

Digital Arabs: Representation in video games

Šisler, Vít

Postprint / Postprint

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

www.peerproject.eu

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Šisler, V. (2008). Digital Arabs: Representation in video games. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 11(2), 203-220.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549407088333>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter dem "PEER Licence Agreement zur Verfügung" gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zum PEER-Projekt finden Sie hier: <http://www.peerproject.eu> Gewährt wird ein nicht exklusives, nicht übertragbares, persönliches und beschränktes Recht auf Nutzung dieses Dokuments. Dieses Dokument ist ausschließlich für den persönlichen, nicht-kommerziellen Gebrauch bestimmt. Auf sämtlichen Kopien dieses Dokuments müssen alle Urheberrechtshinweise und sonstigen Hinweise auf gesetzlichen Schutz beibehalten werden. Sie dürfen dieses Dokument nicht in irgendeiner Weise abändern, noch dürfen Sie dieses Dokument für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, aufführen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Mit der Verwendung dieses Dokuments erkennen Sie die Nutzungsbedingungen an.

gesis
Leibniz-Institut
für Sozialwissenschaften

Terms of use:

This document is made available under the "PEER Licence Agreement". For more Information regarding the PEER-project see: <http://www.peerproject.eu> This document is solely intended for your personal, non-commercial use. All of the copies of this documents must retain all copyright information and other information regarding legal protection. You are not allowed to alter this document in any way, to copy it for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the document in public, to perform, distribute or otherwise use the document in public.

By using this particular document, you accept the above-stated conditions of use.

Mitglied der

Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

Digital Arabs

Representation in video games

Vít Šisler

Charles University in Prague

ABSTRACT This article presents the ways in which Muslims and Arabs are represented and represent themselves in video games. First, it analyses how various genres of European and American video games have constructed the Arab or Muslim Other. Within these games, it demonstrates how the diverse ethnic and religious identities of the Islamic world have been flattened out and reconstructed into a series of social typologies operating within a broader framework of terrorism and hostility. It then contrasts these broader trends in western digital representation with selected video games produced in the Arab world, whose authors have knowingly subverted and refashioned these stereotypes in two unique and quite different fashions. In conclusion, it considers the significance of western attempts to transcend simplified patterns of representation that have dominated the video game industry by offering what are known as 'serious' games.

KEYWORDS Arabs, Islamic games, Muslims, racial stereotypes, representation, serious games, video games

The term 'representation' refers to the construction of meaning through symbols and images. In the digital age, video games have established themselves as a form of mainstream media that shapes our comprehension and understanding of the world by constructing, conveying and iterating various representations. In the last few years a new critical approach towards games has emerged, largely referred to as 'game studies', which places video games in their broader social context (Bogost, 2006; Frasca, 2004; Juul, 2005; Raessens and Goldstein, 2005; Santorineos and Dimitriadi, 2006). The research ventures of game studies come from a large spectrum of other disciplines, mostly literary and film studies, cultural studies, psychology and computer science (Reichmuth and Werning, 2006). For example, Alexander Galloway has extended the traditional debates concerning representation into the realm of video games, considering

whether images (or language) are a faithful, mimetic mirror of reality thereby offering some unmediated truth about the world, or conversely whether images

are a separate, constructed medium thereby standing apart from the world in a separate semantic zone. (Galloway, 2004: 1)

According to Galloway (2004), the discursive, or visual or textual representation of meaning is no longer sufficient in game studies. Instead, the actions and the gameworld in which they occur, must be analysed.

In-game representations of Arabs and Muslims have to be contextualized in a broader narrative structure that covers Islam as it appears in news and popular media (Karim, 2006; Pintak, 2006; Poole, 2006; Said, 1997; Shaheen, 2000; Wingfield and Karaman, 2002). The dominant mode of representation of Arab and Muslim cultures in European and American media generally exploits stereotypical generalizations and clichés. As Bushra Karaman has noted, 'the Arab world – twenty two countries, the locus of several world religions, a multitude of ethnic and linguistic groups, and hundreds of years of history – is reduced to a few simplistic images' (Wingfield and Karaman, 2002: 132). Nevertheless, in the post-9/11 world, polarized rhetoric has intensified in both western and Middle Eastern media. The dichotomy between 'us' and 'them' helps to reinforce simplistic ideas of a collective Self and its hostile Other. For example, recent surveys and research have revealed some disturbing findings about how Muslims are being 'othered' in European and American media:

- the dominant discourses overwhelmingly present most followers of Islam as a threat (Hafez, 2000; Karim, 2006; Poole, 2006; Richardson, 2004);
- Islam is likely to be linked with terrorism (Karim, 2006; Manning, 2006; Miller, 2006);
- the representation of 'ordinary Muslims' is marginalized (Richardson, 2004);
- a conflictual framework dominates (Karim, 2006; Manning, 2006).

Particularly significant among these is the research of Jack Shaheen (1984, 2000, 2001), who has studied the manner in which popular culture has projected and reified images of Muslim Arabs for more than two decades. Shaheen presents us with an analysis of selected media portraits, paying specific attention to American television programmes and motion pictures and the impact that these images have on Arab and Muslim identities. He argues that the stereotypes he has found can lower self-esteem, injure innocents, impact policies and encourage divisiveness:

On the screen, the Muslim Arab continues to surface as the threatening cultural Other ... He/She lacks a human face and lives in a mythical kingdom of endless desert dotted with oil wells, tents, run-down mosques, palaces, goats, and camels. (Shaheen, 2000: 2, 4)

Video games, as 'cultural artifacts', presumably do not stand outside of these broader tendencies. Moreover, they seem to exploit these stereotypes and clichés in a more apparent manner than other forms of media.



