so many people in the chain of actions that it has become increasingly difficult to understand the true impact of what we do. PTSD in the Global Wild West. The trauma of desktop warfare comes mostly from the voyeurism of watching death thousands of miles distant and can, in some cases, be tuned out and eventually turned off. “The situation has transcended the question about whether or not an individual has lost a family member to a drone attack, simply because trauma has become pervasive in a society living constantly under the fear of drones.”