

IR has not, is not and will not take place

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In 1991, Jean Baudrillard wrote three post-modern polemics directed against the Gulf War. They were each titled: *The Gulf War will not take place*; *The Gulf War is not taking place*; *The Gulf War did not take place*.² A key point in this series was that the Gulf War was not so much a war as an atrocity committed from the air, with little engagement between combatants and was primarily a media spectacle that created a structural unreality. His point was not whether or not the war was real, but that a lot about this war was virtual: the combat, the media construction of the war, the use of images from the war to construct an idea of the war, its villains and its heroes. The overcompensation evident in these virtual simulations only served to highlight the absence of the war. The war was simulated through a variety of technologies. The issue of IR being a discipline is, more than anything else, also a simulation that provides a commodity for students to buy into and scholars to help construct through various scholarly performances including writing International Relations (IR) textbooks and conducting IR surveys such as TRIP.³ It is not that there is nothing called IR, far from it, but rather that attempts at defining its parameters, set out its limits, and identify its normal modes of research, are ultimately futile and are more akin to acts of simulation.

The same could be said for many other academic areas. But IR is one of the few to regularly engage in this kind self-introspection. Nevertheless, for many of us, the debate about whether or not IR is a discipline is irrelevant, unless it has an administrative impact. Whether we call it a field, a discipline, a sub-field, a research area, or use some other nomenclature is unimportant intellectually. Indeed the fact that American scholars of IR “bemoan the existence and reification of the major paradigms”⁴ is evidence of the deep ambivalence felt toward the project of defining IR’s disciplinarity. Yet, the majority of IR textbooks continue to discipline students into accepting and often reifying these paradigms, introducing them to the many theoretical “isms” that are often used to define IR – even though most IR scholars do not appreciate this way of defining the field.⁵ In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* Thomas Kuhn makes repeated use of how textbooks are important for introducing and explaining an academic field.⁶ If, however, we accept the ambivalence felt toward these paradigms, and of how most scholars do not easily fit into any one of them, we are guilty of teaching our students a theoretical language that we do not accept. The simulation is already apparent. We might as well use the simulation of video game to explain IR – which in fact we already do, courtesy of the educational tool *Statecraft*.

In IR, the simulation is evident in repeated attempts to explore its beginnings and ends, as the 2013 Special Issue of the European Journal of International Relations has done most recently. Disciplines are largely accidents of history and are rarely clearly defined, distinguishable areas of scholarship. Political Science, History, Philosophy, Sociology, Anthropology, Economics and even Physics, Neuroscience, Chemistry, and Biology all learn and borrow from each other.⁷ Their disciplinarity is as much a product of the history of academia as anything else. It is significantly easier to define a discipline not by its subject matter but by its sociology. In terms of

activities and research outputs, or more specifically in terms of specific journals and professional associations, IR could be a discipline. IR could also be a discipline in the battle over university resources and the creation of undergraduate and graduate degrees in the subject. However, even here the boundaries are tricky since, as Caroline Kennedy-Pipes argues, the subject matter that IR is concerned with is not distinct to IR. In this sense, IR is more of a trans-disciplinary field than a unique discipline. Moreover, as is evident from a critical reflection of the scope and ambition of Barry Buzan's and Richard Little's famous 2001 article, *The Failure of International Relations*, the more IR tries to be a discipline, the greater its failure.⁸

It is worth being reminded that these are not new issues. Susan Strange once argued that to the extent IR has a focus, it does not stand independently: "I can no longer profess a special concern with international politics if that is defined from other kinds of politics and which takes the state as the unit of analysis, and the international society of states as the main problematic."⁹ Attempts to clearly define the boundaries of "IR the Discipline" are, according to Kennedy-Pipes essentially impossible. IR, she convincingly argues, is not a discipline; it is "a crossroads where disciplines meet."¹⁰ At this point, it may be worth asking if being called a discipline or a field matters intellectually – as Helen Louise Turton claims in this forum. Yet, it is not as if there is a need to defend the subject: IR's many simulations ranging from videogames, blogs and textbooks continue to increase in number. The answer is probably not. As Ernest Gellner is reputed to have said, "I'm not a pony, I don't need a field."

Defining IR's subject area and methods are themselves contestable. For example, Stefano Guzzini¹¹ challenges the dichotomy between theory and practical judgment, identifying it as false and emphasizing in its place greater reflexivity. This critical reference to ongoing methodological shadows, which includes the ghosts of realism, serves to further highlight the simulations at play, ones that we challenge but cannot seem to quite escape from. IR is presumably focused on the relations/politics between states/nations. Yet, a lot of what now counts for IR is not about this but about ideas, peoples, norms, aboriginal rights, culture, multinational corporations, and the environment. Furthermore, much contemporary research that could fall under a general rubric of IR blurs the lines between the international, the global, and the local.¹² Leading texts focused on international relations sometimes barely engage with traditional debates (or literature) in the field,¹³ or easily blur the lines between IR and Political Theory.¹⁴ Furthermore, as Chris Brown suggests, many of the key IR thinkers would not have considered themselves to belong to a discipline called IR in the first place.¹⁵ Furthermore, IR's case to disciplinarity ignores the extent to which IR would not exist without its interdisciplinary research programs. IR is and has largely been influenced by debates in Political Science, research in the humanities, and the various fields of political philosophy, political economy, and political sociology among others.

