

Misrepresented Wargames: Sensationalism and Ludic Imagery in Television Journalism's Portrayal of War

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Abstract

This study examines the convergence of ludification and mediatization in contemporary media culture, focusing on the increasing use of game-like aesthetics and simulations within Italian television journalism. I argue that a pronounced shift towards infotainment is blurring the lines between reality and representation, potentially distorting public understanding of complex events, particularly concerning conflict reporting. Through an analysis of Italian television programs, I identify a pattern of inaccurate use of ludic images (from both video games and board games) that circulate inappropriately in mainstream news programs. This intermedial influence, originating online, highlights an agenda-setting dynamic where misinformation readily enters established media narratives. Drawing on Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, I contend that this trend contributes to a broader erosion of collective truth and underscores the urgent need for audience-focused research investigating how viewers engage with sensationalist news content. Although centered on the Italian context, these findings may reflect a broader, transnational shift in media ecology, requiring greater media literacy and critical thinking skills to navigate an increasingly simulated reality.

Keywords: Visual culture; Mediatization; Ludification; Infotainment; Television studies; War journalism.

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“Among the calamities of war may be justly numbered the diminution of the love of truth, by the falsehoods which interest dictates and credulity encourages”.

Johnson, Samuel, *The Idler* no. 30

1 Culture in transformation

In contemporary Western societies, culture – understood as the set of ideas, symbols, values, and practices that a human community produces, adopts and transmits – is subject to multiple processes of change. Considering culture as a dynamic system of signs that shapes and guides both individuals and society as a whole, this essay aims to analyze two transformative trajectories: the mediatization and ludification of culture.

The proposed study is interdisciplinary, drawing on concepts and theories from media studies, game studies, and journalism studies, but the general approach is anchored in visual culture studies. This research examines the historical and technological dimensions of visual imagery, interrogating their cultural significance, the implicit political power structures embedded in their construction, and the ensuing dynamics of consumption.

The aim of this paper is to examine and understand the dynamics of the broader cultural paradigm to interpret episodes of misinformation that have occurred on Italian national television regarding journalistic coverage of wars. The research focuses on some case studies in which well-known journalists on leading television programs broadcast images from games, misrepresenting them as real images from conflict scenarios. Regardless of whether these phenomena are deliberate or not – that is, whether they are constructed to attract public attention through sensationalist communication aesthetics, or whether they are due to the confusion caused by the speed at which news circulates in the contemporary infosphere – it is important to analyze these errors.

Before moving on to a detailed analysis of the cases in question, it is essential to investigate the processes of ludification and mediatization in contemporary culture and to articulate the nexus between war and audio-visual media. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks outlined, I will interpret media texts on war reporting in which mediatization and ludification short-circuit each other, thereby revealing the pervasiveness of the infotainment model and highlighting the progressive erosion of the boundaries between reality and representation.

2 Ludification: between game and *ludus*

Observing Western society at the turn of the millennium, we are witnessing a process of ludification, or the incorporation of elements typical of games and play into culture and everyday life. This phenomenon is transforming the way we perceive, understand, and interact with the world. The ludification of culture manifests itself in two ways, depending on whether we consider the game-like elements in a narrow or a broad sense. The first way is seen in the growing penetration of game mechanics, aesthetics, and logic into social, communicative, and cultural spheres. In this sense, culture takes on the features of a game, a structured form of playfulness that involves rules, challenges, interactions, and rewards: that is the idea of play that we commonly have. We could consider this to be cultural ludification in the strict sense, and it has been studied in the academic literature, which has defined this process as gamification (Deterding et al. 2011).

The second way in which games and play have spread in contemporary society can be seen in the development of the spectacular, theatrical, and representative aspects of culture, which extend to the sphere of entertainment. In this case, the cultural form of reference can be identified with the term *ludus*, a Latin word that encompasses the semantic sphere of games, sports, recreation, and entertainment (Glare 1982: 1048-1049). This process, which we can call ludification, has a broader scope than gamification and is not strictly linked to specific elements of structured play, but is part of a wider cultural trend also related to the spread of digital media in advanced capitalist societies (Dippel and Fizek 2017). If gamification is “the use of game design elements in non-game contexts” (Deterding et al. 2011), we can define ludification, for the context of this research, as the use of entertaining elements outside the context of entertainment. We can envisage the presence of playful elements in contemporary culture as a spectrum ranging from games – structured activities with rules, challenges, and rewards – to *ludus* – play as spectacle, performance, and entertainment.

A significant factor in the spread of the playful form as *ludus* is the exaltation of visual media and the cultural preeminence of the sense of sight. The proliferation of display devices and the multiplication of content accessible through them have increased the importance of the gaze within the contemporary media ecosystem, leading to the production of a culture based on visuality (Pinotti and Somaini 2016).

Authors such as Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle* analyzed this cultural change through a Marxist lens. According to Debord, who wrote in 1967, capitalism had finally won, and the defeated working class had been completely enveloped by alienation, which replaced authentic life with false illusions. This substitution has been carried out primarily by spectacle, which is not “a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (Debord 1994: 12). The accumulation of spectacles is not only a process of capitalist exploitation but also produces a generalized reification of life: “All that once was directly lived has become mere representation” (Debord 1994: 12). According to Debord, spectacle is both a mechanism used by economic powers to capture social life and an illusory means of accessing knowledge.

Mario Vargas Llosa tackles the subject with a different approach – not an economic one but a cultural one – in *Notes on the Death of Culture*. Vargas Llosa does not start from the Marxist premise that economic structure determines cultural forms; rather, he argues that cultural forms often cause social, economic, and political phenomena. However, he shares with the French author the observation that culture has disappeared as a liberating value, replaced by a myriad of spectacles that impose entertainment as the ultimate aspiration. This, according to Vargas Llosa, is the most dangerous illusion:

converting this natural propensity for enjoying oneself into a supreme value has unexpected consequences: it leads to culture becoming banal, frivolity becoming widespread and, in the field of news coverage, it leads to the spread of irresponsible journalism based on gossip and scandal (Vargas Llosa 2016: 24).

