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Playing war – playing with fire.

About dark games

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Abstract

Play is normally regarded as a matter of pleasure, as being a free, creative and harmless activity mainly related to children and their positive development and innocent laughter. But this is only one part of the story.

There exists a larger field in the history of play and game, which unfolds between children's playing soldiers and military sport. Scouting is a phenomenon in-between. And can competitive sport be understood as "war without killing"? Reenactment of historical battles may be regarded as a version for adults or even elderly of playing war.

Furthermore have play and games an important place in military training and military service – from exercise, manoeuvre and marching with song and music to sand-table exercises (in German: Sandkastenspiel). Does military more generally, for instance with its tradition of uniform and colored decorations, appeal to this playfulness?

That war in Medieval and Renaissance times was a form of play, has been a topic in the groundbreaking work of Johan Huizinga about the philosophy of play. And Friedrich Nietzsche emphasized the cruel warrior as player. All this may sound romantic with references to archaic life – but what about the modern relations between high-technological warfare, computer simulation and computer game? And in which way do children's armies, which seem to spread in several parts of the world, appeal to the play of killing?

War as play challenges the philosophical understanding of play as just fun. Brian Sutton-Smith (1983) and Richard Schechner (1988) have earlier pointed towards dangerous forms of play. It seems that "dark play" has to be taken much more serious than it was hitherto realized. Has the connection between war and play to be thought in connection with games killing animals, with bullying as play, with the fascination of horror movies – and with play with fire?

Where does all this lead in its radical consequences of philosophical – and political – understanding? Let us try:

- Play is neither just for fun, pleasure or leisure.
- Play contributes in a shocking way to the anthropological understanding of war.
- And from out dark play, philosophy may have to re-think the question of, what play is.

Taking a step away from the monolithic phenomenology of good play, we may have to consider a differential phenomenology of play.