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Extremely lethal video war games

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By NAT HENTOFF

In his book, “Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the 21st Century,” P.W. Singer — director of the Brookings Institute’s 21st-Century Defense Initiative — describes our use of lethal pilotless drone planes in Iraq and Afghanistan by noting that the pilots directing the drones are seated before a computer in Las Vegas.

Interviewed by National Public Radio’s Terry Gross (Oct. 21), Singer said, “It’s like a video game.”

And indeed, most of these robotic systems, he added, are “modeled after the Xbox or the PlayStation,” which some of the younger pilots of the drone planes in Nevada enjoyed playing as they were growing up.

But video games do not leave real corpses.

Jane Mayer, author of the deeply troubling article “The Predator War” (The New Yorker, Oct. 6), also was interviewed by NPR’s Gross (Oct. 21).

“If it’s a low-level militant, are we justified in killing a number of bystanders that are killed with that person?” Mayer wondered out loud. “These are very morally fraught, complicated questions.”

Mayer added that “the process of who’s making those decisions — and how — is hidden, as far as the CIA goes.”

At that point, Gross asked a question that our media and Congress should be asking:

“What questions do you hope President Obama is asking himself about the drones?”

We don’t know. The president hasn’t told us.

I would also ask him: “What if it’s a high-level terrorist (I avoid euphemisms like “militants”) that the drone plane has targeted? And that terrorist, as often happens, has strategically hidden himself or herself among

civilians? Do our legal and moral values justify killing those civilians to prevent further killings by this wholesale murderer?"

Shouldn't We the People be debating where we go from here in this increasingly remote-controlled war?

P.W. Singer's "Wired for War" includes this dark warning:

"More than a century ago, Gen. Robert E. Lee famously observed: 'It is good that we find war so horrible, or else we would become fond of it.'

Singer adds: "He didn't contemplate a time when a pilot could 'go to war' by commuting to work each morning in his Toyota to a cubicle where he could shoot missiles at an enemy thousands of miles away and then make it home in time for his kid's soccer practice."

Singer goes deeper into future video game wars:

"Can the new armaments reliably separate friend from foe? What laws and ethical codes apply? What are we saying when we send out unmanned machines to fight for us? What is the 'message' that those on the other side receive?

"Ultimately, how will humans remain masters of weapons that are immeasurably faster and more 'intelligent' than they are?"

There's another societal time bomb in Singer's book, a quote from Gordon Johnson of the Pentagon's Joint Force Command about the splendid attractions of robots:

"They don't get hungry. They're not afraid. They don't forget their orders. They don't care if the guy next to them has just been shot. Will they do a better job than humans? Yes."

Will there be new definitions of war crimes?

Even with the YouTube wars ahead, Singer reminds us that "wars are complex, messy and unpredictable."

"And this," he adds, "will remain the case even as unmanned systems increasingly substitute for humans."

So the question is: Will the definition of "humans" remain the same?

—Syndicated columnist Nat Hentoff is a member of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press and the Cato Institute senior fellow.

Comments

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War is Hell wrote on Nov 27, 2009 8:19 AM:

" and the combatant that is prepared to exploit every advantage available to him wins. And in war winning, that is killing the enemy and breaking his stuff trumps all. "

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Its hopeless wrote on Nov 27, 2009 9:44 AM:

" Wouldn't it be cool if we settled differences in war games and no one dies? "

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