According to Vargas Llosa, culture has become playful in the pejorative sense of the term: frivolous,¹ fickle, ephemeral. It is a culture where ideas are replaced by images and intelligence by ingenuity: in collective consumption, the play of sensations precedes reasoning and thought.

Peppino Ortoleva (2012a, 2012b) also analyzes this cultural change: if in the twentieth century one of society’s obsessions was sexuality – often acting as a driving force behind cultural developments – a similar role in twenty-first-century society is held by play. However, this play is shifting towards what Ortoleva calls “new playfulness” (*nuova ludicità*, 2012a: 97-114), that is, a new way of understanding the relationship between play and reality.

This “new playfulness” also marks the transition from Huizinga’s *homo ludens*, a universal anthropological type, to *homo ludicus*, which is instead a historically determined human posture. *Homo ludicus* emerges from the dissolution of clear boundaries between the space/time of work and pleasure, and also from the gradual disappearance of the division between games suitable for adults and games that are not. These ongoing processes favor the emergence of new social and cultural dynamics.

The ludic attitude is progressively making its entrance into areas of common living where its presence would have been deemed as irreverent or misplaced until a few years ago, from mourning to war, from management to science. This phenomenon generates a paradigm of playfulness used to organize and think about various aspects of existence through a movement of trespassing. (2012b: 7).

Ortoleva also posits a significant shift in the human condition, arguing that contemporary society is increasingly characterized by a dynamic interplay between humans and intelligent machines. He contends that a nascent “new ludic system” is emerging as a crucial framework for navigating this evolving relationship. Building upon Bruno Latour’s idea of a society composed of both humans and non-human actors, Ortoleva highlights the necessity of understanding how we adapt to a world populated by sophisticated computational entities.

1. Regarding the concept of frivolity, the author specifies: “This is frivolity, a way of understanding the world, and life, where everything is appearance, theatre, play and entertainment” (2016: 42).

Alessandro Baricco (2020) expresses a similar opinion regarding the advent of a new cultural *Zeitgeist* concomitant with the digital revolution and globalization. Baricco explores the cultural transformation driven by technology, arguing that a mental revolution preceded and enabled the technological one. Through metaphorical cartography, he identifies the crucial stages in the establishment of the new dominant playful paradigm, characterized by a light, fast, and superficial culture. According to the author, the role of video games² is that of a founding myth of the new culture, with elements such as interface design and the new concept of truth – “quick-truth” (*verità veloce*)³ – becoming paradigmatic of the digital age. Baricco states:

there was an element of the Game that seemed to be stripping human experience of its most complex, sophisticated, or mysterious aspects, diminishing everything to a simplified system that bypassed hard work, reduced the unit weight of facts, and chose the easiest and quickest solutions. It was a vague, still unfocused intuition, but it was true that the Game, to put it crudely, appeared to be robbing the world of its soul. They felt as if it was establishing a secular, functional, game-like version of the world for people who had no particular interest in engagement (2020: 153).

Despite the risks and critical issues, Baricco has a mainly positive view of the new cultural paradigm centered on playfulness. Gaming dismantles centralized structures, promoting horizontal networks, direct sharing, and accessible tools that dissolve elites. Furthermore, the game spreads light skills and autonomy, democratizes cognitive practices, and reduces dependence on experts.

Among the positive interpretations of the process of democratization and gamification of culture, Eric Zimmerman's stands out for its vivid and innovative approach. Zimmerman welcomes the advent of the “Ludic Century” in his manifesto (2015). If the twentieth century, the author argues, was the century of the information revolution and the dominant cultural form was the moving image, in the ludic century information “has been put at play” through interactive game-like experiences in which culture becomes increasingly “systemic, modular, customizable, and participatory” (Zimmerman 2015: 19-20). Furthermore, in Zimmerman's view, games are a powerful vehicle for literacy in the new playful culture. This transdisciplinary literacy allows us to analyze, think about, and transform systems. In this sense, games can promote systemic thinking, a prerequisite for addressing the problems posed by the complexity of the contemporary world.

Riccardo Fassone (2024) proposes a theory about play that is closely connected to spectatorship. The author suggests conceiving of play as a “smell that inevitably spreads, carried by the air”.⁴ Play thus becomes a “situation” in which we are involved more often than we think: viewers of a video game stream on Twitch or fans in the stands of a *Serie A* stadium are still players, as they are “participants in the creation of a playful situation”.⁵ This theory of playfulness reformulates what we commonly consider to be play, expanding the boundaries of play culture to all forms of spectatorship connected to some form of game – structured play – or *ludus* – playful spectacle and entertainment performance. Following this line of thought, we can focus on the extent to which playful elements are spreading in contemporary societies.

In summary, games, understood as actions and situations, and ludification, understood as a cultural process, are becoming increasingly prevalent in advanced capitalist Western societies.

3 Mediated culture, mediatization and the postmedial condition

In addition to the process of ludification, contemporary culture is undergoing another transformative trajectory: that of progressive mediatization. Studies on the media, their logic, and their effects on society have produced a vast and varied body of literature. In the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan (2010) proposed that the media system should be viewed as an ecological environment in which communities' function. According to

2. The video game *Space Invaders*, developed by Tomohiro Nishikado in 1978, is considered the first significant element of the new paradigm (2020: 41-49).

3. “Quick-truth is truth that has been redesigned to be aerodynamic in order to reach the surface of the world; that is, in order to be easily understood and catch people's attention. What it loses in precision and exactitude, it gains in brevity and speed” (2020: 278).