Reichmuth and Werning have introduced the term 'neglected media' into the field of computer and video game studies. According to their definition, neglected media exhibit strong popular appeal and economic relevance, which contrasts with their lack of culture prestige and scientific coverage. They have argued that stereotypical representations tend to be reproduced in neglected media in more explicit forms, partly because these media are considered to be less relevant in cultural discourse and thus less subject to media critique (Reichmuth and Werning, 2006).

At the same time, video games possess certain specific, distinguishing features. Gonzalo Frasca suggested that fundamentally, game simulations possess the potential for developing a tolerant attitude:

Unlike narrative, simulations are a kaleidoscopic form of representation that can provide us with multiple and alternative points of view. By accepting this paradigm, players can realize that there are many possible ways to deal with their personal and social reality. Hopefully, this might lead to the development of a tolerant attitude that accepts multiplicity as the rule and not the exception. (2004: 92)

Thus between the more critical argument of Reichmuth and Werning and the supportive outlook of Frasca, there exists a certain tension: do video games merely reinforce and intensify received cultural stereotypes, or do they contain the potential to challenge and undermine them?

This article addresses the apparent discrepancy between the above mentioned statements and argues that, although the production of European and American mainstream video games exhibits a strong cultural bias when constructing and reinforcing stereotypical representations of Arabs and Muslims, the medium possesses the potential to deliver culturally balanced representations. It will demonstrate this by examining iconographical representations of Muslims and Arabs, narrative structures and gameplay in European and American video games. Next, it will examine how these misrepresentations directly concern Arab game designers and have influenced local game production. Essentially, it will demonstrate how video game creators esteem games introducing 'their' point of view, but will argue that this Arab and Islamic point of view does not necessarily destroy or subvert polarized cultural representations. The last section of this article will analyse genuine attempts to transcend the simplifying patterns of representation in video games. In this respect the potential of simulation, as proposed by Frasca, are investigated in practice.

This article is based primarily on qualitative research and content analysis of more than 90 European or American and 15 Arab video games.¹ The examined games are set in the Middle East (or settings reminiscent of the Middle East), and the representation of Muslims and Arabs plays a key role in the gameplay. A substantive portion of the materials used in this study were gathered during fieldwork in Damascus and Beirut in 2005 and Cairo in 2006.

The methodology used for content analysis involves playing the whole game while taking notes and screenshots of relevant visual signifiers, recording the narrative and analysing the structure of gameplay via simplified Petri Net formal description (Natkin and Vega, 2003). Correspondingly, other paratextual materials related to the game were analysed (booklets, manuals and websites). All the European and American games were played in English, whereas the Arab games were played in Arabic, although most of the games are available in other language versions. Interviews with producers were recorded in Arabic.

Research examining ethnic and racial issues in video games is relatively sparse to date (Chan, 2005; Everett, 2005; Leonard, 2006). Anna Everett (2005) has analysed the ways in which video games reinforce, reject or alter iconographical representations. Similarly, Dean Chan (2005) has suggested that we develop a critical attentiveness to the constituencies of racialized difference and the ways in which these differences are structured and represented in gameworld contexts. David Leonard (2006) has described the so-called 'emerging military entertainment complex' in the US and the various tropes of representing the enemy in war games.

Symbolic and ideological dimensions of in-game representational politics related to Arabs and Muslims have been analysed from different perspectives (Machin and Suleiman, 2006; Marashi, 2001; Reichmuth and Werning, 2006; Šisler, 2006a, 2006b). Ibrahim Marashi (2001) has introduced the stereotypical modes of representation of Arabs in selected combat video games focusing on the Arab–Israeli conflict. Philipp Reichmuth and Stefan Werning (2006) have described the exploitation of Oriental *topoi* in various genres of western video games. Finally, David Machin and Usama Suleiman (2006) have compared the discursive of two Arab and American war video games, focusing on the ways in which they re-contextualize and frame real-world events.

Orientalism in the digital age

Video games inherently provide a schematized image of the world. Apart from the heroes, who possess background and personality, often game characters are depicted only by several distinctive symbols. Similarly, the in-game surroundings and setting are rendered frequently by iteration of a limited number of textures and schemes. This also applies to the considerable amount of games which adopt Middle Eastern settings in a quasi-historical or fantasy manner, such as *Prince of Persia* (Broderbund, 1989), *The Magic of Scheherazade* (Cultural Brain, 1989), *Arabian Nights* (Krisalis, 1993), *Al-Qadim: The Genie's Curse* (SSI, 1994), *Beyond Oasis* (Sega, 1995), *Persian Wars* (Cryo, 2001) and *Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones* (Ubisoft, 2005). Although some of these games stand out due to their graphics or plot and are considered milestones within their genre, such as *Prince of Persia* or *Al-Qadim*, they more or less share the visual and narrative features of 'Orientalist' imagery.



