Wargames (1983)

David Lightman (Matthew Broderick) is an intelligent, underachieving teen who spends most of his free time playing arcade video games or messing around on his computer. During an automated modem search, he finds a strange computer that appears to be affiliated with a game company. A list of games appears, but Lightman doesn't have the password. After doing extensive research, he correctly guesses it. As would-be girlfriend Jennifer (Ally Sheedy) watches, he begins playing "Global Thermonuclear War" and targets his hometown (Seattle) and Las Vegas for Soviet strikes.

Unknown to the teens, the computer behind "Global Thermonuclear War" is not a game software company -- it is the War Operations Plan Response (W.O.P.R.) -- a top-secret military system that helps the Air Force decide what to do in the event of a Soviet attack. On their situation screens deep below Cheyenne Mountain, Colorado, the military actually thinks a first-strike is occurring. Top programmer Dr. McKittrick (Dabney Coleman) figures out what has happened, but it seemed all too real for a few minutes.

The government soon finds out who broke into their system, and Lightman is arrested and taken to Cheyenne Mountain for debriefing. It is assumed that he is affiliated with the Soviet KGB! He realizes that the W.O.P.R. is still "playing" Global Thermonuclear War, and needs to be stopped. The computer is feeding false data to the Americans, trying to get them to "move." General Beringer (Barry Corbin), a hawkish sort, is putting US forces on increasingly higher levels of Alert (known as Defense Conditions, or DefCon). When the computer convinces him that full-scale Russian attack is inbound, the General will order a counterattack.

Lightman cleverly escapes from Cheyenne Mountain, seeking Dr. Stephen Falken (John Wood), the original programmer of W.O.P.R. Dr. Falken grew increasingly concerned about the program, took an assumed name and retired to Oregon. Jennifer helps Lightman to find the Doctor, and they manage to convince the cynical programmer to stop World War Three.

At the last minute, while W.O.P.R. is busy feeding "game" data of inbound Soviet nuclear missiles to General Beringer's staff, Lightman and Falken arrive. They convince the General to wait and see if actual nuclear hits take place (which of course doesn't happen). The computer then tries to "guess" the encrypted launch code that will allow it to launch the US missiles and "win." Lightman and Falken try playing Tic-Tac-Toe against the super-computer, which ultimately teaches it the concept of futility. Just before launching the US missiles, W.O.P.R. quickly runs all the possible nuclear scenarios looking for a situation where it can truly triumph. It ultimately decides that Global Thermonuclear War is futile: there is no winner. Better to play a nice game of Chess.

Cast

Matthew Broderick … David
Dabney Coleman … McKittrick
John Wood … Falken
Ally Sheedy … Jennifer
Barry Corbin … General Beringer
Juanin Clay … Pat Healy
Kent Williams … Cabot
Dennis Lipscomb … Watson
Joe Dorsey … Conley
Irving Metzman … Richter
Michael Ensign … Beringer's Aide
William Bogert … Mr. Lightman
Susan Davis … Mrs. Lightman
James Tolkan … Nigan
David Clover … Stockman

Memorable quotes
(with notes on difficult vocabulary)

FBI Agent George Wigan: He does fit the profile perfectly. He's intelligent, but an under-achiever; alienated from his parents; has few friends. Classic case for recruitment by the Soviets.
Lyle Watson: Now what does this say about the state of our country, hmm?
[*General Beringer rolls his eyes*]
Lyle Watson: I mean have you gotten any insight as to why a, a bright boy like this would jeopardize the lives of millions?
FBI Agent George Wigan: No sir. He says he does this sort of thing for fun.
John McKittrick: What?
Arthur Cabot: Dammit, John, I want some answers and I want them *now*!
to fit the profile = (di un ricercato dalla polizia) rispecchiare, ricalcare il profilo; **under-achiever** = uno che non riesce molto bene (a scuola, nel lavoro, ecc.); to **jeopardize** = mettere in pericolo

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McKittrick: See that sign up here - up here. "Defcon." That indicates our current defense condition. It should read "Defcon 5," which means peace. It's still on 4 because of that little stunt you pulled. Actually, if we hadn't caught it in time, it might have gone to Defcon 1. You know what that means, David?
David Lightman: No. What does that mean?
McKittrick: World War Three.
to pull a stunt = giocare uno scherzetto