4. Author's translation. Original text: “odore che inevitabilmente si spande, portato dall'aria”.

5. Author's translation. Original text: “partecipanti alla creazione di una situazione ludica”.

this perspective, individual media forms act as extensions of human senses, thereby augmenting, altering, and transforming the potential for perception and action among individuals and societies alike. If “the medium is the message”, as his famous adage states, the various media must be studied according to their intrinsic form, as this inevitably determines – and informs – the content conveyed.

An important development in media theory has been the focus on the concept of “media logic” (Altheide and Snow 1979). This framework examines the organizational, technological, and aesthetic rules that structure media production. It posits that media utilize a specific frame of reference, particularly in news, which shapes the interpretation of social affairs. Crucially, this logic prioritizes the “form” of communication alongside content, suggesting that media formats exert a pervasive cultural influence, effectively becoming a dominant mindset within society itself. Although powerful and influential, media logic has been the subject of debate and controversy due to its vagueness and broad applicability (Couldry 2008). However, this idea has contributed to the development of the concept of mediatization, a historical-cultural “meta-process” (Krotz 2007) that places mediated communication practices – technologies, textual formats, and media institutions – as fundamental regulatory elements of social, cultural, and political dynamics. This process began well before the advent of mass media, evolving over time and influencing conditions of visibility and power structures. Knut Lundby emphasizes that mediatization produces lasting changes in the social or political space, considering it a widespread historical process rather than an isolated occurrence (Lundby 2009; 2014).

The concept of media logic, on the other hand, has been further developed by other authors who have emphasized that the media are not simply neutral channels, but have structural and practical rules that impact the functioning of various social spheres. Stig Hjarvard (2013) highlights the dual nature of the mediatization process: on the one hand, the media acquire an autonomous institutional position and, on the other, they become integrated into the daily activities of organizations such as politics, religion, or education. This dual process helps to explain why institutions modify procedures, actors, and legitimation strategies, orienting them towards newsworthiness, spectacle, and consensus management.

Andreas Hepp introduces the notion of “cultures of mediatization”, underscoring the creation of cultural worlds structured by the media. The text asks how to describe the functioning of communication networks as a whole in a media-driven world. To answer this question, the author proposes the concept of “communicative figurations” (Hepp 2013: 92-97). Figurations are described as networks of individuals who constitute a social entity through mutual interaction. The concept of communicative figurations can be applied to both small groups and large societies, describing the patterns of interdependence that unite them. The author suggests that communicative figurations are patterns of communicative interconnection processes. A single communication network constitutes a specific figuration, but it is more interesting to consider how different communication networks interconnect within a mediatized world.

Addressing the culmination of these pervasive transformations, Ruggero Eugeni advances the theory of the “postmedia condition,” arguing that the process of mediatization has reached a stage where media no longer function as distinct, stable categories but instead dissolve into everyday social, economic, and technical practices (2015). This vaporization of the media implies that their logic has become naturalized and invisible, shifting from a centralized empire of mass communication to an ambient environment where the distinction between channel and practice collapses. In this condition, media do not merely transmit content but fundamentally reconstitute subjectivity, social relations, and the experience of space and time, creating an “amodern” reality where mediation is the pervasive, constitutive fabric of daily life rather than a separate sphere of influence.

In the case studies analyzed below, we will evaluate how communication is shaped by the interaction of different communicative configurations – consisting of television studios, journalistic teams, and social networks – within the mediatized world of Italian television journalism. Drawing on visual culture studies and expanding upon the media system’s evolution outlined above, we will analyze the nature of television imagery to understand how it shapes and reflects cultural, societal, and power dynamics.

4 Mediatized conflicts: diffused war, logistics of perception, and simulacra

The process of mediatization of society and culture also involves the perception, representation, and communication of armed conflicts. Cinema, as an essential art form of the twentieth century, has contributed significantly to this process. The rational organization of images proposed by cinema has provided an orderly view of war (Alonge 2001).

If cinema has represented and continues to represent war, contemporary conflicts are increasingly mediatized. In this scenario, the media no longer represent a neutral sphere of representation; they actively stage and construct conflict (Cottle 2006: 9). By interacting with the system of perception and vision, the media actively participate in war within its representational arena. The integration of media apparatuses within the war machine has taken on such significance that today the planning, management, and consequences of war are conceived within the perimeter of media ecology (Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2010: 5).

Over the last three decades, the media's influence on war and conflict has undergone a profound evolution, which can be divided into several phases. The 1990s marked the end of the broadcast-era war, in which traditional media (press, radio, TV) controlled the narrative and governments exercised a certain degree of control over information about conflicts. The beginning of the new millennium marked the advent of "diffused war", triggered by the spread of the Internet and the "war on terror" (Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2010: 15-19). This new phase is characterized by the proliferation of digital content, which has made war more accessible, recordable, and shareable. A more widespread and fragmented mediatization is now underway, challenging the traditional control of the media and governments over the narrative. The abundance of information, the lack of verifiable sources, and general uncertainty have created a chaotic environment in which the power position of traditional media has been challenged. War has become a more complex phenomenon, difficult to understand and report on amid a fragmented, uncontrollable media ecosystem.

Further research has sought to highlight how, after the broadcast war and the diffused war, we have entered a new phase called "arrested war", in which mainstream media – after being overwhelmed by the flood of information, images, and news that exploded in the digital environment – have regained a privileged position in the media ecology, appropriating and incorporating the methods and dynamics of non-linear and interactive media typical of the diffused war (Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2015). Although these periodizations are useful for navigating the historical landscape of the mediatization of conflicts, it should be noted that the characteristics of each phase constantly overlap and mix in the media ecology.