Edward Said's classic work has analysed the Orientalist discourse of the 19th and early 20th century, which recreates Islamic society as a timeless and exotic entity. According to Said (1978), fine arts and photography which presented the 'Middle East' in a naive and historicizing way had served to exclude it from 'modernity', and thus endorsed the patronizing and colonial approach of real politics. When examining the visual signifiers used by games to create a 'Middle Eastern' impression, we find very much the same patterns. These include motifs such as headscarves, turbans, scimitars, tiles and camels, character concepts such as caliphs, Bedouins, djinns, belly dancers and Oriental *topoi* such as deserts, minarets, bazaars and harems. However, as Reichmuth and Werning (2006) have noted, Said's concept that the western imagination construes the Orient as one historical entity, conflating historical fantasies with contemporary reality, usually is not evident in video games. Games portraying a contemporary and a historical or fantastical Middle East constitute separate categories, mostly using different imagery, narrative and gameplay, as we will see below.

Roland Barthes gives a diagnosis of how imitative arts comprise two messages: 'a denoted message, which is the analogon itself, and a connoted message, which is the matter in which the society to a certain extent communicates what it thinks of it' (1982: 195). Unlike the fine arts, video games often contain a narrative. Although this usually serves only as an introduction to a larger 'quest', together with the images and gameplay it shapes the broader connoted message of the game as a whole. In the majority of the model games analysed in this section, the plot begins with the kidnapping of a woman (princess, sister, daughter) by an evil character (vizier, caliph, demon) and the hero's in-game *raison d'être* is to save her and gain revenge. (In contrast, in *Al-Qadim* the caliph's beautiful daughter Kara is a final reward for the young hero.) In *Prince of Persia*, *Arabian Nights* and *The Magic of Scheherazade*, the hero is unjustly imprisoned in a caliph's dungeon and his quest is to save himself from beheading; in *XZR* (Renovation Game, 1988) he has to assassinate the caliph. Although these narratives are typical for common medieval fantasy settings, such imagery is particularly dominant in the frame of reference to the 'Middle East', reinforcing stereotypical notions of arbitrary cruelty and barbarism.

Almost all of these games construct a 'fantastical' Middle East, using quasi-historical elements in order to give the player an oriental impression. Only a few games are based on real historical events, such as *Age of Empires 2* (Microsoft, 1999), which includes the campaign of Saladin. On the one hand, this is particularly remarkable when compared with the number of European and American historical games, which usually provide the player with a substantial amount of factual information. On the other hand, the narrative of these games evokes the realm of *A Thousand and One Nights*, constructing the Middle East as a place without history. Thus,

this prevalent 'Orientalist' mode of representation can be perceived as an exclusion from constructive discursive, overshadowing the represented contribution to contemporary reality.

Representation of enemy

When speaking of the 'Other' we may refer to somebody like ourselves, whom we identify as 'one of us', a stranger ('one of them') or even the unknowable Other (whom Lévinas calls *autrui*). In the majority of action games (especially first-person shooters), the point of the game is to kill 'others', who typically are 'one of them' (Dahlberg, 2005). The key question, then, is how the 'Others' are constructed by the game.

The Middle East is a favourite virtual battleground. Action-genre games such as *War in the Gulf* (Empire, 1993), *Delta Force* (NovaLogic, 1998), *Conflict: Desert Storm* (SCi Games, 2002), *Full Spectrum Warrior* (THQ, 2004), *Kuma/War* (Kuma Reality Games, 2004) and *Conflict: Global Terror* (SCi Games, 2005) take place in the Middle East or in ostensibly anonymous yet overtly Middle-Eastern settings.

Generally speaking, the player controls American or coalition forces, while enemy units are controlled by the computer. Usually, playing for the other side is not allowed. The enemy is depicted by a set of schematized attributes which often refer to Arabs or Muslims – headcover, loose clothes, dark skin colour. In many cases, the in-game narrative links these signifiers to international terrorism and/or Islamist extremism. *Delta Force: Land Warrior* presents a scenario in which Arabs from several countries have banded together into a terrorist organization bent on undermining the activities of the US. *Full Spectrum Warrior* is set in the fictional but overtly Muslim country of 'Tazikhstan', 'a haven for terrorists and extremists' (Leonard, 2004). While the US or coalition soldiers usually are humanized and individualized by their nicknames or specific visual characteristics, the enemy is collectivized and linguistically functionalized as 'various terrorist groups', 'militants' and 'insurgents' (Machin and Suleiman, 2006). At the same time, the moral mission, professionalism and courage of the forces controlled by the player are emphasized by the in-game narrative and scripts. However, the enemies are presented in a way that suggests they are not 'real' soldiers, thereby removing the legitimacy of their actions (Machin and Suleiman, 2006). This could be manifested even on the level of the artificial intelligence controlling the enemy soldiers via scripts including undisciplined poses, shouting and yelling (*Full Spectrum Warrior*), or raising weapons above their heads, laughing mockingly after they kill (*Delta Force*). Thus the in-game behaviour of the enemies to some extent exemplifies the concept of 'unlawful combatants'. This is reminiscent of what Slavoj Žižek (2002) has referred to as the Agambenian term of *Homo sacer*, an individual foreclosed from the political space proper, whose resistance is regarded as a criminal act.



