Beyond Comparison:

Reframing Analysis of Video Games Produced in the Middle East

Adrienne Shaw

Ph.D. Candidate

The Annenberg School for Communication

University of Pennsylvania

3620 Walnut St.

Philadelphia, PA 19104

802-999-8446

ashaw@asc.upenn.edu

www.adrienneshaw.com

Author's biography: Adrienne Shaw is a PhD. Candidate at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication. Her research focuses on popular culture, the politics of representation, cultural production and qualitative audience research. Her primary areas of interest are video games, gaming culture, representations of gender and sexuality, and the construction of identity and communities in relation to media consumption.

Abstract: Over the past decade, multiple video games have been produced in the Middle East. Some are the product of political groups (*Special Forces*) or individual creators (*The Stone Throwers*) while others are produced by game development companies like Afkar Media (*UnderAsh, UnderSeige*). The few academic articles on the subject (Galloway, 2004; Machin & Suleiman, 2006; Sisler, 2006) focus on these games primarily in comparison to games produced in the United States. This paper seeks to shift that focus. By first analyzing how this dichotomy is constructed in both popular and academic discourses and then using interviews with Arab gamers and game designers, I look at how we might rethink the study of representation in video games by localizing our focus on game design, content and play.

In the years since the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and the beginning of simultaneous wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the representation (both in and out group) of Arabs in video games and elsewhere have been written of with a palpable urgency. Often this results in a conflation of religious, national, and ancestral identities (in many articles the Middle East equals Arab which in turn is often equated with Islam). Articles, popular or academic, tend to look critically at the representations in games produced both within and outside the Middle East. In terms of the former, critiques are positioned in relation to a fear that games produced within the Middle East are essentially "terrorist simulators" (Harnden, 2004; Marks, 2006; Wakin, 2003). Articles addressing the latter are concerned with rising prejudice towards Arabs and Muslims, similar to Shaheen's (2001) and Semmerling's (2006) analysis of Arab

representation in film.

While the study of digital games is a growing and varied academic field, only cursory interest has been paid to the small but growing Arab gaming sector. Over the past decade, multiple video games have been produced in the Middle East. Some are the product of political groups (*Special Forces*) or individual creators (*The Stone Throwers*). Others games are produced by game development companies like Afkar Media (*UnderAsh, UnderSeige*). The few academic articles on the subject (Galloway, 2004; Machin & Suleiman, 2006; Sisler, 2006) focus on the games primarily in comparison to games produced in the United States. This focus makes sense as media coverage of these games primarily situates them as reactions to the images of Arabs in Anglo-produced video games and as peripheral to mainstream video games. These popular and academic accounts situate these games as interesting only in their relation to American/European video games. This paper seeks to shift that focus. By first analyzing how this dichotomy is constructed in both popular and academic discourses and then using interviews with Arab gamers and game designers, I look at how we might rethink the study of representation in video games by localizing our focus on game design, content and play.

Video Games in the Middle East

In 2001 a Syrian medical student created the game *The Stone Throwers*, which allowed players to take on the role of a Palestinian fighting against Israeli police during the Second Intifada (Galloway, 2004; Halter, 2006; Vargas, 2006). At the time, the game, still freely downloadable[i], appears to have only made

news in the Middle Eastern press. A year later however, Afkar Media made international news when it released *UnderAsh*, a game which puts players in the role of Ahmed, a young Palestinian fighting against Israelis during the First Intifada (Agence France Presse, 2002). Afkar Media has since released a sequel called *UnderSiege* (with two more in production) as well an adventure game titled *Victory Castle* about the myths of Palmyra (Radwan Kasmiya, Personal communication, March 20, 2007). No game produced in the Middle East has received as much attention, however, as the game *SpecialForces* released in 2003 by the Hezbollah Central Internet Bureau (Halter, 2006, p. 40). In this game players reenact battles fought between Hezbollah and Israeli forces in southern Lebanon in 2000. Often, these games are assumed to have been produced in reaction to U.S. produced video games. Arab representation in video games has largely been discussed in the terms of games produced in Middle Eastern countries vis-à-vis those that are produced elsewhere but contain representations of the Middle East. Games produced in the Middle East, it is argued, share "a similar goal: to subvert the typical gaming stereotype of Arabs as bad guys by replacing the typical American or European action hero with a recognizably Muslim protagonist" (Zawawi, 2006). This association is strengthened by the fact that games like the Global Islamic Media Front's *Quest for Bush* (2003) and a game by the Union of Islamic Student Societies from Iran, *Commander Bahman* (2006)[ii], were reportedly direct responses to the U.S. made games *Quest for Saddam* and *Assault on Iran* respectively[iii] (Vargas, 2006).