A recently published volume edited by Samuel Antichi, Lorenzo Donghi, and Giuseppe Previtali examines the transformation of the representation of war in the contemporary era (2025). The authors consider the current media landscape to be unprecedented, in which war events are intrinsically linked to the use of new technologies – such as drones, helmet-mounted cameras, and sensors – and viral channels such as TikTok and Reddit. To decipher these complex audiovisual remediations, the introduction to the text proposes a historical-theoretical framework based on image theory and visual studies, articulating the investigation along three axes: images, gazes, and rhetoric. The reflection on images analyzes their formal and qualitative definition as a vehicle for specific visual policies, while the analysis of gazes focuses on the "how" of vision, highlighting the shift from a human perspective to an artificial and automated gaze, which necessarily implies a point of view that is not only perceptual, but also ideological and political. Finally, the theme of rhetoric explores the growth of amateur photojournalism: thanks to the portability of devices, more and more citizens are risking their lives to document conflicts, affirming a new aesthetic that subordinates formal beauty to the power of direct testimony. This volume, therefore, offers essential tools for interpreting the physiognomy and functions of war images in a global and remediated media landscape.

Media management in relation to military operations is a strategic element in influencing public opinion by instilling a certain view of events. But the relationship between media and war goes beyond propaganda aimed at the civilian population. The enhanced perception capabilities provided by the media are fundamental to effective warfare. The ability to perceive and gather information has always been a strategic element of war.⁶

6. The realm of perception has always been affected by the dynamics of war, as shown by Sun Tzu's references to war as based on

The development, advancement, and use of sophisticated information and communication technologies are among the objectives of military institutions. Paul Virilio has developed this idea in depth in several texts, highlighting that:

In the age of “generalised simulation” of military missions (ground, navy or air) we thus land smack bang in the middle of the age of total dissimulation – a war of images and sounds, tending to take over from the missile war of the nuclear deterrence arsenal (1995: 69).

Virilio also coined the concept of the “logistics of perception” to designate the importance of organizing the flow of sensory information in warfare:

alongside the “war machine”, there has always existed an ocular (and later optical and electro-optical) “watching machine” capable of providing soldiers, and particularly commanders, with a visual perspective on the military action under way. From the original watch-tower through the anchored balloon to the reconnaissance aircraft and remote-sensing satellites, one and the same function has been indefinitely repeated, the eye’s function being the function of a weapon. However great the area of the battlefield, it is necessary to have the fastest possible access to pictures of the enemy’s forces and reserves. Seeing and foreseeing therefore tend to merge so closely that the actual can no longer be distinguished from the potential. (2009: 4)

Following this line of thinking, war is fought on two fronts: the physical battlefield and the representation of the theatre of war configured from the perceptual information gathered. The exponential growth of technology and its applications in digital media open new horizons in the capacity to store, process, and represent information. Pondering the extraordinary technological advances of recent decades, we can consider Baudrillard’s hypothesis to be fulfilled: *techné* is capable of achieving “a mimesis which replaces a natural world with an intelligible artificial one” (2000: 57). This condition leads to the concept of ‘simulacrum’, which designates a semiotic form that is a copy without an original, a representation that does not refer to a real referent. The final point of this process is constituted by the “emancipation of the sign”: “remove this ‘archaic’ obligation to designate something and it finally becomes free, indifferent and totally indeterminate, in the structural or combinatory play which succeeds the previous rule of determinate equivalence” (2017: 29).

The free play of signs is maximized by the combinatorial potential of digital technologies, which can create extremely accurate virtual simulations. The scope of virtual simulacra also extends to the domain of armed conflict: “War has not escaped this virtualisation which is like a surgical operation, the aim of which is to present a face-lifted war, the cosmetically treated spectre of its death, and its even more deceptive televisual subterfuge” (Baudrillard 2008: 28). When Baudrillard wrote in 1991 that “the Gulf War did not take place”, it was not to deny the reality of the massacres and the concreteness of the bombs, but to affirm that the mediatization of events makes them exist in social reality primarily as simulations.

This phenomenon finds its institutional expression within what James Der Derian has mapped as the emerging “military-industrial-media-entertainment network”, where the boundaries between warfare, media production, and entertainment technologies increasingly blur (Der Derian 2009). The seamless integration of military simulation technologies with entertainment platforms – from first-person shooter games to drone operator interfaces – demonstrates how virtual warfare has become embedded within a broader economic and cultural apparatus that simultaneously trains soldiers, shapes public perception, and generates profit through the commodification of conflict (Crogan 2011). This complex represents a structural framework through which the virtualization of war identified by Baudrillard is not merely a philosophical condition but an operational reality sustained by institutional collaborations between defense contractors, media corporations, and entertainment industries.

deception and by Tacitus’s remarks on the fierce Germanic peoples: “in all battles, the eyes are the first to be defeated” (author’s translation; original text: “in tutte le battaglie per primi sono sconfitti gli occhi”; Tacitus 1991: 57).

5 Infotainment, sensationalism, and the softening of journalism

As previously discussed, cultural change in contemporary Western societies is characterized by the convergence of two major trends: ludification and mediatization. Ludification refers to the progressive permeation of play and entertainment into the cultural sphere, while mediatization reflects the exponential growth of media influence across virtually all domains of social life. These two processes converge in the emergence of infotainment, a term combining information and entertainment that first appeared in the late 1980s (Thussu 2007). This hybrid phenomenon is not merely an evolution of traditional television formats, but rather an indicator of a broader transformation in communication and cultural models, in which the boundaries between journalism and other social systems – such as public relations, economics, and marketing – are progressively blurring (Otto et al. 2017).

Television infotainment, in fact, involves a significant redefinition of the relationship between the public and information, with consequences that extend far beyond the viewer's simple pleasure. One of the most notable effects is the progressive marginalization of hard news – that is, serious and complex news reporting – in favor of a lighter and more accessible style of presentation (Baum 2006). Issues of global importance, such as war, are treated by mainstream journalism through narrative modes and communication techniques typical of infotainment, with a particular focus on the emotional and narrative aspects at the expense of analytical depth and contextual complexity.