In the face of its own uncertainty IR often presents itself as being concerned with the highest order of political questions. Ned Lebow writes, "International relations is at the apex of multiple levels of social aggregation, and is significantly influenced, if not shaped, by what happens at other levels."¹⁶ The logical structure of IR that Lebow articulates so well is already evident in Waltz's, *Man, the State and War*, and is also suggested by Robert Keohane, among others.¹⁷ This representation of IR is surely more self-serving than it is accurate, and is a crucial moment in the simulation as it overcompensates for IR's obviously significant subject matter. The definition is self-serving because it ostensibly overinflates IR's importance by

suggesting its primary concern is at the highest level of analysis and thus rests above those disciplines concerned with the lower levels. If the simulation is to function logically, the logic of levels and in regularly asserting IR's stature at the highest level implies that future IR work would need to move up yet another level, to interstellar relations. This logic of moving up the levels is evident in Alexander Wendt and Raymond Duvall's examination of UFOs and the anthropocentricity of sovereignty,¹⁸ although they are not the first social scientists to think about this final frontier. In 1978 Paul Krugman, who won the Nobel Prize for economics in 2008, wrote a paper applying economic theory to interplanetary trade.¹⁹ To take IR as a discipline seriously is to buy into a logical structure that heads into the realm of science fiction, for if IR is concerned with the highest level of social and political aggregation, interplanetary trade or UFO influenced reflections on sovereignty is the logical next part of IR's research brief. The simulation at this point is both complete and revealed.

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² Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

³ Full disclosure: I completed a two graduate degrees in IR. Consequently, I am complicit in the disciplinization of IR even as I question it.

⁴ Daniel Maliniak et al., 'International Relations in the US Academy,' *International Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (2011): 442.

⁵ Daniel Maliniak, Amy Oakes, Peterson Susan, and Michael J. Tierny, 'International Relations in the US Academy' *International Studies Quarterly*, 55(2) June 2011) pp. 437-464.

⁶ Thomas S. Kuhn, T. S., *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁷ William E. Connolly, *Neuropolitics : Thinking, Culture, Speed* (Minneapolis, Minn. ; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Stephen Gaukroger, *The Emergence of a Scientific Culture: Science and the Shaping of Modernity 1210-1685* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006); Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed., ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Stephen Kern, *A Cultural History of Causality : Science, Murder Novels, and Systems of Thought* (Princeton, N.J. ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004).

⁸ Barry Buzan and Richard Little, "Why International Relations Has Failed as an Intellectual Project and What to Do About It," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 30, no. 19 (2001).

⁹ Susan Strange, *The Retreat of the State: the Diffusion of Power in the World Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. xv.

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- ¹⁰ Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, 'At a Crossroads – and Other Reasons to be Cheerful: The Future of International Relations,' *International Relations*, 21(3) September 2007, pp. 352.
- ¹¹ Stefano Guzzini, 'The ends of International Relations theory: Stages of reflexivity and modes of theorizing' *European Journal of International Relations* 19, no. 2 (2013): 521-541
- ¹² Warren Magnusson and Karena Shaw, *A political Space: Reading the Global Through Clayoquot Sound* (Minneapolis, Minn.; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
- ¹³ Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Odysseys: Navigating the New International Politics of Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- ¹⁴ Andrew Linklater, *The Transformation of Political Community: Ethical Foundations of the Post-Westphalian Era* (Oxford: Polity, 1998).
- ¹⁵ Chris Brown, 'The Future of the Discipline?', *International Relations*, 21(3) September 2007, pp. 347-350.
- ¹⁶ Richard Ned Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 1.
- ¹⁷ Robert O. Keohane, 'International Institutions: Two Approaches,' *International Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (1988) Paul Y. Hammond, "Man, the State and War: A Theoretical Analysis by Kenneth N. Waltz," *Political Science Quarterly* 75, no. 3 (1960).
- ¹⁸ Alexander Wendt and Raymond Duvall, "Sovereignty and the UFO," *Political Theory* 36, no. 4 (2008).
- ¹⁹ Unfortunately, Krugman's discussion over interest rates and the time needed for space travel ignored the possibility of simultaneous near instantaneous transport across planetary worlds. The paper was something of a joke, although the analysis contained within it is serious. See <http://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/03/11/economics-the-final-frontier/> [Accessed April 11, 2013]. Paul Krugman, "The Theory of Interstellar Trade," (1978).