These games produced in different countries, for different reasons, and under different conditions, are often spoken of as a singular phenomenon. Such an

assessment, however, greatly simplifies the many nuances of their context of production, their content, as well as much larger questions about how audiences receive video games in general and these games in particular. This later issue is particularly important, as it is misguided to talk about game representations in and of themselves, as one must understand how the context of play affects reception. The 'meaning' and lived experience of video game play, for instance, has yet to be empirically proven as a universal singularity. As Kerr describes "the global movement of media products, people, and commodities do not necessarily imply a homogenization of cultures…contexts of use must be considered as a vital stage in the production/innovation process" (2000, p. 290). As various theorists have discussed, the ways in which globally distributed cultural products and formats are consumed are very much informed by and altered to fit local contexts (Appadurai, 1996; Kraidy, 2005; Lee, 1991; Waisbord, 2004).

Methodology

To begin teasing out the nuances of examining video games produced in the Middle East, as well as gaming in the region more generally, we can look at how these games have been discussed in the news media. I analyzed a total of 45 articles and blog posts from world news sources, including some from English language sources in the Middle East[iv]. In order to contextualize the content of these articles, I interviewed (via email) Afkar Media's CE and game designer Radwan Kasmiya. I also had a dialogue with some players via the Middle East Gamers (megamers.com) message board and received four completed questionnaires from Arab-identified gamers. While the response rate for this study was low, there were similarities between answers given in these exchanges and

those I received in my other research on audiences (particularly gamers who are members of marginalized groups) and media representation. These similarities are where I draw many of the theoretical claims made herein.

News Discourses

The first major difference between articles on video games from Middle Eastern and non-Middle Eastern sources is the breadth of topics available in the former. Articles from Middle East news sources covered topics ranging from the impact of video games on Arab children (Ginete, 2006) to video game conventions in various Middle Eastern countries (Middle East Company News Wire, 2003) to video game parlors being closed in Dubai to curtail gambling (Ahmad, 2004). Conversely, articles about video games and the Middle East from other parts of the globe focus very specifically on what is sometimes called "Islamogaming."

> Though relatively small, Islamogaming is also a diverse field, ranging from amateur projects by students, unabashed anti-Zionist propaganda produced by an internationally recognized terror organization, religious games produced to teach Islam to kids and a set of more sober games designed to explore the complex realities of Middle Eastern history. (Halter, 2006, p. 39)

Several articles look at this "phenomenon" of Arab-produced games, often with a note of concern about the ideological underpinnings of these texts (Addelman, 2006; Agence France Presse, 2002; Ashcraft, 2006; Associated Press, 1995; Ghattas, 2002; Halter, 2006; Harnden, 2004; Marks, 2006; Roumani, 2006; *The Economist*, 2003; Thompson, 2006; Vargas, 2006). The term "Islamogaming," of

course, is highly problematic as it conflates regional, national, and religious identity at the same time as it groups together a variety of types of games produced for a plethora of reasons.

One interesting trend in the Middle Eastern sources is the assertion that the region is a viable gaming market. In part this is done by averring the attention the region has received by the video game industry. According to one press article, "Mr. Yasuhide Yokota, Managing director, Sony Gulf FZE said: 'The Middle East is the fastest growing gaming market in the world'" (Middle East Company News Wire, 2003). Another article notes that the video game market in the Middle East "is expecting an annual growth rate of 20.1 percent from now until 2009" (Middle East Company News Wire, 2004). Similarly, a 2005 article proclaims the significance of the premiere gaming title released in Arabic, *This is Football* produced by Sony in 2004 (Middle East Company News Wire, 2005). Furthermore, the articles assert that people in this region play video games, much in the way women gamers in the West have done in their fight for industry recognition (Douglas, 2000). Iraqi blogger Zeyad states, for example, that "[a]lmost every neighbourhood in Baghdad has what you might call a 'videogame café' with several consoles where people can play for about a dollar an hour….Iraqis are hardcore gamers" (Zeyad, 2003).