This journalistic approach tends to result in sensationalism, which we can understand as a way of packaging news by emphasizing elements capable of provoking effects on the human sensory apparatus (Uribe and Gunter 2007). Sensationalist news can stimulate the emotional sphere of viewers (Bas and Grabe 2015), an increasingly necessary element in the digital media ecosystem that follows market logics, in which information operators compete for public attention (Webster 2014). The dominant economic model of television production in the contemporary era is linked to advertising revenue: this generates a model of news production focused on the audience, no longer considered as a group of citizens to be informed but as consumers who want to be entertained (Boukes 2019). Observing the evolution of journalistic communication and news production methods, Vargas Llosa's words in *Notes on the Death of Culture* seem significant:

Without any set intention, journalism today, following the dominant cultural mandate, seeks to offer information in an entertaining or amusing fashion, with the inevitable result that, through this subtle deformation of its traditional objectives, the press today has become light, pleasant, superficial and entertaining. And, in extreme cases, if there is not enough information of this sort around, then it can be manufactured (2016: 45).

The following analysis of case studies will reveal how widespread this trend is in prime-time programming on Italian television channels, both private and public, contributing to the shaping of an information culture increasingly oriented towards entertainment and immediate accessibility, in which the verification of sources succumbs to sensationalism, aimed at capturing the viewer's attention. This process risks having significant implications for civic awareness and citizens' ability to interpret and address the challenges of the contemporary world.

6 Case studies: wargames misrepresented in Italian journalism

This case study investigation focuses on the circulation of images taken from video and analogue games that are misused or inaccurately presented by some television programs, ultimately producing sensationalist forms of communication. The case studies examined consist of analyses of excerpts from several television programs belonging to the talk show genre, *Porta a porta* (Rai1), and journalistic, cultural, and current affairs programs – *Controcorrente* (Rete4), *Atlantide*, and *Piazzapulita* (La7). These images from games emerged during media coverage of certain war scenarios.

6.1 The killing of Qasem Soleimani

The first case concerns the tense period between the United States and Iran from the end of 2019 to the beginning of 2020. A series of attacks and retaliations between Hezbollah⁷ militias and the US military in late December 2019 exacerbated relations between the two states (Reuters 2019). This escalation culminated, on the morning of January 3, 2020, in the killing of Qasem Soleimani (head of the Quds Force) and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (prominent commander of the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces/PMF) in an air strike ordered by the Trump administration (Borger 2020).

On the evening of January 8, 2020, the program *Atlantide*, hosted by journalist Andrea Purgatori and broadcast on La7, aired a special report on the tense situation in the Middle East following the killing of Soleimani and Mahdi al-Muhandis. At the beginning of the episode, Purgatori aired a report: a video showing the air strike that killed Soleimani. The images are black and white, grainy, with an overlay interface showing a crosshair. Purgatori remarks: "It looks a lot like a video game, but it's not a video game."⁸

The aerial view shows a convoy of vehicles moving along a road in a semi-desert environment. At a certain point, the operator opens fire and a series of artillery strikes hit the convoy. Some vehicles explode, while small white figures moving away from the impact zone suggest that several individuals are attempting to flee. Purgatori comments on the footage live, repeatedly inviting viewers to "look", thereby emphasizing the visual and emotional engagement of the audience. At the end of the sequence, as the white figures are seen lying on the ground after the drone strikes, he states: "The drone is unforgiving, the operation is practically over. Those white spots you see are unfortunately burning bodies."⁹

The presenter's proxemics and language, and, above all, the spectacular nature of the video images shown on the full screen, indicate the use of sensationalist journalistic methods and techniques.

The broadcast proceeds with studio guests discussing the event, but something feels off. The images displayed are actually preview videos of a video game called AC-130 GUNSHIP SIMULATOR, created by the independent developer Byte Conveyor Studios.¹⁰ The game, initially scheduled for release in 2015, was never launched, but the video presented by Atlantide remains accessible and can still be seen on the development company's YouTube channel.¹¹

Numerous people spotted the error, sparking a wave of protests on Twitter. Among the many who pointed out the oversight was journalist Paolo Attivissimo, to whom Andrea Purgatori replied in a tweet on January 9: "Dear Paolo, you are right. Of course, it's a video game, I knew that, but technically, it was a perfect demonstration of how a drone strikes. I'm the one who expressed myself terribly badly. Thank you for your attention"¹² (Purgatori 2020).

6.2 The siege of the Azovstal steelworks

Perhaps the most striking example of these misrepresentations involves a series of incidents concerning the media coverage of the siege of the Azovstal steelworks in Mariupol by Russian forces. On 24 February 2022, Russia launched a large-scale invasion of Ukraine, an event that fits within the ongoing conflict since 2014, marked by Russia's annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbass. The 2022 escalation was preceded by Russian President Vladimir Putin's recognition on 21 February of the independence of the self-proclaimed

7. Hezbollah is a Shiite Islamist and anti-Zionist Lebanese paramilitary organization close to Iran.

8. Author's translation. Original text: "somiglia molto a un videogioco ma non è un videogioco". *Atlantide Special – Andrea Purgatori hosts*, "A un passo dalla guerra", [TV programme], La7, 9 January 2020, <https://www.la7.it/atlantide/rivedila7/speciale-atlantide-andrea-purgatori-conduce-a-un-passo-dalla-guerra-09-01-2020-301006> (last accessed 10-03-2026). Images appear from approximately 00:06:45.

9. Author's translation. Original text: "il drone non perdona, ecco l'operazione è praticamente conclusa, quelle macchie di colore bianco che vedete sono purtroppo dei corpi che bruciano".

10. "Byte Conveyor Studios". <http://www.byteconveyor.com/>. (last accessed 10-03-2026).

11. "AC-130 Gunship Simulator – Convoy Engagement", [online video], YouTube, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cIL9yZSbcE0> (last accessed 10-03-2026).

