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BAUDRILLARD AND RETHINKING THE MODERN WESTERN-CIV  
COURSE: THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF WAR IN AN ERA OF NEW MEDIA,  
NEOLIBERALISM, AND VIRTUAL WARFARE

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A university commitment to the liberal arts can take many forms, but more often than not it attempts to ensure that all students, regardless of direction or professed major, become educated in some form about the defining events of Western Civilization. There are many specialized History and Global Studies courses that educate students about countless aspects of the human experience past and present. Yet in the broader survey-style Western Civilization (Civ) courses that attempt to cover the breadth of history of the modern West, wars tend to be central, though not exclusive, loci in understanding major turning points in the contemporary human experience. This traditionally has been done with good reason; the history of violent human conflict between nation-states has produced winners and losers with enormous outcomes for multitudinous actors. There are also increasing bodies of academic literature dedicated to conflict by and between non-state actors in the more distant past as well as the temporally closer post-Cold War global order. While recognizing that historical cause and effect is subjective and multifaceted, the pedagogy of war is nonetheless critically important to understanding the ideas people fought and died for that have brought us to the world we inhabit today.

However, I'm increasingly convinced that the way war is conceptualized and taught to students is becoming incompatible with "war" for our current screenified post-9/11 generation. There needs to be room to examine if the use of the procession of images as war, which become more available and accessible as we and the classroom experience move temporally closer to the present, is actually "educating" students about war at all. This article theorizes that the education students receive in human conflict past has gradually become discordant with how they conceptualize human conflict in the present. Modern conflict is taught without recognizing a historical break in the realities of conflict that have coincided with enormous developments in new media technologies. In short, a generation of college students deserves a new educational theorization of the war-media nexus when the United States has technically been, via the "Global War on Terror" (GWOt), in a state of perpetual, asymmetrical "war" for the entirety of their lifetime.

While today's college students grew up under an outgoing president known for setting a relatively progressive social tone at home, his militarist actions abroad tell a different story. President Barack Obama was elected in 2008 on a wave of anti-war sentiment from a nation reeling from an unnecessary invasion of Iraq. Yet, by 2016 writers had noted, "As Barack Obama prepares to

vacate the Oval Office after two terms, he has earned an odd distinction: The U.S. has been at war every day of his tenure, a record unmatched in American history.”<sup>1</sup> Western Civ invariably involves learning about the numerous asymmetrical battles between Western powers and indigenous resistance, but these wars historically have been fought by humans within some physical proximity of each other and had a beginning and an end. Here in the U.S., institutions of higher education are educating a post-9/11 age group that will be the first generation to enter college while the United States has always been at war, with no end in sight. For these students, symmetrical war constrained by temporality and having root in historicity is a fading relic of a bygone past as they have been alive during an endless present of asymmetrical warfare with a distant unseen enemy. A new understanding of war that is not bookended by history is needed in the college Western Civ classroom.

The present and future of warfare, as understood here in the West, has become the obliteration of a faceless other via screen, with major ramifications for war’s preparation, practice, and study. Modern American war as a lived physical endeavor is exhaustingly practiced, pre-calculated, and then performed via simulation, only to be projected back home as theater spectacle. This characterization of warfare was first articulated by Jean Baudrillard during the First Persian Gulf War and his descriptions of conflict have only intensified as the GWOt continues.<sup>2</sup> Baudrillard’s argument rests on understanding that war changed in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century in response to new media. Whereas hard power, meaning the use of overwhelming force to defeat a relatively seen “other,” was deployed up to and including the major World Wars, what has become perhaps of greater importance in more recent times is the simulation of the ability to project hard power, something Baudrillard predicted in the aftermath of the First Persian Gulf War. War has since passed from the proximal and visceral experience of hard power to the distant simulation of an endless punishing surveillance, something almost ghostly. Since armed conflict is enormously, though not exclusively, responsible for shaping our modern world, I argue for a new war pedagogy in the Western Civ classroom that acknowledges a very recent and very significant historical break from hot war into a form of dead war keeping the world safe for the allies and beneficiaries of Western neoliberalism.

First, I argue that American military objectives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are reflective of 21<sup>st</sup> century neoliberal capital. With no lands left to conquer after emerging triumphant from the Cold War, free market capitalism and its military enablers no longer employ strategies of expansion; they are instead strategies of

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew J. Bacevich, Hamid Dabashi, Paula J. Dobriansky, Hassan Hassan, Kori Schake, and Dominique de Villepin, “Tearing Up the Map: Toward a Post-Obama Foreign Policy,” *Harper’s Magazine* (September 2016): 26.

