THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PHYSICAL AND VIRTUAL WORLDS IN WARFARE PRACTICES AND REPRESENTATIONS

By Laura Lindsay-Smith

Within Social Anthropology, the digital is defined as "everything that has been developed by, or can be reduced to, the binary code – that is bits consisting of 0s and 1s" (Miller and Horst 2012: 5). If we consider Boellstorff's assertion that the "digital" and "virtual" can be treated as "rough equivalents" (ibid.: 1), then the virtual world could also be conceptualised in this way. In opposition, the actual world has previously been conceptualised as "everything in the physical world" (ibid.). In other words: the"real world" (Boellstorff 2015: 3). However, in recent years this binary has been criticised, since "virtuality and reality can intersect in multiple ways" (ibid.: 1). There is, of course, an intrinsically interlinked relationship between the virtual world and the physical world. This is true of armed conflict today whereby drones, media and "human technology" (Stone 2017: 154) have become central to warfare practices and representations. This essay will therefore partake in a discourse regarding the impact of virtual warfare on the physical world. In particular, it will argue that the virtual world has become central to creation of certainty in a physical world of great uncertainty.

One of the most significant ways in which the virtual world has impacted the physical world is through a perpetuation of new versions of reality. For example, combat music videos are often "amalgamations of countless different battles" (Sumera 2012: 96). Indeed, "footage may feature numerous troops from different deployments representing activities that sometimes span multiple years and even different conflicts" (ibid.). This delineates the fact that virtual war films do not give an accurate representation of actual world events as they take place in time and space. Despite this, war music videos are watched primarily because of "the perceived truth content of such ... depictions" (ibid.: 101). So regardless of whether the films provide an accurate representation of reality, the virtual world is still creating greater certainty in society because the truth of these depictions goes uncontested, and people feel that they have a true understanding of warfare. The roleplay used in military training also produces a choreographed version of reality whereby "cultural representations of the Middle East were shoehorned into specific conceptions of authenticity" (Stone 2017: 156). Although Stone asserts that interruptions to roleplay in the form of laughter "existentially negates the possibility that human beings can truly be tools" (ibid.: 154), she also articulates that "the structure nonetheless appears to continue mutely, with military systems and notions about the world undisturbed" (ibid.). Thus "human technology" demonstrates that even within the military, the virtual world can reinforce an inaccurate vision of conflict and its surrounding settings, so as to create certainty and reassurance of preparedness for those fighting.

The virtual world has also created greater certainty in other areas of actual warfare. For example, virtual warfare has increased the distance between forces and has allowed for the dehumanization of the "enemy combatant" (Gusterson 2012: 85), resulting in a psychological disconnect in warfare. This positionality has reinforced certainty around the act of killing even within a complex reality of human rights and societal

morals. For example, the "overhead shot" characteristic of drone strikes "is one that denies the reciprocity of a returned gaze" (ibid). This illustrates the fact that by virtue of virtual technologies allowing for greater physical distance between combatants and thus remove the feelings of compassion that might be experienced when two people face each other in war. Killing within the context of war therefore becomes emotionally undemanding and more certain. Tracking technologies also replicate this disconnect by dehumanizing "the enemy combatant" (ibid.). Indeed, a former drone operator's description of tracking, comparing it to "targeting a cell phone", which highlights how those on "a targeted list" (Scahill and Greenwald 2014, cited in Gusterson 2012: 80) are not visualised as human beings. The use of virtual technology in warfare therefore provides a platform for desensitization, as combatants become more able to remove themselves from the understanding that they are killing a living person. In support of this is Sluka's assertion that "virtual war dehumanizes the victims and desensitizes the perpetrators of violence, lowering the moral and psychological barriers to killing" (ibid.: 28). Because virtual technologies have become so fundamental to reimagining a new and arguably warped idea of killing practices in warfare today, the virtual and physical worlds have become closely interlinked within this militarized context.

Moreover, it is arguable that even when the virtual world creates uncertainty during warfare, in the long run, this arises to certainty for a future physical world. For example, for communities in Pakistan and Afghanistan, uncertainty is predicated on the fact that "there is typically a much longer prelude to violence" when Western forces use virtual technologies (Coll 2014, cited in Gusterson 2019: 84). The result of this prolonged tension is that the "communities endured … a kind of mass psychological trauma that seeped into all corners of life" (ibid.: 85). Drone warfare is also "particularly terrifying to children" (ibid.). This suggests that the anger and "ill will" (Sluka 2012: 29) towards Western forces inevitably arising from prolonged psychological fear will be maintained throughout generations. The distinction between "us" and "them" (Suchman 2016: 8) are the norms that encourage violence and are "so central to war". This creates certainty that the current nature of warfare will continue. Indeed, as an international mediator, John Paul Lederach asserted that "bombing Taliban and Al-Qaeda targets is like hitting a mature dandelion with a golf club. It just ensures another generation of Al-Qaeda" (Dodge 2009, as cited in Sluka 2012: 29). It is therefore apparent that the virtual world has a significant relationship with a future conception of reality. This is because the virtual world has become active in shaping the future through reproduction of norms and beliefs, in this case beliefs about the "Other, generally Arab, more specifically Iraqi and Afgan" (Suchman 2016: 8), which in turn creates certainty about the nature of warfare.

Digital technologies have become fundamental in shaping current and future warfare practices and representations in the actual world. The ethnographic research into drone warfare, war music videos and human technology used in roleplay have therefore demonstrated how the virtual world has a closely interlinked relationship with the physical world today. The boundary between "the two worlds" has become blurred, and a reconceptualization of what the "virtual" and "real" are is much needed today (Boellstorff 2015: 3).

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