Unlike the games already mentioned, the strategy game *Command & Conquer: Generals* allows the player to choose from three sides of a fictional conflict: the US, China and the Arab 'Global Liberation Army'. Again, the description of these struggling factions is significant:

The United States has powerful and expensive units, including well-armed infantry and vehicles that can heal themselves. Their superior intelligence capabilities and flexible air force allow them to strike quickly anywhere on the map. (Chick, 2003: 1)

The Arab Global Liberation Army, on the other hand, is distinguished by 'terrorists with car bombs and truck bombs, suicide bombers with explosives strapped to their bodies, anthrax and biotoxin delivery systems and angry mobs of Arabs wielding AK-47s' (Chick, 2003: 1). In such cases, as Gerard Greenfield has noted, 'choosing to be "enemy" adds no objectivity, it just makes it harder to win – the enemy is still depicted in racist terms' (2004: 2).

Nina Huntemann states that '9/11 is so culturally significant that the games take on a new meaning' (Barron, 2004). Apart from a dramatic increase in games with the objective of fighting terrorism, and combat games set in the Middle East, the militarization of the public sphere is a trend that has modified digital entertainment as a whole. Recent studies examine increasing collaborations between the games industry and the military in the US (Barron, 2004; Leonard, 2004; Nieborg, 2006; Zhan, 2004). Video games are being used as a public relations tool for promoting the US Army and recruitment (*America's Army*), or as a means of explaining and vindicating the 'War against Terror' (*Kuma/War*). The latter is a first-person shooter action game based on real US Army campaigns, mainly from the War in Iraq. New downloadable missions are available every month covering recent operations, with Arab or Afghani terrorists or insurgents as enemies. Missions such as *Spring Break Fallujah* (Kuma, LLC, 2004) and *Battle in Sadr City* (Kuma, LLC, 2005) allow the player to engage in 'Operation Iraqi Freedom'. *Assault on Iran* (Kuma, LLC, 2005) even anticipated America's potential further engagement by carefully changing the depiction of enemies to Iranians.

When a game is set in a particular Middle Eastern country and based on real conflict, the retelling of the narrative inevitably reshapes its comprehension and evaluation, schematizing complex political relations into a polarized frame. Nina Huntemann compares similar games with the *Why We Fight* war films made by Hollywood directors in the 1940s, but comments that the interactive character of the video games medium makes the game's message more like *How We Fight* (Barron, 2004). She notes that such games are provided with an overwhelming amount of technical information about weaponry and technology of war, but fail to provide background for the deeper understanding of the conflict and its

outcome. Similar opinion has been expressed by Zhan in his analysis of *America's Army*:

The ergodic virtual representation of war in video games engages the public in a participative mimesis within the confines of instrumental media system, so thereby detaching it from actual communicative reasoning. (Zhan, 2004: 118)

The militarization of the video game trope, having reinforced the polarized frame of the good Self and the evil Other, obviates any further explanation of the reasons for the conflict.

Introducing the Other

If there is one example that constitutes an attempt to challenge this broader pattern – matching in particular Frasca's claims concerning simulation – it is surely Sid Meier's *Civilization* series (1991–2006). These famous strategy games allow players to act on the part of various civilizations and engage in building cities, establish trade routes and interact with others on a diplomatic or military basis through thousands of years of virtual history. Each civilization has its own unique traits and all are presented in a very culturally sensitive way. The balanced gameplay allows the player to choose any side and generally rewards cooperation. *Civilization 3: Conquests* (Atari, 2003) has introduced a historical Middle Eastern scenario, as one of the few exceptions. The game is equipped with an encyclopedia containing a substantial amount of historical, ethnographical and cultural information. In the words of McKenzie, 'Sid Meier turns history and anthropology books into strategy game' (2006: 69). The in-game description of many features of Islamic civilization is unique for its correctness and sensitivity, such as the description of *jihad* (see http://www.civ3.com/ptw_prof_arab.cfm). The same sensitivity applies to the selection of the representative figure for game diplomacy: the first caliph Abu Bakr and not the prophet Muhammad, whose depiction in a video game would be a very delicate subject.

However, the ideological frame of *Civilization* has been challenged by Ted Friedman (1999), who argues that the game proposes imperialism by rewarding violent exploration and expansion. The *Civilization* series has evolved considerably from the time of Friedman's essay and gameplay has been changed in favour of cooperation and a non-military approach. Moreover, simulations intrinsically transcode historical realities into specific mathematical models and make any axiological judgements problematic. As Alexander Galloway has noted:

'History' in *Civilization* is precisely the opposite of history, not because the game fetishizes the imperial perspective, but because the diachronic details of lived life are replaced by the synchronic homogeneity of code pure and simple. (2006: 102)



To relate this broader observation to our topic, we can conclude that despite the possible contradictions in the ideological frame of *Civilization*, the game is one of the few exceptions in which Arabs and Muslims are neither functionalized as enemies nor depicted in an Orientalist manner, but constitute a possible representation of the player's Self.