Contextualized within broader discussions of video game and media representation, asserting one's location and importance in the market is often part of the argument for media representation. This is perhaps the corollary to analyses demonstrating that industries shape and divide market segments based on the presumed value of those segments (Blumer, 1996; Ewen, 1976; Marchand, 1985;

Ohmann, 1996; Sender, 2004; Turow, 1997). Of course, asserting one's presence in the marketplace does not ensure an equal place in mainstream gaming. Industry reactions to the 'girl games' movement resulted not in creating a place for female gamers in the mainstream video game market, but rather in a 'ghettoizing' of content designed to be 'for girls' (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000). We can see similar discourses surrounding games produced for an Arab audience, which is always situated on the periphery of the video game world.

Articles from the U.S. and European news sources focus very specifically on games produced in the Middle East as being outside the mainstream video game culture and industry. In many of these articles there is an undertone of concern over the intentions of game designers in the region. As early as 1995, U.S. papers were reporting that Iran was developing what, according to "[s]tate-run Tehran television…[was] the first computer game embracing Islamic moral values and beliefs" (Associated Press, 1995). This article uses much the same language effects theorist use to caution against children's playing of video games (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999; Sherry, 2001), stressing the powerful medium's ability to warp young minds. There is a fear in many of these articles that such games are being used to 'recruit terrorists', an apprehension seen especially surrounding Hezbollah's creation *SpecialForces* (Addelman, 2006; Halter, 2006; Harnden, 2004; Marks, 2006; *The Economist,* 2003; Wakin, 2003).

More recently, US officials released a statement claiming a modification of the game *Battlefield 2¸* produced by al-Qaeda militants, allowed players to kill U.S. soldiers via an Arab avatar (Yee, 2006). A follow up article, however, points out that the scenes causing concern were actually from a video created by a

Battlefield 2 fan "who mixed an 11-minute sequence from the game with sound bytes from President Bush and dialog from *Team America: World Police*" (Cringley, 2006, p. 8). While the fear of video games as training tools for terrorism was unfounded in this instance, the anxiety itself is interesting in light of the U.S. military's use of *America's Army* (freely downloadable from their website) as a recruitment tool (Galloway, 2004; Nieborg, 2006). It also corresponds to a history of allegations, in both academic and political discourses, that video games train children to kill[v]. These anxieties are made even more palpable when tied to the pervading post-9/11 (though it existed pre-9/11 as well) discourse which promotes fear of Islamic extremists, as well as the Arab world and Middle East more generally (Abdel-Latif, 2001).

The articles trying to instill a fear of "terrorist training simulators," emphasize the open arm acceptation of these games by young Arabs, particularly *SpecialForces*. One author writes that *SpecialForces* was "the top must-have game for the youngsters of Beirut's Shiite neighborhoods" (Marks, 2006). Another speaks warily of teenage gamers in cybercafés cheering one another on while they play the game and soberly warns of the impact these games might have on young Arabs (Wakin, 2003). Similarly, one author quotes a seven year-old who "says [*Special Forces* is] his favourite because it shows Arabs can be strong. 'I don't like Israelis and I want to shoot them because they're bombing us and they're bombing Palestinians'" (Harnden, 2004). Halter finds a more nuanced response from his eight year-old interviewee "I can be a resistance fighter even though in real life I don't want to do that" (Halter, 2006, p. 40).

This latter quote indicates an interesting tension in the articles which seek

to simultaneously encourage concern over these games while also trying to mitigate that concern. For example, articles describe the difficulty of marketing these games in countries' like Egypt and Jordan (Ghattas, 2002; Imam, 2002). They try to reassure their audience that there are some 'good' countries that are not encouraging these anti-Israeli, anti-American games. Moreover, many articles stress that these games are a reaction to U.S. portrayals of Arabs in video games (Addelman, 2006; Agence France Presse, 2002; Ghattas, 2002; Harnden, 2004; Roumani, 2006; *The Economist*, 2003; Wakin, 2003). This implicitly redeems the games by claiming that the producers were simply defending their culture and identity, while still looking at the games from an American based center. Situating them as reactions, however, reasserts the centrality of U.S. game industry in realm in which Arab-produced games are merely the periphery. This trend is also seen in academic discourses on the subject.

