Opinion

The Surveillant Simulation of War: Entertainment and Surveillance in the 21st Century

Matthew J. Cousineau

Department of Sociology, University of Missouri, USA. mccn7@mizzou.edu

Introduction

Make your way to the website of the US Air Force¹ in 2010 and you'd be greeted with the message "IT'S NOT SCIENCE FICTION. IT'S WHAT WE DO EVERY DAY". Click "Check out Games and Extras" at the top right of your screen, and your browser would take you to another web page with an "interactive feature" called "Fly the MQ-9 Reaper RPA". After some sound bites and music, you would gain the opportunity to fly a Reaper "Remotely Piloted Aircraft" on missions to "locate and destroy enemy targets using AGM-114 Hellfire missiles". I begin by describing this video game and the pop up message on the US Air Force website because they reveal some of the analytical advantages of studying surveillance as entertainment. Approaching surveillance as entertainment brings the normalization and tension between the ordinary and extraordinary into the foreground.

This short paper builds on important work in Surveillance Studies to argue for another direction in the development of Surveillance Studies. I build on the work of Albrechtslund and Dubbeld (2005) by unpacking their surveillance as entertainment perspective. While Albrechtslund and Dubbeld (2005) make an important contribution to Surveillance Studies by calling attention to the myriad ways surveillance serves as entertainment, I advance their perspective by providing an analytical focus for studying surveillance as entertainment. Conceptualizing surveillance as entertainment can sensitize Surveillance Studies to emerging patterns of surveillance in the relationship between the military-industrial complex and entertainment. I argue that future work should address how the military-industrial complex incorporates entertainment technologies and the skills these technologies involve.

Surveillance as Entertainment

Albrechtslund and Dubbeld (2005) argue that the early preoccupation of Surveillance Studies with the negative impacts of surveillance such as their effects on civil liberties and rights has overshadowed how surveillance serves as entertainment. Drawing on examples from literature, film, video gaming, and art, Albrechtslund and Dubbeld (2005) highlight how surveillance "...can also serve as a source of enjoyment, pleasure and, fun, as is evidenced in the entertainment industry" (p. 220). Famous novels by Huxley and Orwell, Hitchcock films such as *Rear Window* (1954), and video games like "The Sims" are offered as examples of these links between entertainment and surveillance (Albrechtslund and Dubbeld 2005).

¹ <http://www.airforce.com>

Albrechtslund and Dubbeld (2005), then, conclude that their perspective holds promise to explore surveillance in unexpected places such as online gaming communities and argue that this direction enables Surveillance Studies to interrogate the concepts and metaphors imported from fiction and pop culture. To refine Albrechtslund and Dubbeld's (2005) approach, I want to call attention to another part of this relationship between surveillance and entertainment. While this perspective helps scrutinize the concepts and metaphors smuggled into Surveillance Studies, it also sensitizes us to what is accomplished by those we study in using such concepts and metaphors. To return to the greeting message on the website, the US Air Force uses the language of science fiction in a particular way. It's what Wittgenstein (1953) called a "language game" to promote the US Air Force as a technologically superior force, and a recruitment tool to help military service appeal to youth with interests in technoscience. In addition to studying what we are doing with language, we can also study how language "performs" "...in relation to some audience, [and] for some purpose" (Gubrium and Holstein 2009:81) like persuading them that a preferred interpretation of their surveillance is the most legitimate one.

The Surveillant Simulation of War

Although others have built on Albrechtslund and Dubbeld's (2005) approach by examining art (Brighenti 2010) and voyeurism (Bell 2009), I call attention to the advantage this surveillance as entertainment perspective has in sensitizing Surveillance Studies to emerging links between the military-industrial complex and the video game industry. In doing so, I want to pull together the important work on "surveillant simulation" by Graham (1998) and Bogard (1996) as well as the global "boomerang" effects of war described so well by Graham (2010) in his later work. Bogard (1996) was one of the first scholars to unpack the relations between surveillance and simulation in his treatments of the war gaming that preceded the first Gulf War, but lasted longer than the fighting. Graham (1998) builds on this by exploring the links between surveillance and simulation in some emerging technologies. Graham's (2010) later work, then, emphasizes the effects of military intervention in the Middle East on the cities of the US. In sum, I build on these important studies by examining an emerging surveillant simulation of war in the blurring between entertainment and surveillance, and pointing out the analytical advantages to this approach.