Resistance and martyrdom

The production of video games in the Middle East is in the early days of its development. Nevertheless, there is a strong belief among game designers that Arabs and Muslims are being misrepresented and that their image is being distorted by western production:

'Most video games on the market are anti-Arab and anti-Islam,' says Radwan Kasmiya, executive manager of the Syrian company Afkar Media. 'Arab gamers are playing games that attack their culture, their beliefs, and their way of life. The youth who are playing the foreign games are feeling guilt.' (Roumani, 2006)

Similar concern has been expressed by the Central Internet Bureau of the Lebanese *Hezbollah* movement:

The problem behind video games is that most of them are foreign made, especially American. Therefore, they bear enormous false understandings and habituate teenagers to violence, hatred and grudges. In addition, some enfold[sic] humiliation to many of our Islamic and Arab countries, where battles are running in these Arab countries, the dead are Arab soldiers, whereas the hero who kills them is – the player himself – an American. (<http://www.specialforce.net/english/indexeng.htm>)

Few attempts have been made to overcome this alleged misrepresentation, but the games on the market to date vary considerably in their means and philosophical approach. A direct answer to games such as *Delta Force* or *America's Army* came from the above mentioned Central Internet Bureau of *Hezbollah* in 2003. The action game, entitled *Al-Quwwat al-Khasa* (*Special Force*, Solution, 2003), is a promotional tool for the movement, dealing with the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon and glorifying the role of *Hezbollah* in the retreat of the Israeli army (see <http://specialforce.net>). The game constructs two basic types of Arab and Muslim hero. The first is a figure controlled by the player, a fearless warrior winning against the odds despite being outnumbered by Zionist forces. The second is the fallen comrade. Throughout the game these 'real fighters of the Hezbollah' are consistently referred to as martyrs (*al-shuhada'*), and the player character finds their photographs at various points throughout the game. Essentially, the concept of the game is not different from western first-person shooters: it has merely reversed the polarities of the narrative and iconographical stereotypes mentioned above by substituting the Arab Muslim hero for the American

soldier. The primary difference is that instead of stressing camaraderie and brotherhood between the individual members of a beleaguered army platoon, it stresses the soldier's Muslim identity and higher obligation to *Hezbollah* as a part of a collective spiritual whole.

A different approach to the topic of self-representation can be found in the Syrian game *Tahta al-Ramad* (*Under Ash*, Dar al-Fikr, 2002) which deals with the First Intifada. The game is unusually emotional in the way that it presents players with a story starting with the Palestinians' conflict with Israeli soldiers at the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. The first mission introduces the main hero, Ahmad, in a demonstration. The Palestinians throw stones at the Israeli soldiers who answer with rifle shots, and the scene is full of shouting, shooting and moaning of the wounded. The player's task is to get out of the demonstration alive; then the story goes on into the classic scheme of action games with the hero joining the Palestinian resistance. Combat is central to the gameplay, but killing civilians is prohibited. According to the authors, *Under Ash* is a 'call for justice and realization of the truth, the prevention against the wrong and aggression' (www.underash.net/emessage.htm) Despite its low technical quality, more than 50,000 copies were sold in a market where most gamers copy and burn video games.² Players discussing the game on the internet often value the fact that it presents 'their' point of view:

From a gamers point of view its one of the worst games I have played. The idea behind the game is admirable though. To give Arab youth their identity back after it has been lost in the western media. (Xenon 2, Dubai; <http://www.tbreak.com/forums/showthread.php?t=37702&page=2>)

Although referring to 'real' games, Fadel Abu Hien made an observation concerning the replaying of skirmishes by Palestinian children:

It's a way to have some feeling of power in a real-life situation where they are powerless. If a boy can 'fire' the same weapon as the occupier, if he can imitate the sound of a mortar or rocket which he sees as the Israeli source of power, then he 'owns' that power too and feels more in control. (<http://rafahnotes.blogspot.com/2005/11/playing-game-professionally.html>)

Special Force and *Under Ash* can be considered as the first attempts to participate in video games' construction of Arab and Muslim self-representation. Although the first is blatantly ideological and propagandistic, whereas the latter pales in technological comparison with similar US and European games, for the first time the Middle-Eastern gamer is offered congruence between their political reality and its in-game mimesis. As Galloway (2004) puts it:

If one is to take the definition of realism a documentary-like attention to the everyday struggles of the downtrodden, leading to a direct criticism of current social policy, then *Special Force* and *Under Ash* are among the first truly realist games in existence.



Digital dignity

The direct sequel to *Under Ash* is *Tahta al-Hisar* (*Under Siege*, Afkar Media, 2005). Unlike its predecessor, the game introduces real events to the virtual world. It begins with a killing in the Mosque of Abraham in Hebron, where in 1994 a radical Jewish fundamentalist, Baruch Goldstein, shot 29 Muslims during Friday prayers. The player controls Ahmad, who has to survive the first minutes of Goldstein's shooting by hiding between pillars, and then at the right moment disarm him. In a narrative similar to *Under Ash*, he then engages in a fight with Israeli police and army. All the main characters in the game are individualized and humanized by very emotional background stories which are presented to the player in cinematic sequences. Radwan Kasmiya, manager of Afkar Media, told me: 'It was our aim to show what happens in Palestine behind politics, to show people[']s stories and problems.'³ As with its western equivalents, the game fails in its schematization and instrumentalization of enemies (Israelis), although it does make an attempt to overcome this problem. The gameworld is inhabited by civilians (Israelis and Palestinians) whose killing is penalized by an automatic 'game over'. This constitutes a substantial difference from the majority of western war games, where Middle Eastern cities are depicted without inhabitants and the Allied war effort is shown not to hurt civilians (Leonard, 2004). Nevertheless, on the level of gameplay, combat remains the only interaction possible with the Israelis.