Academic Discourses

There are relatively few academic articles that look at video games produced or set in the Middle East. Two of these focus very specifically on comparing images of Arabs in Anglo-produced video games to those in games produced in the Middle East. Machin and Suleiman (2006), for instance, compare the content and player reactions to *Delta Force* and *Special Forces*. They focus on the realism of each game in relation to the ideologies of their creators. Sisler (2006) likewise compares a collection of U.S.-produced games featuring Arab (or in some cases Persian) characters and environments to games developed in the Middle East. He describes how mainstream American and European video games create an Arab/Muslim 'Other' via flat stereotypical representations, an analysis

reminiscent of Said's (1994) work on Orientalism. Arab produced video games on the other hand construct Arab and Islamic heroes by making references to Islamic cultural heritage.

A different take on representation in video games is provided by Galloway (2004). He focuses on social realism in gaming and how we might assess representations in terms of realism. He distinguishes between two types of representation: 1. how groups are represented (stereotypically or in-depth) and 2. graphics (abstraction vs. realistic). We must, he argues, look at both if we are discussing representation in games. Galloway states that realistic actions can occur in graphically abstract games (such as *the Sims*) or highly unrealistic activities can occur in graphically rich and realistic games (ex. *SOCOM*). In his analysis, while video games may achieve a great deal of graphical realism, they are rarely socially realistic. His discussion of representation then turns to realist games of which *UnderAsh* and *Special Forces* are "among the first truly realist games" because of their "documentary-like attention to the everyday struggles of the downtrodden." His analysis, like those discussed previously, situates these games as periphery responses to American games.

While these articles are all strong textual analyses, they still rely on the comparative framework seen in the news discourses. There is a presumption in all three is that Arab video games are primarily interesting with regard to how they are different from American games. They do not interrogate the concept of positive and negative representation. They rely on the notion that in-group produced games are necessarily 'better' than out-group produced games. Machin and Suleiman presume an attainable and stable concept of 'good representation.'

The perception is that by grounding the player's avatar in an Arab/Muslim identity, the Arab-produced war games are countering the 'bad Arab other' image in games like *Counter Strike* and *Delta Force*. There is an uninterrogated presumption in Sisler's article that the act of playing a game in which your character is Arab, created by Arabs, will cause an ontological shift in the nature of the gaming experience for an Arab gamer. Galloway (2004), likewise, uses his analysis of content to make claims about player investment in the games. "*UnderAsh* players then, have a personal investment in the struggle depicted in the games, just as they have a personal investment in the struggle happening each day around them." He goes on to state that American teenagers playing *America's Army* have a corollary, though perhaps not as strong, investment in that game's ideological perspective. These authors' make very particular, but not empirically proven, claims about who plays these games and what they think about when they play them. Galloway's main point, however, is that "a true congruence between the real political reality of the gamer and the ability for the game to mimic and extend that political reality, thereby satisfying the unrequited desires contained within it" (Galloway, 2004). While his placing of the games as reactionary is still problematic, his point that player context plays an important role in game reception is an important one and will be returned to shortly.

Reframing the Discourse

The major problem with discourses about Arab games as they have been discussed is the preoccupation with talking about them as the 'other' of the gaming industry. True, the Middle East, Africa, Latin and South America are not major players in the video game industry. In this industry "a small number of

Anglo-Saxon/Japanese companies control the production and distribution channels and erect artificial barriers to entry for others either through scale or licensing agreements" (Kerr & Flynn, 2003, p. 109). Placing those dominant players at the center, however, fails to look at the video games produced in non-U.S. or Asian contexts in and of themselves. What if we were to shift our assessment and place the Arab gaming realm at center? What if we saw these games not as reactions to outside representation but rather as individual expressions of Arab identity, politics, and culture? This would require not approaching these via a comparative method, but rather on the terms of their creators, meanings, and end users and the relationship between all three. By looking at video games as the result of particular contexts, and in relation to where and how they are consumed, we can gain a much more nuanced understanding of games as cultural texts.

Game Production: The Local and the Global

Play scholar Brian Sutton-Smith (1986) has argued that, as King and Krzywinska describe, "games can be understood in some contexts as adaptive mechanisms that can serve to express and contain cultural tensions" (2006, p. 20). It is important to look at games within their contexts of production. Dr. Khalil Fadel, for example, an Egyptian psychoanalyst, decries the popularity of imported video games in the Arab world because they "glorify 'solitude, narcissism, and hatred of the other,' all of which reflect the cultural choices of the Westerners who produced these games" (Mernissi, 2006, p. 121). Video games produced in the Middle East, for example, are based in very different social and cultural histories than games produced in Asia or the U.S. The cultural values of the country of origin are particularly important, as how games are coded defines how play is

experienced (a point which will be returned to later).