Stephen Falken: What you see on these screens up here is a fantasy; a computer enhanced hallucination!
to enhance = migliorare

General Beringer: Goddammit, I'd piss on a spark plug if I thought it'd do any good!
spark plug = (di motore a scoppio) candela di ignezione

McKittrick: Excuse me, sir. We can't send these men back to the President of the United States with a lot of head-shrinker horseshit!
head-shrinker = strizzacervelli

Stephen Falken: I loved it when you nuked Las Vegas. Suitably biblical ending to the place, don't you think?
to nuke = sganciare una bomba atomica su

Stephen Falken: The whole point was to find a way to practice nuclear war without destroying ourselves. To get the computers to learn from mistakes we couldn't afford to make. Except, I never could get Joshua to learn the most important lesson.
David Lightman: What's that?
Stephen Falken: Futility. That there's a time when you should just give up.
Jennifer: What kind of a lesson is that?

Stephen Falken: Did you ever play tic-tac-toe?
Jennifer: Yeah, of course.
Stephen Falken: But you don't anymore.
Jennifer: No.
Stephen Falken: Why?
Jennifer: Because it's a boring game. It's always a tie.
Stephen Falken: Exactly. There's no way to win. The game itself is pointless! But back at the war room, they believe you can win a nuclear war. That there can be "acceptable losses."
tie = pareggio

Major Lem: [*D.S.P. registers a massive launch from Soviet ICBM fields*] We have a launch detection. We have a Soviet launch detection.
Colonel Joe Conley: BMEWS confirms a massive attack.
Major Lem: Missile Warning - no malfunction.
Radar Analyst Kirkland: Confidence is high. I repeat, confidence is high.
Female Airman First Class: Cobra Dane, is this an exercise?
Colonel Joe Conley: Negative, this is not an exercise.
Female Airman First Class: [*to Beringer*] General, D.S.P. is tracking three hundred inbound Soviet ICBMs.
General Beringer: [*points at the C.C.P.D.S. screen*] Tell me this is another one of your simulations, Mr. McKittrick.
McKittrick: It's not, Jack.
General Beringer: Alright. Flush the bombers, get the subs in launch mode. We are at DEFCON 1.
Major Lem: [*buzzer sounds*] DEFCON 1.
ICBM = missili balistici intercontinentali

McKittrick: It might help to beef up security around the W.O.P.R.
to beef up = migliorare

Radar Analyst Kirkland: Inbounds presently MIRV-ing. We now have approximately twenty-four possible targets in track.
Colonel Joe Conley: Sir, new time to impact: eight minutes.
Major Dawes: [*hands Beringer a telephone*] Sir, SAC is launching the bombers. General Powers is on the line.
General Beringer: [*into the telephone*] Beringer.
[*pause*]
General Beringer: Goddamn it! We didn't get a launch detection from our satellite!
[*pause*]
General Beringer: No, no. Radar picked 'em up already out of the atmosphere. That's the first we heard of it.
[*Beringer gives phone back to his aide, Major Dawes*]
General Beringer: [*to Colonel Conley*] Get the ICBMs in the bullpen warmed up and ready to fly.
General Beringer: [*to Major Dawes*] Get me the President on the horn.
bullpen = parte del campo da baseball in cui si pratica il lancio; **to get on the horn** = chiamare al telefono

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Richter: [*looking at a report*] There's just been a very serious penetration into our WOPR Execution Order file.

Lyle Watson: What the hell's he saying?
Arthur Cabot: Let's have it in English.
General Beringer: I'll give it to you in English - somebody broke into Mr. McKittrick's well-known system and stole the codes that'll launch our missiles. That right, Mr. McKittrick?
John McKittrick: There's no cause for alarm. The system won't accept the launch code unless we're at DEFCON 1. I can have those codes changed in less than an hour.
Lyle Watson: Well, who did this?
John McKittrick: I think the kid's got to be working with somebody on the outside.
General Beringer: I don't know what they're up to, but I sure as hell don't want our bombers on the ground when it happens. Take us to DEFCON 3 and get SAC on the line...
[*looks around for Major Daves*]
General Beringer: ... where are you?
Major Daves: Uh, sir.
General Beringer: Oh, uh, and get me a report on those subs. I want to know what those bastards are up to.
sub = abbreviazione per *sottomarino*.

Sources