



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*.

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From Wargaming to Peacegaming: Digital Simulations with Peacekeeper Roles Needed

A. Walter Dorn^a, Stewart Webb^b and Sylvain Pâquet^c

^aRoyal Military College and the Canadian Forces College, Toronto, Canada; ^bDefence Report, Salt Spring Island, Canada; ^cCanada Border Services Agency, Ottawa, Canada

ABSTRACT

Militaries around the world have benefited from computerized games. Many recruits have been attracted to the military through military-style video games. After recruitment, games and simulations provide an important means of soldier training, including before actual deployments. However, electronic games are lacking for UN peace operations. The multidimensionality of peacekeeping has yet to be simulated in serious games to complement the many games that too often depict a binary battlefield of blue-team versus red-team (or, often in public games, good versus evil). Not only could soldiers benefit from nuanced and ambitious peace-related games, so too could civilian peacekeepers, and the public at large. Peacekeeping gaming should not be merely at the tactical level; the operational and strategic levels can be gamed as well. The decision-making in future peacekeeping simulations could help instruct conflict-resolution and critical thinking skills. The paper posits that such digital games could be an important tool for current and future peacekeepers, both military and civilian. Commercial games could also help educate the public on UN peacekeeping. The paper suggests that the United Nations partner with some member states and perhaps the video game industry to provide in-depth training simulations that mirror the challenges and complexities of modern peace operations.

KEYWORDS Digital games; peace operations; simulation; training; United Nations

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:

Fight epic battles, slay endless waves of enemy hordes, and restore the peace! You're the Peacekeeper, one of the world's toughest elite soldiers. A relentless onslaught of enemy troops is invading your land. It's up to you to restore the peace, and what better way to do that than with your huge arsenal of guns?!

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](#).



Screenshot from the Peacekeeper Game Project.

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.

Peacekeeping games, anyone?

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

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