Dorn: Peacekeeping games, anyone?

The following has been contributed to PAXsims by Walter Dorn. Dr. Dorn is a professor of defence studies at the Royal Military College and the Canadian Forces College. He also serves as a consultant on technological innovation at the United Nations. The views expressed are those of the author and do not represent the official policy or position of any agency, organization, employer or company.

So many people play online as warfighters but, in stark contrast, no one plays as peacekeepers. The immediate explanation is simple: there are no such games. But that is a mystery to me. Peacekeeping is more intellectually and ethically challenging, more deeply meaningful, more emotionally rewarding (saving people), and still includes the challenges (and excitement) of combat. So I began to explore the possibilities of peacekeeping gaming which led to publishing of a detailed paper recently: “From Wargaming to Peacekeeping: Digital Simulations with Peacekeeper Roles Needed” (pdf) in the journal International Peacekeeping.

I first asked myself and my research assistants, avid gamers who became my co-authors: what existing games come close to peacekeeping? A search online for “peacekeeping” games yielded some ridiculous results at first. For instance, the game Peacekeeper – Trench Defense describes itself this way:
Not exactly what we had in mind.

I took heart from PAXsims, which has the best reviews and descriptions of games involving realistic peace processes. Furthermore, the journal *Simulation & Gaming* had a whole issue on peacebuilding in 2013, guest edited by Rex Brynen. So I felt that at least I was not alone; others were thinking about similar possibilities. Rex's *Brynania* game, in his eponymous territory, considers peacekeeping as part of the toolbox for conflict resolution. And, his survey shows that his student gamers strongly supported UN-led peacekeeping and mediation over all the other peace process options. But there are no games online to actually practice UN peacekeeping.

I have yet to find a commercial game, on a gameboard or digitally, where UN-style peacekeeping is the focus. Some militaries have experimented with peacekeeping training by reskinning warfighting games, like *Arma3* and its more expensive (professional) platform Virtual Battlespace (now at VBS4 from Bohemia Interactive). But with a license fee of thousands per computer per year, VBS4 is beyond the reach of most individuals and peacekeeping training institutions. Besides, a wargame modified into a peacekeeping game will look like just that, not a product built from the ground up to realistically simulate peace operations.

There are a few relevant and exciting games for counter-terrorism and stability operations. But these are mostly US-style operations – think Iraq and Afghanistan, which have hardly proven to be successful models for creating peace. These operations are quite different from UN peace operations, which are based on a trinity of principles that are not usually present in US/NATO stability operations: consent of the main parties to the conflict for the UN deployment; impartiality so that the mission is guided by international law and any peace agreements between the conflicting parties (i.e., the UN should not side with one party and treat the other as the enemy); and the defensive use of force, unlike the frequently offensive character of most stability operations. Still, peace operations can require the use of force if an armed group poses an imminent threat to UN personnel or local civilians. And some elements can definitely be transferred from counter-insurgency (COIN) games like *Rebel Inc: Escalation*, e.g., learning about power-brokers, civ-mil relations, working with humanitarian actors (while giving them "humanitarian space"), using media coverage as leverage, etc.

We can also learn from the table-top exercises (TTX) that militaries so often play. However, in Canada and its NATO allies, the simulations are centered on a NATO-like alliance. These forces do not have the composition, spirit or integrated nature of the United Nations, where troops from the developed and developing world work alongside police and civilians, all under civilian international control. More importantly, the goal is to win the peace not to win the war. There are a few exercises with strong peacekeeping components, like the Viking multinational exercises held annually by the Swedish armed forces and the Folke Bernadotte Academy. In its day, the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre (1994–2013) in Canada also developed multiple exercises involving UN-led multidisciplinary peacekeeping missions, mostly based in the land of Fontinalis.

After searching, researching and writing about the idea of digital peacekeeping games, I wanted to start practicing what I was preaching. But moving from the general idea to even a demonstration game (proof of concept) necessitated a skilled game developer, who was generously provided by M7 Database Services. One game concept is now being developed – see www.peacekeepersgame.com, with explanation and video playthrough. A preliminary demonstration game is also available (upon request to walter.dorn@rmc.ca). This design and development work showed me the great power of agile object-based game development using assets from the Unity store – for more, see the peacekeeping gaming paper (pdf), specifically the section on "New and Emerging Methods of Game Design and Development."
With this and similar initiatives in progress, it seems that peacekeeping gaming might be moving from vision to reality. Hopefully, game design companies will explore the field and the options. And I also urge the United Nations to explore them, not only for the training but also public education. Digital simulations allow for the easy production of videos to illustrate peacekeeping principles and practices. From my UN experience, I learned why “disruptive technologies” are given that name. Many UN officials recognized the exciting potential for peacekeeping simulation but did not want to disrupt their current work plans, overloaded as they were. Still, there is hope for UN digital innovation, especially as the COVID-affected world seeks to do more online, including peacekeeping training, during and after the crisis.

I know the Canadian and international officers I teach at the Canadian Forces College, especially those in my peace operations class, are enthusiastic to engage in peacekeeping simulations. Now would be the time to develop the games or encourage others to develop them. There are options to foster a new gaming genre: work with the gaming industry or with emerging game designers at colleges and universities in their gaming and design programmes.

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And if the options to develop new games are few, and the development work with the United Nations proves too slow, then there’s more time to do the next best thing: producing more academic papers!

Walter Dorn