Radwan Kasmiya stated that his aim is not only to transcend western stereotypes, but also to counter Muslim and Arab misconceptions. He believes in the educational potential of video games and wants to appropriate this medium in order to deliver positive and culturally balanced message about Islamic civilization to both Middle-Eastern and western players.⁴ His first project within this framework is a real-time strategy game, *Quraish*, already developed by Afkar Media and delivered to publishers. It deals with the wars of Bedouin tribes and the spreading of Islam. The gameplay allows the player to control four different nations: Bedouins, Arabs, Persians and Romans. The authors promise that the origin of Islam will be witnessed by a Byzantine officer, a Persian priest and a Bedouin tribe chieftain (see www.quraishgame.com). His newest and most ambitious project with Afkar Media, currently in development in Damascus, is an action-adventure called *Suyuf al-Janna* (*Swords of Heaven*). This game will cover the Crusades from a Muslim perspective and, according to Kasmiya, should explore 'the rise of extremism on both sides and the religious and cultural roots of the modern crisis'.⁵ In contrast to quasi-historical western games, Afkar Media deal with real historical events. When presenting them, they use distinctive narrative based on Islamic historiography, such as the opening scene to *Quraish*, which is built on Muhammad Ibn Ishaq's *Al-Sirat al-Nabawiyya*, a classical

Islamic text describing the life of the prophet Muhammad. The game pays attention to the delicate subject of representation of the prophet, so his sayings and deeds will be present through the memories and dialogues of his companions, in a way similar to that which the authors of the movie *Al-Risala* (The Message, 1976) chose.

Radwan Kasmiya has coined the phrase 'digital dignity' to describe their works. According to his explanation, this concept comprises pride, self-esteem and aptitude: 'It is how an Arab teenager feels when he puts his hands on a game that reflects his point of view, knowing that non-Arabs may play it too.'⁶ From the perspective of Arab gamers, even a normal fantasy action game such as *Qal'at al-Nasr* (*Castle of Victory*, Afkar Media, 2003) could have cultural meaning in the sense that the hero who fights evil is Arab and speaks the Arabic language.

Conclusions

This article has explored stereotypical representations of Muslims and Arabs in European and American video games on three different levels – iconographical, narrative and gameplay (i.e. the rule system governing the player's interaction with the game).

First, a general observation on its underlying logic is that the mode of representation seems to depend to a great extent on the genre of the game. Adventure and role-playing games typically portray the Middle East in fantasy or quasi-historical manner, exploiting 'Orientalist' imagery, whereas action games and especially first-person shooters present the Middle East in a contemporary and decidedly conflictual framework, schematizing Arabs and Muslims as enemies. The latter exhibit strong cultural bias on a variety of levels and particularly demonstrate Reichmuth and Werning's concept of 'neglected media'. The reason for this is closely connected to the question of stereotyping and schematization in video games *per se*, and lies in the linkage between production and consumption. Since video games are usually produced with their consumer base in mind, they tend to incorporate and reflect the general imaginations of the Middle East prevalent among the western public, as well as the audience's expectations of particular genres. The producers logically 'intend on maximizing revenue and implement their own assumptions of their audience's tastes, expectations, and consumption habits' (Reichmuth and Werning, 2006: 47). Moreover, the highly competitive nature of the game market, together with high production costs, reinforces the iteration of proved and successful patterns in game genres and content. Several commercially successful games laid down frameworks which have dominated the market for years, such as *Doom* (ID Software, 1993) or *Dune 2* (Westwood, 1992).

In this respect, the media analysis of Karim H. Karim is worth mentioning, with his findings that 'the more closely a journalist report reproduces the common stereotypes of a particular people, the greater the



likelihood that it will be highlighted in a newspaper' (Karim, 2006: 118). As this article has shown, similar logic seems to determine the tropes of representation in video games.

Second, although we have been using the term 'Arabs and Muslims', in the vast majority of European and American games the diverse ethnic and religious identities of the Islamic world have been flattened out and reconstructed into a monolithic representation. Although this corresponds to the broader tendencies of reporting on Islam and the Middle East in western media (Hafez, 2000; Karim, 2006; Poole, 2006), in video games this simplification and schematization seems to be even more prevalent. Apart from missing academic reflection and media critique, the reason could be technological. Non-player characters are depicted often by a limited number of reiterating textures, models and other visual signifiers. Thus technological limitations intrinsically promote schematization, which leads to social stereotyping.

Finally, this article has presented the ways in which misrepresentation influences Arab game designers and local production. It has examined two significantly different fashions in which Arab producers have attempted to subvert this misrepresentation – by exploiting and reversing stereotypical depiction, narrative and gameplay known from European and American games (such as *Special Force*), or by humanizing Arab and Muslim characters and using distinctive Islamic narrative (such as *Under Siege*, *Quraish*). The awareness of racial schematizations does not necessarily lead to attempts to destroy or subvert the schematizing framework itself. On the contrary, many Arab game producers have appropriated the first-person shooter genre with its polarized cultural frame in order to present an Islamic and Arab point of view. The broader 'cultural mission' of Radwan Kasmiya constitutes a rather ambitious exception.

