Play War: Homemade Recreational Battlefields

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White Suit in Chicagoland, Illinois, 2013.

You're looking at a world of gameplay, of simulated war, fought by an army of paintball enthusiasts who spend their weekends shooting one another with gelatin shells of colored dye. Paintball is an industry of equipment suppliers who rely on amateurs to design and build the playing fields. Typically, a few friends with a Bobcat construct a combat

stage by incorporating whatever materials remain on the land from its previous use, and whatever can be salvaged nearby. Old agricultural machines, remnants of fallen buildings, shipping containers, cable spools, loading pallets, railroad ties, junked cars, concrete fittings, PVC pipes, obsolete communication towers: The detritus of an industrial century is pushed to the urban margins to create apocalyptic playgrounds. Collectively, these sites represent a range of military conflicts at home and abroad, past, present and future.

It takes some imagination to read these free-form interpretations of castles, spaceships, and Islamic villages. But for the 9 million players that use them, all that's needed is the symbolic form, a suggestion of meaning. Over the years, the sites take on new complexities, as buildings are layered with patchwork repairs and surfaces acquire an abstract expressionist patina of exploded pigment. They hold the memories of battles won and lost, testifying to the power of personal narrative. *We were here then. That's where I caught them.* Authentic hauntings.

Play War is a photographic survey of homemade recreational battlefields across the United States, tucked into the everyday landscapes that surround a disheveled middle class. Photographing these spaces and these warriors, one finds a keen and disarmingly honest form of creativity. Here, players can test their efficacy, their agency, their ability to make a difference in the company of friends and strangers. As expressions of potential realities, these spaces present an intricate relief of the culture that created them. They are also deeply intertwined with the real needs of the military.

At the Edge

Paintball draws dollars to low-value properties outside the urban perimeter, a cash boost at the rural edge. With GPS, remote locations and interstitial spaces are more accessible than ever. Gaming fields are hidden amid utility right-of-ways, light industrial zones, bankrupt big

boxes, swampy plateaus, fallow farms, and fields of wild scruff around shopping malls and airports. Their scale varies, as does the ambition of their staged productions. The largest game is held annually in Oklahoma on a thousand acres of private land. At the other end of the scale are the many informal games held in provisional spaces. Airsoft enthusiasts, considered more "militant" because they use more realistic weapons and gear, rendezvous through coded *MilSim* websites. They infiltrate exurban backwoods and industrial ruins, where ravaged architectures complete the all-immersive experience of urban war.

These landscapes recall the "adventure playgrounds" of postwar Europe. After a blitz, residents would return to the rubble of their former lives to start rebuilding, dragging debris into a pile at the end of the block. The pile was designated a playground to occupy children while the adults worked. Calamitous kids used the garbage to build and destroy their own little war-torn worlds. Later, in the 1960s and '70s, municipal authorities across Europe and North America built playgrounds with forts and assault courses of netted climbing frames, monkey bars, and crenellated platforms — a ubiquitous architecture of competitive encounter.

Homemade recreational battlefields also draw heavily on the visual and spatial conventions of video games. Since Operation Desert Storm, 25 years ago, simulated war has evolved from the arcade into a vast subculture that comprises massive multiplayer online games as well as paintball and live-action role-play. Leagues and scenario championships have proliferated. Some organizers hold online "casting calls" where players sign up for roles ahead of an event. Myths and legends are sourced for designing missions and storylines. A war historian may be hired to stage the field.

Teenagers use the games to test the feel of a soldier's life. At big scenario events, the Marine Corps sets up mobile recruiting stations amid the hotdog vendors. The military long ago recognized the power of video games for recruitment and training. [1] Since its release in 2002,

America's Army — designed and run by the U.S. Army — has become the biggest online multiplayer game in the world, with 13 million trained soldiers. As teens seek to "level up" from video games, they are drawn to real physical challenge. They might dress in fatigues and play paintball in a suburban back lot, then level up to find themselves at a major scenario event, camping in a tent, with skirmishes running day and night. They learn military syntax and operate fake tanks and gunners. They run through a smoke-filled forest, with helicopters buzzing overhead and voices shouting through the fog, feeling the adrenaline heat of real fear. Back at school on Monday, others notice the afterglow of heroism; a light flesh wound augments the tale.