Furthermore, it is important to understand the context and motivations of producers as well as potential audiences. Returning to the previous discussion of press articles, what is interesting is that not all of the games gathered under this umbrella of "Islamogaming" are actually produced in the Middle East. The company IslamGames, which released games such as *Ummah Defense I*, *Ummah Defense II*, and *Maze of Destiny*, is based in the U.S. (Halter, 2006, p. 39). The game *The Resistance*, in which players get to be members of Hezbollah and collect ammo by answering a faith-based history quiz, is produced by Innovative Minds in the U.K. (Halter, 2006, p. 40). These games, produced (though of reportedly lesser quality than most commercial games) in countries that are at the center of the video game industry are made peripheral by their connection to Islam and thus semantically the Middle East and games produced in that region. However, are the potential markets for these games really the same? Are the social locations as motivations of the creators comparable? There is an assumption that the contexts of production and reception of all of these games are equal, regardless of geographical difference and political intent. These are assumptions one cannot make for any media text, but particularly not for video games as we have so little empirical data on reception of this medium[vi].

The attempt to give broad descriptions of "Islamogaming" also blurs distinctions of author intent and the agency of individual producers. Games such as *Special Forces*, which were created as political statements, are often grouped with games produced by publishers like Techniat 3D (Syria), Imaginations (UAE), and Afkar Media (Syria) (Vargas, 2006). While all their games may be informed,

as any media text is, by the political position of the authors the motivations for creating them are qualitatively different. *Commander Bahman* (2006) developed by the Union of Islamic Student Societies from Iran and created in response to U.S. based Kuma Games' title *Assault on Iran*, is generally inferred to have the same political charge as *UnderAsh*. Multiple articles quote -- Radwan Kasmiya, CE and game designer for Afkar Media, as saying that his games were developed in answer to American games like *CounterStrike*. His responses to my own questions, however, revealed a story that had not been told. According to his email: "I am sure that there is a lot of [debate] about 'political and propaganda games', I feel offended when they refer to my games as a reaction to other titles such as *American Army*, *Full Spectrum Warriors* or *Special Forces* by Hezbollah" (Personal Communication, March 20, 2007). He also states that:

> The common factor in all of my projects is that they reflect my region culture and history (old and modern), the funny thing here is none of my projects had reach[ed] the " west " markets, and I am sure that many critics didn't [get] the chance to play these games (unfortunately most of them [are] in Arabic language and distributed poorly in some ME markets) yet they are debating this phenomena and <u>assuming</u> positive or negative messages through this. (Ibid)

Rather than looking at these video games in comparison to U.S. games, it may prove more useful to look at them as cultural texts in and of themselves, as expressions of a particular social and cultural location. In this way, we can appreciate them for what they are outside of describing what they are not.

Game Texts: Beyond the Comparative Model

One way in which we can look at video games texts, without relying on comparative models, is by invoking authenticity discourses. Implicitly discussed in Machin and Suleiman, Sisler, and Galloway, is that by creating a game from an Arab perspective, these games are more authentic than games produced elsewhere. As Machin and Suleiman (2006) discuss, both the U.S. game *Delta Force* and the *Special Forces*, rely on military information to make the games grounded in reality. However, in their analysis of the two games they find that: "The Arab game explicitly seeks to be about *real* events, about the real resistance. The US game, on the other hand, seeks to be *realistic* rather than real" (p. 6). Sisler (2006) describes how mainstream American and European video games create an Arab/Muslim 'Other' via flat stereotypical representations. Arab produced video games on the other hand construct Arab and Islamic heroes by making references to Islamic cultural heritage. This recalls Peters' definition of authenticity, "both the past and future linked contingently by the ontological void of today" (1999, p. 48). Similarly, Galloway's description of Arab audiences' embracement of the games requires an 'authentic' connection between the lived experience of players and the narratives of the games.