The Military-Industrial Complex

American President Dwight Eisenhower coined the term "military-industrial complex" to refer to the public-private partnerships between the high military command and defense contractors which provide financial incentives for war (Eisenhower 1961). The increasing integration of entertainment into this complex forms what Der Derian ([2001] 2009) calls a "military-industrial-entertainment-media network" where mammoth transnational corporations typically own both news networks charged with war reporting and defense contractors who build the weapons used in these wars. To provide a glimpse into these processes, I describe four contemporary examples that include both video game simulations of surveillance and actual military surveillance technologies and practices. The entertainment industry produces video games, which American youth cultures consume. To recruit these youths and ensure their success in the military, the American military has developed promotional video games and computer interfaces to resemble equipment these youths have experience with. Likewise, the US Air Force adopted surveillance technologies developed by sports broadcasting contractors.

Emerging Forms of Surveillance

Emergent patterns of surveillance in the relationship between the military-industrial complex and entertainment are evident in military developments of video games. The US Army has developed both home computer games and arcade style simulators of Army vehicles with surveillance gameplay to promote and recruit youths who possess what Bourdieu ([1979] 1984) calls "embodied cultural capital", or

the first hand knowledge and skills developed in gaming. In contrast to some of the science fiction “surveillance games” identified by Albrechtslund and Dubbeld (2005) such as “The Sentinel”, the computer game *America’s Army* was painstakingly developed by the American military to simulate military definitions of reality as much as possible. Developed with the input of soldiers across the US, the game contains accurate modeling of military weapons, shell ejections, and how soldiers move when holding rifles (Kennedy 2002). Likewise, the gameplay simulates actual combat operations like a raid conducted on a terrorist camp in the early days of the Afghanistan occupation (Kennedy 2002). These features, along with offering the game as a free download on the US Army website, help make the game accessible to anyone with an internet connection and a web browser (Kennedy 2002). Other game play features like serving virtual military duties expose gamers to the military values of loyalty, honor, and personal courage beneath the semblance of actual military life (Kennedy 2002). With more than 500,000 copies downloaded since its release in 2002, *America’s Army* was a popular video game among computer users (Kennedy 2002). In addition to recruiting gamers through their home computers, the US Army established an ambitious facility to recruit gamers face to face.

In 2008, the US Army opened what it calls the “Army Experience Center”, a facility one official called “a marketing and sales experiment” (Matheson 2008). And showcase the US Army it does. Within Philadelphia’s Franklin Mills Mall, the glass walled Army Experience Center beckons mall-goers with approximately 80 military gaming stations, and Black Hawk helicopter, Apache helicopter, and Humvee simulators (Matheson 2008). Participants “...can sit in a model chopper and virtually fly through a mountain village, shooting at enemies as they protect a U.S. convoy headed to a medical facility” (Matheson 2008). Although the US Army claims the Army Experience Center is a “learning laboratory” in an area with few bases, the Center does manage enlistments (Matheson 2008). After the computer games and simulators of the Army Experience Center and *America’s Army* have successfully recruited gamers into the military, the links between entertainment and surveillance continue to unfold in recent military developments.

The contemporary American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan increasingly rely on the “video game generation” to fill their fatigues (Singer 2009). Beginning in training with a Microsoft Flight Simulator like computer program, young soldiers apply their video gaming skills to learn how to pilot military aircraft. Soldiers use video gaming skills like multitasking, quick fingers, familiarity with software interfaces, (Singer 2009) and “...their years of experience as heroes and killers in violent, virtually real interactive videos” during their enlisted lives as unmanned aerial vehicle pilots (Szafranski 1995). These young pilots operate what are popularly known as “drones” using remote controls complete with joysticks, keyboards, and computer monitors reminiscent of their personal computers and video gaming interfaces (Singer 2009). Although these pilots are few in number, there is evidence that the pattern is growing. According to Barnes (2010), the US Air Force currently trains more pilots to fly unmanned than manned vehicles. In addition, drone inventories, budgets, and bombings have soared. Wise (2010) reports that since 2006, the unmanned aerial vehicle budget allocation has increased from \$1.7 billion to \$4.2 billion while American military inventories rose from approximately 3,000 to 6,000 drones. Missile strikes from drones also seem to be growing in number. According to Finn and Warrick (2010), about 666 alleged terrorists have been killed since 2009 in contrast to the 230 killed between 2004 and 2008. While these examples show how the US Army and Air Force have been busy recruiting and relying on the embodied cultural capital of American youth, American military officials have also been integrating sports broadcasting technology into the military industrial complex.