12. Author's translation. Original text cited in the bibliography.



Fig. 1. – Image from the episode *Speciale Atlantide* - Andrea Purgatori hosts: *A un passo dalla guerra* aired on January 8, 2020, on La7.

separatist republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, authorising the deployment of troops “for peacekeeping” (Osborn 2022). The invasion has been condemned by numerous governments and international organisations as a violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and international law.

The Russia-Ukraine war is characterized by a fierce information conflict, with both sides employing propaganda and psychological operations to sway public opinion, demoralise their adversaries, and justify their actions (Helmus and Holynska 2024). In particular, Russia has been noted for using propaganda and disinformation techniques during military operations to control the narrative on social media and digital platforms (Geissler et al. 2023). Amidst this overload of information, it becomes challenging to distinguish between genuine and false news, increasing the risk of mistakes.

The siege of the Azovstal steelworks, which concluded with the surrender of Ukrainian soldiers in mid-May 2022, represents the culmination of the long and devastating battle for the city, which occurred as part of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Mariupol, strategically situated on the Sea of Azov and vital for the land connection between Russia, Crimea, and the Donbass, was a key target for Moscow, aiming to establish a land corridor in southeastern Ukraine. The Azovstal steelworks, with its extensive industrial complex and network of bunkers and tunnels, became the city’s final stronghold of resistance, accommodating regular troops, volunteers, and civilians alike. Following international pressure and mediation, evacuations of vulnerable civilians were carried out. Ultimately, between 16 and 20 May 2022, the remaining Ukrainian fighters surrendered, marking the complete capture of the complex by Russian forces (Sauer and Beaumont 2022). The siege of Azovstal became a symbol of Ukrainian resistance and the profound suffering endured by the civilian population. The siege garnered significant media attention, with several Italian news programmes reporting on the story.

Three different Italian television programs emphasized this phase of the conflict in particular: *Controcorrente* (episode of April 20, 2022), *Piazzapulita*, and *Porta a Porta* (both episodes of April 21, 2022). All three broadcasts displayed the same image – a graphic representation of an underground complex – presented as a map of the Azovstal steelworks.

During the episode of *Controcorrente*¹³ the image in question appears at the beginning of the episode on a screen behind host Veronica Gentili, who introduces the episode's theme: the Battle of Mariupol and the siege of the Azovstal steelworks, a strategic hub of the conflict. The host explains that, despite the ultimatum issued by Russian forces, Ukrainian troops – together with civilians – are continuing to resist while barricaded inside the steelworks. After the opening theme, and a report featuring images of civilians inside the steelworks and Ukrainian soldiers surrendering to Russian troops, the same image appears on the same screen in a graphic that also features the text “Steel Apocalypse.”¹⁴



Fig. 2. – Image from the program *Controcorrente*, showing the siege of the Azovstal steelworks, broadcast on April 20, 2022.

At minute 39:25, the host points to the image on the screen, stating that “we see the layers of these steelworks, where they [the Ukrainian civilians and soldiers inside the steelworks] are hidden.” The frame stays in the background of the television studio for nearly an hour (until about 52 minutes into the broadcast), while discussions between the studio guests and live feeds from the front are shown.

On April 21, 2022, the day after the episode of *Controcorrente*, the program *Porta a Porta*,¹⁵ hosted by Bruno Vespa, airs in prime time on Rai 1. After a cover featuring videos from the war zone, with images of civilian suffering and the destructive power of weapons, Vespa introduces the studio guests. In the background of the television studio is a photo of Russian President Vladimir Putin, with the text: “Mariupol taken, not the steel mill.” To introduce the topic, the host states, “Let’s try to understand what this legendary steel mill is. Our graphic designers have animated, let’s say, the graphic design base from *Il Messaggero*”¹⁶ [the national newspaper based in Rome]. At this point, the images begin to show a vertical pan of the same image we also saw in the background of *Controcorrente*. Vespa continues: “You see, this is a city: the monitoring station, the

13. *Controcorrente*, “Episode of 20 April 2022”, [TV programme], Rete 4, 20 April 2022, https://mediasetinfinity.mediaset.it/video/controcorrente/mercoledì-20-aprile-2130_F311547501001601 (last accessed 10-03-2026). Images appear from approximately 00:01:43.

14. Author’s translation. Original text: “Apocalisse d’acciaio”.

15. *Porta a Porta*, “Episode of 21 April 2022”, [TV programme], Rai 1, 21 April 2022, <https://www.raipaly.it/video/2022/04/Porta-a-Porta-11e06f4f-58a8-4ea2-bf8c-83f67ed7d68c.html> (last accessed 10-03-2026). Images appear from approximately 00:03:00.

16. Author’s translation. Original text: “cerchiamo di capire che cosa questa mitica acciaieria. I nostri grafici hanno movimentato diciamo una base di grafica del *Messaggero*”.

infirmary and the research, even the crops, experimental crops obviously...”¹⁷ and goes on to list the names of the various areas of the map present on the graphic shown.