In this respect, European and American attempts to transcend culturally-biased representations should be mentioned. Most can be found in the emerging media of so-called 'serious games'. The term refers to games with an agenda, whose aim is not only to entertain but also to deliver a message to the audience. In the context of racial stereotypes related to Arabs and Muslims, three serious games are worth mentioning. *Real Lives* (Educational Simulations, 2004; <http://www.educationalsimulations.com>) is a life simulator that gives the player an opportunity to 'grow up' and 'live' in almost any country in the world. *Global Conflicts: Palestine* (Serious Games, 2007; <http://www.globalconflicts.eu>) puts the player into the role of a journalist who has just arrived in Palestine and whose task is to write an unbiased article about the unfolding events. *PeaceMaker* (ImpactGames, 2007; <http://www.peacemakergame.com>) is a strategy game that allows the player to be the Israeli prime minister or the Palestinian president, while their task is to establish a peaceful and stable solution to the conflict.

In these games a culturally-balanced representation is central to the design in most of the terms analysed in this article: visual signifiers, narrative and gameplay. These games are meant as educational tools and provide additional materials for students and teachers. In *Global Conflicts: Palestine* the game characters, both Arabs and Israelis, are individualized by distinctive graphical features and humanized by their background stories, presented to the player via a textual interface. The gameplay of *PeaceMaker* is based on the feedback from the player's counterpart and thus representation and introduction of the Other are key elements of the game. Given the relative novelty of these games, a proper consumption study is not yet available, but preliminary results from the implementation of *Global Conflicts: Palestine* in Danish high schools are promising (Egenfeldt-Nielsen and Buch, 2006). Although serious games presumably can expand their influence in the realm of digital entertainment and contribute to subvert the dominant stereotypes of ethnical representation, their impact on the mainstream game production cannot be overestimated.

Today we are in crucial need of critically understanding the symbolic and ideological dimensions of in-game representational politics. Obviously, no single factor leads to stereotyping. As Shaheen points out: 'Undeniably ignorance continues to be a contributing factor' (2000: 11). The most dangerous effect of stereotyping is that sometimes, negative images are perceived as a real portrayal of the other culture. This applies mainly in the absence of positive ethnic images, particularly when these schematizations remain unchallenged. Systematic and well-researched academic reflection of representation in video games is needed, with further emphasis on other languages and cultural spheres.

Acknowledgements

This article is based on a research project on Islam, the Middle East and digital media (digitalislam.eu), supported by Charles University, Prague. It draws upon a paper presented at the MediaTerra Conference in Athens, 4–8 October 2006.

Notes

1. The complete list of all the games analysed can be found at digitalislam.eu.
2. Sales figures received from Radwan Kasmiya, May 2007.
3. Interview with Radwan Kasmiya, Damascus, May 2005.
4. Interview with Radwan Kasmiya, Damascus, May 2005.
5. Personal communication with Radwan Kasmiya, May 2007.
6. Personal communication with Radwan Kasmiya, May 2007.

References

- Barron, M. (2004) 'Militarism and Video Games: An Interview with Nina Huntemann', *Media Education Foundation*. [Accessed 8 May 2006: <http://www.mediaed.org/news/articles/militarism>]
- Barthes, R. (1982) 'The Photographic Message', in *A Barthes Reader*, pp. 194–210. New York: Hill and Wang.



- Bogost, I. (2006) *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Chan, D. (2005) 'Playing with Race: The Ethics of Racialized Representations in e-Games', *International Review of Information Ethics* 4(12): 24–30.
- Chick, T. (2003) 'Command & Conquer: Generals', *Gamespy*. [Accessed 8 May 2006: <http://pc.gamespy.com/pc/command-conquer-generals/5617p1.html>]
- Dahlberg, L. (2005) 'Playing the Other and Killing the Other in Contemporary Video Games', paper presented at the Critical Legal Conference, University of Kent, Canterbury, 4–5 September.
- Egenfeldt-Nielsen, S. and T. Buch (2006) 'The Learning Effect of "Global Conflicts: Middle East"', in M. Santorineos and N. Dimitriadi (eds) *Gaming Realities: A Challenge for Digital Culture*, pp. 93–7. Athens: Fournos.
- Everett, A. (2005) 'Serious Play: Playing with Race in Contemporary Gaming Culture', in J. Raessens and J. Goldstein (eds) *Handbook of Video Game Studies*, pp. 311–25. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Frasca, G. (2004) 'Videogames of the Oppressed: Critical Thinking, Education, Tolerance, and Other Trivial Issues', in P. Harrigan and N. Wardrip-Fruin (eds) *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, pp. 85–94. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Friedman, T. (1999) 'Civilization and its Discontents: Simulation, Subjectivity, and Space', in G. Smith (ed.) *Discovering Discs: Transforming Space and Place on CD-ROM*, pp. 132–50. New York: New York University Press.
- Galloway, A. (2004) 'Social Realism in Gaming', *Game Studies* 4(1). [Accessed 1 July 2006: <http://www.gamestudies.org/0401/galloway>]
- Galloway, A. (2006) *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Greenfield, G. (2004) 'Killing Games', *Z Magazine* 6(17). [Accessed 1 July 2006: <http://zmagazine.zmag.org/Images/greenfieldpr0604.html>]
- Hafez, K. (2000) *Islam and the West in the Mass Media*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Juul, J. (2005) *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Karim, H. (2006) 'American Media's Coverage of Muslims: The Historical Roots of Contemporary Portrayals', in E. Poole and J. Richardson (eds) *Muslims and the News Media*, pp. 116–27. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Leonard, D. (2004) 'Unsettling the Military Entertainment Complex – Video Games and a Pedagogy of Peace', *Studies in Media and Information Literacy Education* 4(4). [Accessed 7 November 2007: <http://www.utpjournals.com/simile/issue16/leonard1.html>]
- Leonard, D. (2006) 'Not a Hater, Just Keepin' it Real: The Importance of Race- and Gender-Based Game Studies', *Games and Culture* 1(1): 83–8.
- McKenzie, W. (2006) 'GAM3R 7H3ORY'. [Accessed 5 June 2006: <http://www.futureofthebook.org/gamertheory>]
- Machin, D. and U. Suleiman (2006) 'Arab and American Computer War Games: The Influence of a Global Technology on Discourse', *Critical Discourse Studies* 3(1): 1–22.
- Manning, P. (2006) 'Australians Imagining Islam', in E. Poole and J. Richardson (eds) *Muslims and the News Media*, pp. 128–41. London: I.B. Tauris.