Hotdog Stand, Massachusetts, 2014. [Ruth Dusseault]

Thus, the techno-military entertainment complex targets youth by blurring the lines between real and fantasy war. Drones that kill in Afghanistan are piloted in the American Midwest, relying on the fast reactions of young soldiers who grew up playing video games. The gaming industry is one of the biggest contributors to defense research.

Flight simulator games, for example, now outperform professional training systems. In the commercial sphere, the budget for a first-person shooter online game now rivals that of a blockbuster Hollywood movie. Perhaps this is the social condition necessary to sustain one of the world's largest all-volunteer armies.

On the paintball field, youths on their way to war cross paths with soldiers who have recently returned. Veterans, unwilling or unable to obtain conventional mental health care, use war games as self-administered PTSD treatment. [2] The movement of troops among the cacophony of heavy machines provides an immersive sensory environment for exposure therapy. With social support, it may be possible for vets to defeat their darkest fears (although Veterans Affairs advises against high-adrenaline treatments that might trigger flashbacks). Most gamers suffering from PTSD are young men returning from 21st century wars. They grew up on video games, survived the trauma of real combat, and have returned to find healing in this ersatz space that lies between.

Veterans are the majority at the world's largest D-Day reenactment, a nine-day camp-out at the Oklahoma site, featuring parades, flag raisings, salutes, and reunions, and culminating in a 5000-player rally for the climactic surge at Colleville. Former soldiers journey there from over a dozen countries, bringing the mental baggage of various geopolitical conflicts. Through the magic of theater, their memories are redefined in the context of the noblest battle in modern history.

Simulation and Documentary

Outside of the weekend game schedule, many of the larger fields are leased to ROTC groups or civilian first-responders for simulation training. In the real military, live-action simulation sites have been used to prepare soldiers for the shock of battle since World War I. Each new war requires a simulation design that matches the theater of conflict. Replicas for the 21st century wars are set in the American

Southwest, at facilities like Fort Irwin, California, which hosts the mock Iraqi village of Medina Wasl.

One of the most significant military efforts to connect real and virtual battle experience came in the wake of the first Gulf War. At the Battle of 73 Easting — a decisive victory for American and British forces — military technicians were sent into the field, even as the battle raged, to collect documentary data that would later enable its synthetic reenactment. In the mid-1990s, many thousands of soldiers relived the battle in mock-up tank interiors. The simulation graphics were rudimentary, but military trainers found that visual fidelity mattered less than the narrative. If the story fits, you believe you're in the thick of it. The game designers wanted to create an experience that felt more authentic than the battle itself.

Just what are the truths of war? *Play War* follows the precedent of photographers who have responded to the hyper-real nature of post-9/11 global conflicts by studying their simulations. Rather than embedding themselves with military units as frontline photographers, they focus on the constructs of war at home. Artists Paul Shambroom and Steve Rowell, for example, have documented domestic training facilities in the United States, and Jo Röttger has photographed field exercises in Germany. (See Landscape and Memory, on *Places*.) Straight photographs of fake war seem to confirm a new authenticity in our heavily mediated world. [3]

Marcia Vetrocq has written that the subjective-objective somersaulting in contemporary documentary practice reflects a self-conscious culture "shaped in overt and subtle ways by three decades of the critique of truth in pictures." Documentary war photography has acquired a particular kind of urgency: "When the control of visual access becomes a flashpoint, the urge to photograph the real acquires the allure of a mission." [4]

Play War seeks to uncover some of the social infrastructure that

undergirds a seemingly endless war. On these playing fields, teens drawn to war exchange fire with veterans trying to find a way home. The games become a ladder leading up to war and a ladder for coming back down. All of it circles, of course, on the authentic experience of war, fragmented across multiple realities —on the battlefield, back home, here and there, then and now.

NOTES

1. Gary Webb, "The Killing Game," *Sacramento News & Review*, October 14, 2004. ↩

2. Albert Rizzo, Greg Reger, Greg Gahm, JoAnn Difede and Barbara O. Rothbaum, "Virtual Reality Exposure Therapy for Combat-Related PTSD," in *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: Basic Science and Clinical Practice* (New York, NY: Humana Press, 2009), 375-399. ↩

3. Ruth Dusseault, "The Incomplete Illusion: Photographing the Training Ground," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians,* Vol. 72, No. 3 (Sept. 2013), 292-300. ↩

4. Marcia E. Vetrocq, "Rules of Engagement," *Art in America*, vol. 96, No. 6, (June/July 2008), 169. ↩

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