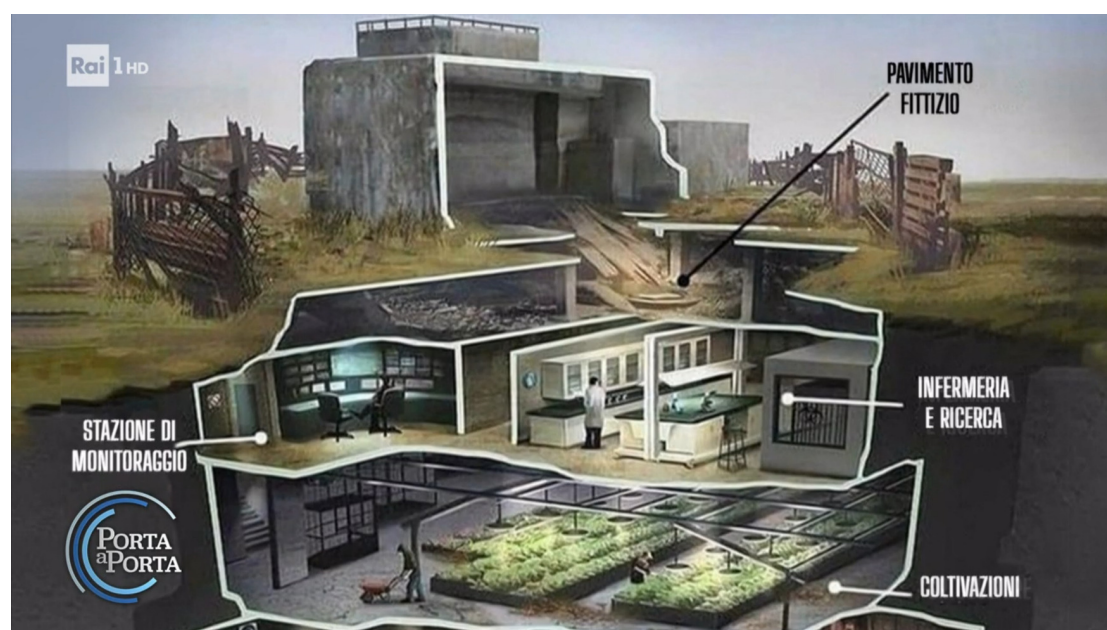


Fig. 3. – Frame from the program *Porta a Porta* focusing on the siege of the Azovstal steelworks, aired on April 21, 2022.

The map is shown in its entirety, and the various areas that make up the underground structure are listed. The accessibility, communicative effectiveness, and evocative power of the image are exploited to sensationalistic effect.

That same evening, *Piazzapulita*¹⁸ also aired on La7. The program, hosted by Corrado Formigli, opens with a report showing the devastation in Mariupol and the civilians' desperation. After the report, the host begins speaking with guests in the studio and then shows the same image that had also been broadcast on *Controcorrente* and *Porta a Porta*. The map is accompanied by various captions, above which stands the text: "Azovstal Steelworks in Mariupol,"¹⁹ and at the bottom, Russian political scientist Sergei Markov is cited as the source. Formigli continues: "This is a section of the Azovstal Steelworks. Look at how many floors there are, there is the engine room, the maintenance room, there is a residential area, a refreshment area, there were even greenhouses for, let's say, self-sufficiency [...]"²⁰

The map is briefly discussed with journalist Cecilia Sala in the studio, and emphasis is placed on its impregnable nature. Here too, the image illustrates the supposed structure of the steelworks, which is dramatized through sensationalized communication. Using an easy-to-read, graphically appealing visual aid can be an effective way to emotionally engage viewers.

17. Author's translation. Original text: "vedete questa è una città: la stazione di monitoraggio, l'infermeria e la ricerca, addirittura le coltivazioni, coltivazioni sperimentali evidentemente..."

18. *Piazzapulita*, "Episode of 21 April 2022", [TV programme], La7, 21 April 2022, <https://www.la7.it/piazzapulita/rivedila7/piazzapulita-puntata-del-2142022-22-04-2022-435075> (last accessed 10-03-2026). Images appear from approximately 00:17:00.

19. Author's translation. Original text: "Acciaieria Azovstal di Mariupol".

20. Author's translation. Original text: "questa qui è una sezione dell'acciaieria Azovstal, guardate quanti piani ci sono, c'è la sala macchine, la sala manutenzione, c'è un'area residenziale, un'area di ristoro, c'erano addirittura le serre per, diciamo, l'autosufficienza..."

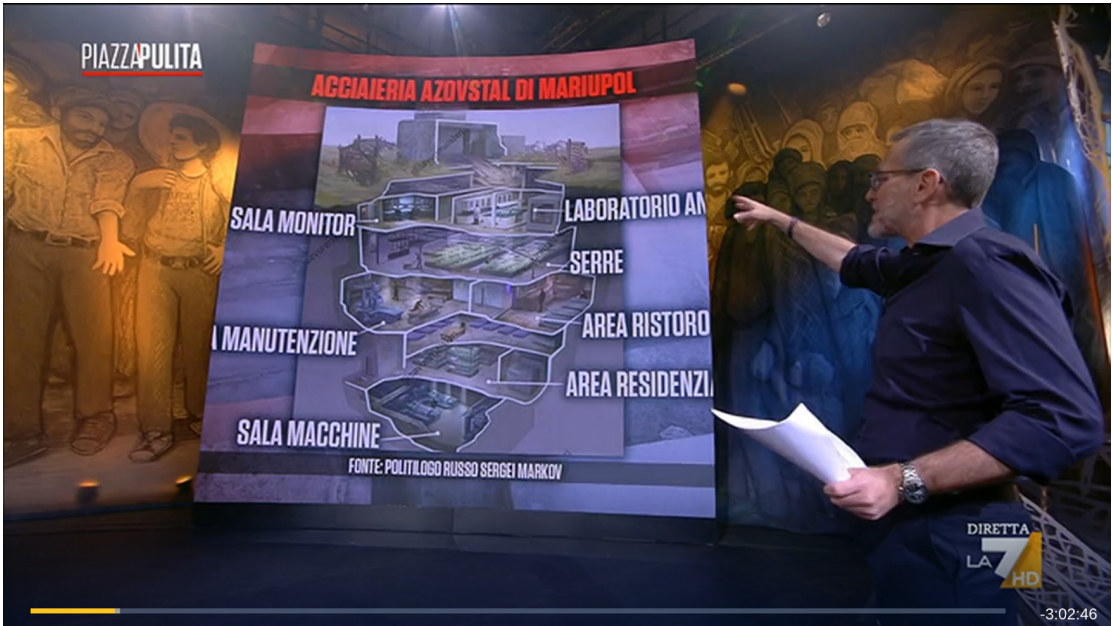
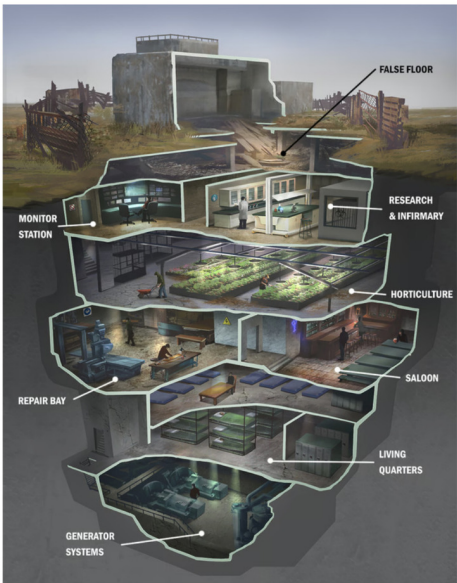