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

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intensification. I then use Baudrillard’s arguments on why the First Persian Gulf War was anything but a classical “war” to describe how warfare changed in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to reflect overwhelming American/Western dominance and to broadcast this Western might via televised medium in a manner designed to shock and awe audiences at home and future challengers to American hegemony abroad. I analyze when the simulation of overwhelming military superiority became more powerful than physical military superiority itself. I then take up the idea of virtualized war to explain how new media’s ability to simulate overwhelming military superiority ends up changing the way we prepare, conduct, and even understand warfare in the classroom and in a broader societal context.

### AMERICA’S CHANGING WAR OBJECTIVES

American objectives in war have long since passed from representing a global battle on behalf of state actors for liberal democracy *against* fascism, communism, and authoritarianism into a battle *for* globalized neoliberal finance capitalism that is indeed quite willing to tolerate authoritarianism.<sup>3</sup> War fought for elite private profit seemingly prolongs conflict in its temporality and geographical reach. War becomes interminable when its reach is boundless and its conduct becomes one of intensification via punishing 24/7 surveillance.

The college Western Civ classroom must be a place for discussing how the GWOt continues unabated with no end in sight because we’ve entered a historical period in which democracy and public control over military adventures dies, but capitalism and misplaced consumer desire intensifies. Elites controlling U.S., British, & French foreign policy don’t want these wars to end in peaceful, power-sharing liberal democracies because these institutions have already been thoroughly broken at home in the West. Democratic power-sharing and decision-making by the masses has arguably been replaced in the West by institutions of political economy offering an intensified variant of authoritarian capitalism.<sup>4</sup> War has been maximized for profit efficiency, both in how it is conducted and in its ultimate goal.<sup>5</sup> It is too expensive to build functional states friendly to market penetration in some parts of the world; better to keep them at bay with drone warfare, as cheaply and with as few casualties as possible. Why have another World War for liberal capitalist democracy when you can support an insurgency promising pro-Western stability on the cheap and with minimal U.S. casualties? There needs to be a place in any type of Western Civ curriculum to understand how the West has entered a historical break in what war is fought for and with whose interests in mind. What is becoming imperative, though, are new understandings of 20<sup>th</sup> century warfare as established via the medium through

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<sup>3</sup> Bacevich et al., “Tearing Up the Map,” 28.

<sup>4</sup> France’s recent election of Macron does little to convince me that French military intervention in postcolonial Francophone African affairs will cease anytime soon.

<sup>5</sup> P.W. Singer, *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

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which the American public experienced these wars at home, and how this shaped the conduct of wars to come.

It isn't all that controversial when teaching the two World Wars and even the Vietnam War to teach that they had starting and end points. I don't intend to argue that they began and ended on an exact day, but there were a series of events that began and ended with formal declarations. What is unique about the current GWOt, especially as it is presented to students in historical context, is that these are wars where the U.S. is currently involved and yet they may never end because they never actually began. If the 21<sup>st</sup> century American decision to use hard force in these countries never actually commenced with a declaration of war, as it had in previous 20<sup>th</sup> century wars, these wars will never end because they were never actually wars to begin with. What if war has instead become a never-ending series of punitive massacres meant to demonstrate the West's overwhelming technical and cultural superiority? These are the bold questions, with their provocative roots in Baudrillard's philosophies of contemporary media war during the First Persian Gulf War, that are worth revisiting for a deeper analysis in order to understand endless "war" going forward for an incoming classroom generation that has only ever known war as the status quo. Baudrillard's provocations during the First Persian Gulf War are important, for they force educators of Western Civ to consider new media's capacity for shaping the understanding of late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century Western warfare.

#### YOU CAN'T END WHAT NEVER BEGAN

William Merrin's analysis of Baudrillard's *Gulf War* in his *Baudrillard and the Media* is useful for understanding why war is becoming endless.<sup>6</sup> Baudrillard contended that you can't end a war that never began. When the United States had its right to act approved by both Congress and the United Nations in the First Persian Gulf War, and when the U.S. Congress passed the Authorization for the Use of Military Force in the days after 9/11, war transformed from an act that is declared into an endless authorization for pursuing some ill-defined endpoint where total national security is dubiously achieved. Baudrillard was highly suspect about how "the declaration of war" has been replaced with a UN-mandated 'right to war', for this 'right to war' represents 'the disappearance of the symbolic passage to act', and thus of war itself and the distinction of winners and losers."<sup>7</sup> This right to war would ultimately lead to the neoconservative strategy of pre-emptive warfare, where the United States could deem another state a threat and act militarily to neutralize that threat.