Although these drones collected approximately 24 million minutes of video surveillance, the footage did not inform decision making because military analysts had no way of searching it (Barnes 2010). However, beginning in 2006 the US Air Force teamed up with sports broadcasting contractor Harris Corporation to make the video searchable (Barnes 2010; Drummond 2010). Originally developed to enable sportscasters to quickly choose and rebroadcast the highlight reels of professional football and baseball games, the Full

Motion Video Asset Management Engine (FAME) encodes times, dates, and camera locations into video frames (Drummond 2010). In addition to making their video library searchable, the US Air Force continues to develop the technology in an effort to link embedded text tags with links to other surveillance such as photographs, local maps, cell phone calls, databases, and documents (Barnes 2010; Drummond 2010).

Conclusion

By building on important work that brought surveillance, simulation, and emerging surveillance to the forefront, Surveillance Studies can analyze surveillance as entertainment for the analytical advantages it provides. First, it helps sensitive us to not only the ways that pop culture concepts and metaphors are smuggled in the back door, but also how surveillance agents use the language of pop culture as a kind of “language game” (Wittgenstein 1953) to promote and recruit their activities. Second, it provides a view of how emerging surveillance becomes normalized. With the controls of drones resembling the home computers of pilots, it becomes difficult to distinguish war from entertainment. Third, it supplies us with a sense of how ordinary activities like playing video games are linked to extraordinarily violent warzones overseas. Following Graham’s (2010) insight that foreign wars bring domestic effects, this approach sheds light on how the “marked” (Brekhus 1996) violence of “robowar” (Graham 2010) gets folded into the “unmarked” (Brekhus 1998) suburban spaces of air force bases and home gaming systems. Finally, conceptualizing surveillance as entertainment reveals one way in which the “Surveillance Society” (Lyon 2001) is reproduced. When the US Air Force chooses to incorporate sports broadcasting technology, this reproduction is observable. Since one of the dominant epistemologies of visual surveillance includes the assumption identified by Parks (2002) that what is screened is known, the US Air Force reproduced the Surveillance Society by incorporating a technology that relies on the same assumption. The US Air Force, like the major television broadcast networks assume that what is screened – what is transformed from any ground conditions into wireless communication, and then onto a computer or television screen – is known. A particular historical and technologized vision is interpreted by both as knowledge of some reality, whether an NFL football game or Baghdad’s Green Zone. While these analytical advantages help make the case for studying surveillance as entertainment in the relations between the military-industrial complex and the video game industry, I describe them because I also want to suggest their potential advantages in future work.

Advancing the perspective outlined by Albrechtslund and Dubbeld (2005) is posed to make significant contributions to understandings of the relationship between youths and surveillance, the military and civilians, military action legitimacy, work and play, and masculinities and war. In terms of military recruitment, future studies should account for the effects of entertainment themed military recruitment efforts on youths and the effects of these recruitments on perceptions of military surveillance. How does the military assemble “data doubles” (Haggerty and Ericson 2000) to identify and recruit gamers who may consume some of the “surveillance games” (Albrechtslund and Dubbeld 2005) produced by the entertainment industry?

How these emerging patterns of surveillance shape public perceptions of the military also demands scholarly attention. As Singer (2009) hints at, the rising tide of drones to fight America’s wars raises ethical questions. Future work should systemically explore how stakeholders like pilots, commanders, politicians, and citizens make sense of the wars fought remotely. Studies ought to investigate the effects of entertainment infused military technology on public attitudes about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Have drones made war into a simulacrum (Baudriallard [1981] 1994; Der Derian [2001] 2009) where citizens are largely insulated from the consequences of war? Or have platforms for leaked confidential information like the website Wikileaks made these consequences more apparent? The relationship between war and masculinities also demands scholarly attention. Since war often functions as a rite of

passage into manhood for many boys, and what it means to be a soldier is increasingly reconfigured by technologies like drones, how are masculinities expressed in fighting remote wars?

More broadly, studies should investigate the effects of cultural capital and entertainment technologies on perceptions of military legitimacy. Do the financial benefits of the military-industrial complex's drone capabilities repair some of the War on Terror's legitimacy damaged by the absence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq? In terms of the relationship between work and play, institutional ethnographic work (Walby 2005) should explore the boundary work (Lamont and Molnar 2002) that distinguishes gaming surveillance from drone surveillance. If the military values the embodied cultural capital earned by playing video games, how are work experiences different from leisure? Although many of these future directions seem likely to include the roadblocks in research access included in studies of social control agents, some methods can at least help conduct preliminary analyses. Performative discourses of official rhetoric should be analyzed with the tools of discourse analysis to examine the claims the American military makes about its interest in, and implementation of entertainment technologies. Graham (2010) has laid down a strong template for this kind of work by drawing on military doctrine, security industry advertising, and the work of defense intellectuals. Content analyses of newspapers and books as well as interviews with pilots may shed light on these forms of surveillance and how they are enacted and interpreted in specific contexts.

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