Fig. 4. – Image from the program *Piazzapulita* focusing on the siege of the Azovstal steelworks, aired on April 21, 2022.

BENEATH THE SURFACE

Beneath the crumbling cities, a vast network of subterranean pathways exists. These vast underground chambers are vital to the Brood's survival. With these tunnels, The Brood emerged to feed on mankind after the great fall. It is in these same tunnels they continue to thrive unmolested. Many of the nomadic Unification kill teams have attempted to cleanse these zones but all have been unsuccessful, for the network beneath the surface is vast.



Our thanks for your support!

Backers 126 Estimated delivery Dec 2016

Limited quantity
None left

Details Pledge \$1

Miniature Collector- Blackout core game miniatures + All unlocked stretch goal miniatures! US Shipping is included! This is a "miniatures only" reward and does not include the contents needed to play the game.

Backers 22 Ships to Anywhere in the world

Estimated delivery Dec 2016

Details Pledge \$60

Blackout Early Bird 1- Blackout core game + All unlocked stretch goals! US Shipping is included!

Backers 505 Ships to Anywhere in the world

Estimated delivery Limited quantity

Pledge \$90

Fig. 5. – The original illustration from the game *Blackout: Journey into Darkness*, available on the Kickstarter platform.

The image broadcast by the three programs mentioned above, as will soon be discovered, actually comes from a map in the board game *Blackout: Journey into Darkness*,²¹ which was launched on the Kickstarter crowd-funding platform in October 2015. On April 22, 2022, the day after the broadcast, the official *Piazzapulita* account published a correction on Twitter. The post read: “Last night we also made the mistake of broadcasting this graphic referring to the Azovstal steelworks. This is not the case. We apologize to our viewers. Thanks to whoever pointed it out to us! #piazzapulita”²² (*Piazzapulita* - La7 2022).

It is surprising that three different news programmes, citing various sources, show the same inaccurate image that propagates false news. Since the image went viral on Twitter in the days leading up to the broadcast of these programmes (Di Niro 2022), it is possible to explain this phenomenon through agenda-setting theory from an intermedial perspective, whereby various information actors influence one another within the same information system (Stern et al. 2020).

7 Conclusions

This study highlights a critical juncture in the evolution of media culture, where the ludification of information and the mediatization of reality have merged to reshape public understanding of conflict, especially through the lens of Italian television journalism. Examining the processes of ludification and mediatization present in our culture helps us better understand contemporary communication methods, which are increasingly focused on infotainment. The interaction of communicative figurations (Hepp 2013) within information networks creates a media ecology where news verification and fidelity to truth often seem secondary to capturing and maintaining viewers' attention. The expansion of digital platforms and game aesthetics has not only expanded the global reach of infotainment but has also entrenched a hyperreal landscape where simulations and spectacle frequently overshadow empirical truth:

It is useless to ask if it is the loss of communication that produces this escalation in the simulacrum, or whether it is the simulacrum that is there first for dissuasive ends, to short-circuit in advance any possibility of communication (precession of the model that calls an end to the real). Useless to ask which is the first term, there is none, it is a circular process—that of simulation, that of the hyperreal. The hyperreality of communication and of meaning. More real than the real, that is how the real is abolished (Baudrillard 1994: 80-81).

However, this is not a deterministic process. Media producers are not the sole architects of meaning; audiences also play a dynamic role in negotiating, resisting, or co-creating these narratives. The case of *Piazzapulita* demonstrates how media self-correction is possible – yet its effectiveness depends on the public's capacity to distinguish fact from fabrication. This underscores a significant gap in current scholarship: while much discussion focuses on production practices, the agency of viewers remains underexplored. Do members of the public passively engage with infotainment content, or do they employ their critical literacy to deconstruct its mechanisms? Are they able to recognise the ideological underpinnings of simulations, or do they confuse perceptual realism with factual accuracy? Future research should prioritise empirical studies on public reception. Although this analysis focuses on Italy – a country where political polarisation and media sensationalism intersect uniquely – the phenomenon reflects a broader, transnational shift in how cultural narratives are constructed and consumed.

In conclusion, this research places Italian television journalism within a cultural paradigm shift, in which the media's role as cultural arbiters is increasingly compromised by the seductive logic of ludification. The blurring of reality and simulation not only redefines the way conflict is perceived, but also threatens to erode the very foundations of collective truth. Future research will need to address the long-term social impacts of this hyperreal media landscape, while promoting a public sphere equipped with the analytical tools necessary to

21. “Blackout: Journey into Darkness”, [board game], Kickstarter campaign, 15 April 2018, <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1336904045/blackout-journey-into-darkness-0> (last accessed 10-03-2026). The map is also visible on: BoardGameGeek, “Blackout: Journey into Darkness”, 22 October 2015, <https://boardgamegeek.com/image/2721741/blackout-journey-into-darkness> (last accessed 10-03-2026).

22. Author's translation. Original text cited in the bibliography.

navigate it. As the boundary between simulation and reality thins, the imperative to cultivate media literacy and critical thinking is no longer optional, but existential.

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