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<sup>6</sup> William Merrin, *Baudrillard and the Media: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

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## NOT A WAR BUT A SERIES OF ATROCITIES

Baudrillard also argued that the occurrence of “hot war,” meaning relatively symmetrical forces opposing each other and facing an uncertain outcome, has long been replaced by “dead war” in which war’s outcome going forward is predetermined and thus war is waged by one side as punitive spectacle that, “unlike earlier wars, in which there were political aims either of conquest or domination, what is at stake in this one is war itself: its status, its meaning, its future.”<sup>8</sup> This second argument for understanding endless war is highly dependent upon Baudrillard’s definition of war. Baudrillard contended that 1991’s Gulf War did not take place because the conflict wasn’t a war in any traditional sense but was instead a series of atrocities disguised as warfare.<sup>9</sup> The U.S. used overwhelming asymmetric airpower to completely vaporize Iraqi resistance from afar without symmetrically engaging Iraqi forces. Dozens of miles of Iraqi trenches were simply bulldozed over killing Iraqi soldiers trapped inside, “already *dead in advance* before the American forces they were not worth engaging, only burying.”<sup>10</sup> In so doing, both the Iraqi enemy and any American casualties went almost completely unseen by the American public as well. Since the war was experienced by the majority of the American public via media presentations practically absent of enemy casualties, it is incredibly difficult to say what really happened during the war and what was merely represented via media simulation back home.

By labeling the conflicts between the United States and Iraq “the first world’s third world war versus the third world’s first world war,” Baudrillard predicted an era of endless warfare in which the U.S. and its proxy allies can use overwhelming technological firepower in a show of force so as to deter any dissent to its neoliberal hegemony.<sup>11</sup> In this post-Cold War scenario, U.S. conduct of warfare is overwhelmingly asymmetrical and has been reduced to a predetermined outcome. Even in the Vietnam War, soldiers carrying guns came within physical proximity of a human enemy. I’m not saying that gauzy U.S. objectives, when they exist, of democratic institution building are predetermined or inevitable. Yet to claim that the U.S. honestly faces a similarly overwhelming deadly show of force that threatens American life and limb, matching the scale of destruction that the U.S. inflicted on Iraq, is already known in advance to be impossible. Going forward, American wars are not and will not be fought on a shifting battlefield with an unknown outcome, for this would be a hot war that implied symmetrical use of force. Instead, for Baudrillard, war will not break out “due to war’s entropic heat death since 1945, passing from a ‘hot war’ to a ‘cold’, then a ‘dead war.’”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Baudrillard, *The Gulf War*, 32.

<sup>9</sup> Merrin, *Baudrillard and the Media*, 88.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

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Likewise, the GWoT, in its broadest context, remains a forgotten war with no beginning, because it is difficult to say when it began, and its battles are unknown because it is carried out via screens, drones, and minimal American casualties against an unseen enemy a world away. Applied to warfare, Baudrillard didn't argue that people don't really die in today's conflicts, rather he argued that these aren't wars in the traditional sense of the term because they're no longer symmetrical hot conflict with an undetermined outcome. Because their images are manipulated and simulated in our hyper-fragmented mediascape, it's impossible to say what's really going on. In the current GWoT, with the move away from having American troops on the ground, relatively, to a war fought mainly through unmanned drones supporting proxy forces fighting a hot war on the ground, war has become reimagined from a Westernized perspective that is increasingly virtualized. Much like Baudrillard characterized the First Persian Gulf War, the GWoT is a "preventative deterrent, punitive war" to prove the West's overwhelming power and to domesticate and eliminate the symbolic alterity of the Arabic and Islamic world "other."<sup>13</sup> American war becoming preventative and punitive, especially in the post-9/11 era, is further reinforced through the virtualization of war across society as a whole.

Importantly, media manipulation of distant audiences is not an entirely new phenomenon. Western audiences were manipulated on a mass scale in previous 20<sup>th</sup> century conflicts via film and print propaganda directed from politicians, to be sure. Propagandistic manipulation of the war effort by governments is a long American tradition, from WWI through World War II, Vietnam, and right on through the First Persian Gulf War. The Committee on Public Information (CPI) during WWI was notorious for pushing stories to newspapers and other media outlets that censored negative accounts of the war and misled the public that victory was assured.<sup>14</sup> The U.S. government actually made money for the WWI war effort off of CPI publications and films.<sup>15</sup> Yet while the images circulated by the CPI had a real-world referent on the other side of the Atlantic, there was time that passed between a battle and the effort needed by CPI to distort the battle's events that were occurring across the ocean from an American audience. Today's events in Syria, for example, are distorted instantaneously and any semblance of an historical act is obliterated in the process. Any fear that the American public felt about the possibility of a very real defeat in WWI was assuaged by propaganda that was spoken, written, and broadcast. Today's American public has little to physically fear in actual battlefield defeat so they are instead whipped up into a mediated fearful paralysis by a corporatized, deregulated, instantaneous media that disregards the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas J. Fleming, *Illusion of Victory: America in World War I* (New York: Basic Books. 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Christopher B. Daly, "How Woodrow Wilson's War-Time Propaganda Machine Changed American Journalism," *Scroll.in*, May 4, 2017, <https://scroll.in/article/835974/>.