- Marashi, I. (2001) 'The Depiction of Arabs in Combat Video Games', paper presented at the Beirut Institute of Media Arts, Lebanese American University, 5–9 November.
- Miller, D. (2006) 'Propaganda and the "Terror Threat" in the UK', in E. Poole and J. Richardson (eds) *Muslims and the News Media*, pp. 45–52. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Natkin, S. and L. Vega (2003) 'Petri Net Modelling for the Analysis of the Ordering of Actions in Computer Games', in *Proceedings of Game-ON*, pp. 82–92. London: EUROSIS.
- Nieborg, D. (2006) 'We Want the Whole World to Know How Great the U.S. Army Is!', in M. Santorineos and N. Dimitriadi (eds) *Gaming Realities: A Challenge for Digital Culture*, pp. 76–84. Athens: Fournos.
- Pintak, L. (2006) 'Framing the Other: Worldview, Rhetoric and Media Dissonance since 9/11', in E. Poole and J. Richardson (eds) *Muslims and the News Media*, pp. 188–98. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Poole, E. (2006) 'The Effects of September 2001 and the War in Iraq on British Newspaper Coverage', in E. Poole and J. Richardson (eds) *Muslims and the News Media*, pp. 89–102. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Raessens, J. and J. Goldstein (2005) *Handbook of Video Game Studies*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Reichmuth, P. and S. Werning (2006) 'Pixel Pashas, Digital Djinn's', *ISIM Review* 18(Autumn): 46–7.
- Richardson, J.E. (2004) *(Mis)representing Islam: The Racism and Rhetoric of British Broadsheet Newspapers*. Amsterdam: J. Benjamins.
- Roumani, R. (2006) 'Muslims Craft Their Own Video Games', *Christian Science Monitor*, 5 June. [Accessed 30 May 2007: <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0605/p07s02-wome.html>]
- Said, E. (1978) *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Said, E. (1997) *Covering Islam*. London: Vintage Books.
- Santorineos, M. and N. Dimitriadi (2006) *Gaming Realities: A Challenge for Digital Culture*. Athens: Fournos.
- Shaheen, J. (1984) *The TV Arab*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press.
- Shaheen, J. (2000) 'Hollywood's Muslim Arabs', *Muslim Word* 90(1–2): 22–42.
- Shaheen, J. (2001) *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*. New York: Olive Branch Press.
- Šisler, V. (2006a) 'Digital Intifada', *Umelec/International* 10(1): 77–81.
- Šisler, V. (2006b) 'Representation and Self-Representation: Arabs and Muslims in Digital Games', in M. Santorineos and N. Dimitriadi (eds) *Gaming Realities: A Challenge for Digital Culture*, pp. 85–92. Athens: Fournos.
- Wingfield, M. and B. Karaman (2002) 'Arab Stereotypes and American Educators', in E. Lee, D. Menkart and M. Okazawa-Rey, *Beyond Heroes and Holidays: A Practical Guide to K-12 Multicultural, Anti-Racist Education and Staff Development*, pp. 132–6. Washington, DC: Network of Educators of Americas.
- Zhan, L. (2004) 'The Potential of *America's Army* the Video Game as Civilian–Military Public Sphere', master's thesis, MIT. [Accessed 10 June 2006: <http://www.gamasutra.com/education/theses/20040725/ZLITHESIS.pdf>]
- Žižek, S. (2002) *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. London: Verso.

**Biographical note**

Vít Šisler is a PhD candidate at the Institute of Information Science, Charles University in Prague, where he is completing his thesis on Islam and Islamic Law in Cyberspace. He is founder and editor-in-chief of Digital Islam, a compound research project on Islam, Middle East and digital media. ADDRESS: Charles University in Prague, Faculty of Arts and Philosophy Institute of Information Studies and Librarianship, U Kríže 10, 15000 Prague 5, Czech Republic. [email: vsisler@gmail.com]