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asymmetry of conflict with North Korea or ISIS and celebrates the beauty of replayed and simulated images of American force that come to stand in for any real-world referent.<sup>16</sup>

### VIRTUALIZED WAR

New media continues to fundamentally alter the way war is understood in American society and, as a result, how the military even prepares for war. To give just one example, video game technology and film are new rhetorics, simulations, and versions of contemporary war, all competing with each other in their representations of what happened and is happening. They seduce us into reconceptualizing the scale and form of what humans associate with war and what actions they take to conduct war. Knowledge of WWII for the next generation of college students is much more likely to come from the film *Saving Private Ryan* than it is from a textbook. In fact, *Saving Private Ryan* the film is likely to be dated as *the* source for what happened at Normandy in the very new future as a new *Call of Duty*-immersive WWII video game is due out in 2017. With the video game, viewers won't be subject to a film director's interpretation of battles and instead can relive and fight the battles themselves in louder and more "immersive" environments. The video game series *Call of Duty* has consistently outsold the top-grossing films of the 2010s through immersing gamers in highly-realistic recreations of battles past and present. These games and films have enormous power in rewriting history and replacing it with a pro-Western narrative that makes the world safe for free market rationality and the Western "democratic" nation-state. They also have another debatably pernicious effect. They have the overwhelming capacity to associate conflict with the screen: that which can be viewed and, increasingly, manipulated by the viewer. War viewed through and conducted via screen becomes more real than actual war to the point that warfare becomes a series of manipulating screen images itself.

The ubiquity and popularity of these virtualized simulations of warfare as entertainment have long convinced the military that they are the future of military training. The military is shifting its physical training of soldiers for physical wars, to virtual training for physical wars. The Department of Defense has invested enormous amounts of money into virtual reality and gaming to simulate conditions soldiers may face in a virtual battlefield.<sup>17</sup> With the move towards drone warfare as the next big means of conducting war, the DoD now virtually trains its soldiers for what are ostensibly virtual wars, where soldiers in bunkers in Nevada control drones via joystick and interpret the movement of friend or foe across the world via screen. In the 2013 book *War Play*, Corey Mead quotes a DoD official developing next-gen war simulators commenting on who is more prepared for war. That DoD official states, "Who would you want

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<sup>16</sup> MSNBC via Street Beat, *Brian Williams Is "Guided By the Beauty of Our Weapons" in Syria Strikes*, April 7, 2017, <https://youtu.be/Q4n3SI81m9w>.

<sup>17</sup> Corey Mead, *War Play* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013).

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if you were suddenly thrown into the middle of Baghdad—the physics professor or the nineteen year-old kid who has been playing video games all his life?”<sup>18</sup> Soldiers feel as though they are prepared for U.S. wars because they grew up playing *Call of Duty*, and virtualized war continues right through their basic training via simulators and virtual reality war games. Preparation for virtualized war is preparation for asymmetrical drone warfare from above against an Afghani farmer with a gun on the ground. War preparation is nothing short of predetermined annihilation from afar and above. It gives the technologically inferior opponent no option other than vaporization from the sky. It is punishment without retribution. It is the perfect form of warfare in a neoliberal age that takes overwhelmingly punitive action against non-state actors who resist the Western imposition of the neoliberal client-state.

#### RAMIFICATIONS FOR WESTERN-CIV TYPE COURSES

In any university culture that is pressured by market forces to emphasize vocational curricula over humanities and liberal arts education, there is a very short time in which college educators of the latter fields have the attention of a classroom of, for example, STEM majors. It is morally imperative to make time for understanding current events and modern wars and the ways they are shaped by new media. Western Civilization courses can conceivably cover the last 500 years of the human experience up to the present. There needs to be a discussion about a remarkable shift in warfare, in only the last 50 or so of those 500 years, where the human risk, relationship, and involvement in hot war has been replaced with a morally distanced screen culture that is more concerned with machine technology and war as film and video game entertainment and less concerned with human violence.

The historical shift to contemporary media war means that we are facing a world in which war ultimately becomes bifurcated between those overwhelmingly here in the West who experience war safely via screen and/or are entertained virtually by it and those primarily in the Global South doomed to eternally suffer from it physically. Certainly hot war needs to be taught in a U.S. Civil War History Course or a course on World War I. However, there needs to be a place in the broader, general Western-Civ type curriculum that talks about the profound shift away from hot war into our present era of dead war via screen. The way war is taught in the Western Civ course that brings us to our present era doesn't take into account that today's students live an era of contemporary media war where war is a screenified non-event obliterating an unseen "other" with a predetermined outcome, a condition that I believe produces a profound indifference to the suffering on the ground by this faceless "other." A reconceptualization of the Western-Civ type course requires that we identify a

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 56.

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new phase in Western history where the screen medium changed the way war was understood and then the way war was carried out.

For many students eager to “get through” a university’s mandated humanities course and enter the marketplace, their college education in History is one of sweeping grand narratives. Three times a week my students may spend 50 minutes learning about the broad ideas, *-isms*, and conflicts that have shaped the early modern West and its conquered lands up to the present; then they leave the classroom to probably take three more STEM or vocational classes later that day and so on for the rest of their undergraduate years. I feel increasingly under pressure to provide a litany of imagery and short films so that students may “relate” to the topics at hand through visual associations. Yet I’m increasingly convinced that the use of historical imagery, whether via a singular image or a film speeding up a series of images so quickly as to create a “moving” narrative, may actually be detrimental to an education in Western Civ.

Western Civ taught via History should be focused on primary sources to reconstruct the past, but I fear that education on subjects temporally closer to “now” may be over-reliant on images. Baudrillard found such a reliance to be problematic. Students watching a film on a historical event may lead the students to claim they “know” what horrors happened in the Battle for Stalingrad, for example, but for Baudrillard, what my students would know would be “only its aestheticized hyperrealization . . . so the real event was even more effectively eclipsed and forgotten.”<sup>19</sup> Students may also claim, after watching an historical film, that at least they are now aware of events that happened. But this too is problematic for Baudrillard. Students may leave the classroom feeling that they are somehow more aware of what has occurred because of images they associate with an event, because somehow they have a new consciousness of events that previously did not exist for them. However, for Baudrillard these viewers of images “are actually *complicit* in the extermination process, with [their] role as tortured witnesses functioning to absolve [them]selves and dissipate the horror.”<sup>20</sup> The problem with the student’s consumption of the Battle of Stalingrad’s media images in this instance is that the film replaces any desire to seek out primary sources because the student could feel they’ve already born witness to the realities of historical warfare.

Also working against the instruction of history in the classroom is an attention economy that is shrinking from books, to articles, to websites, to social media text entries, to social media text entries limited to 140 characters, to social media photos, to Snapchat and other ephemera that disappear almost instantaneously after their viewing. Events now disappear without a trace in a hyperindividuated, screenified world when events happen at all. Making the past relevant to today is, in my mind, the job of both the educator and the student. Yet what relevance does the history of civilization recorded in textual format have for a generation that has been indoctrinated in the profane, cold image to be

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<sup>19</sup> Merrin. *Baudrillard and the Media*, 66.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

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viewed at a distance and forgotten? If students are going to revert back to imagery with phones and computers the second they leave the classroom, then the classroom should be a space where a break is taken from a world where simulated imagery stands in for the “real.” Maybe the college Western Civ classroom needs less visuals to entertain and be made relevant, and more speech and proximal lived communication in the presence of other human beings. The past is a record, and certainly written records can be manipulated. However, we have entered an era in which manipulated media images proliferate and the ability of text and lived, heard human speech and its capacity to educate becomes increasingly diminished. There needs to be a reexamination of the image’s presence in the classroom as lessons about events move temporally closer to the present, lest we absolve ourselves of remembrance because a screen has remembered for us, albeit in replayed, reinvented, and whitewashed images endlessly producing cleaner, more historically acceptable imagery. Baudrillard was concerned that this whitewashing of the past into acceptable image form was turning the past into an “artificial double . . . [frozen] in a sham exactitude.”<sup>21</sup> Primary texts in Western Civ education still matter because through them we can better understand events in their lifetimes, when records of events existed outside of instantaneous imagery that doesn’t allow history to occur. Otherwise, “history” ends.

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<sup>21</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “The End of the Millennium or the Countdown,” *Theory, Culture, & Society* 15, no. 1 (1998): 3.

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