We can look at the ways in which these games produce an Arab authenticity by examining them in relation to the discourse of pan-Arab nationalism. As Barnett (1998) discusses, "the first concrete and politically consequential meaning associated with Arab nationalism was anticolonialism and political independence…. To be an Arab nationalist meant to be committed to independence and freedom from foreign control" (p. 68). Similarly, support for Palestine was a defining feature of Arab nationalism. Pan-Arab unity, seen in the

formation of the League of Arab States, lead to the formalization of the norms of Arabism, as "[t]o be counted as a member in good standing an Arab state had to abide by the norms of Arabism" (Ibid, , p. 81). All of the games ground their appeal in the enactment of various Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, fights against imperialism, or portrayals of the history and traditions of Islam, thus appealing to the norms of Arabism.

This appeal to authenticity also makes these games a very modern project. As Garcia Canclini (1995) discusses, modernity is in essence about reflecting on one's past and traditions and incorporating it into one's present identity. As he asserts the "*multitemporal heterogeneity* of modern culture is a consequence of a history in which modernization rarely operated through the substitution of the traditional and the ancient" (p. 47). We can see this type of modernity in quotes from game publishers in press articles:

> Hasan Salem, a director at Dar al-Fiqr, hopes that 'Al-Quraysh' will promote a more 'modern' Islam. 'People believe that only their heritage will help this nation,' says Mr. Salem. 'We believe that this nation needs a new vision, new people, new blood to study, read, and then think about Islam. We believe in this line, not the old line that only reads old books and believes in the past. (Roumani, 2006)

It would require more in-depth and first hand analysis to really interrogate this concept of modernity as displayed in Arab games, as well as the ways in which they display authenticity. This very preliminary analysis, however, points to ways in which one might look at these video games outside of their relationships to U.S. games.

We must also consider the uniqueness of video games as a medium. A major difficultly in discussing video game representation is that it is a highly under-theorized area of study. In order to study representations in video games, we must first understand how we can study them as texts. This is complicated in part by the narratology-ludology divide in game studies. In brief, narratology argues that we can look at games as cultural narratives and analyze them much in the way we do other media texts (Apperley, 2006). Ludology, however, focuses very specifically on looking at games as forms of play and not as texts (Juul, 2001).

This divide is often brought up in discussions of 'serious' games, a category in which the Arab-produced video games are often placed. As described in Woods (2004), discussions of 'serious' games are torn between two poles. On the one hand there are those that proclaim video games are "a new medium for critical creative expression," however "they have, apparently, been unable to convey the emotional depth with which we might associate such topics in other media forms" (Woods, 2004). Their inability to do so is blamed on the fact that it is a relatively new medium (Costikyan, 1998; Koster, 2005). In contrast, ludologists, like Juul argue that the nature of games as a medium precludes "dealing with sophisticated human issues" (Woods, 2004).

Juul (2001), a main figure in this debate, concludes one article by claiming that because some games contain no characters (ex. *Tetris*), characters are not intrinsic to the experience of gaming; that games are inherently games, not narratives. There is an important similarity between this and arguments about representation in video games not being an issue. For example, it has been argued that because games exist that do not include characters, the representation of

women, homosexuals, non-white individuals, etc. is not an issue (i.e. if they do not want to play characters that are not like them, they do not need to play games with characters). And yet, this fails to recognize the important variable of genres in studying video games (Apperley, 2006). True, many games exist in which story and characters are not important. However, many games are highly narrative driven. As Galloway (2004) argues games can be divided into two groups "those that have as their central conceit the mimetic reconstruction of real life, and those resigned to fantasy worlds of various kinds" (though I would amend this to add the placeless, characterless games Juul (2001) mentions).

As a retort to such arguments Juul (2001) argues that video games based on movies do not actually contain the narratives of the movie and thus are not truly narrative. Conversely, narrative versions of video games do not really relate the game as it is experienced during play, and thus the narrative cannot express the essence of the game. His argument, however, does not account for a notion of intertextual reference. In games based on either real events or fictional texts from other media, part of the narrative of play is that reference, the relation of what one is doing in the game to a larger narrative. Playing as a young Palestinian in the First Intifada in *UnderAsh* may only relate to an actual story of rebellion via cut scenes and on screen text, but that information is part of the game logic, part of the motivation for playing. King and Krzywinska see the interplay of the two when they ask, while speaking of *UnderAsh* and *Special Forces*:

> Does a powerful impression of agency created within a game reinforce broader cultural/ideological notions of agency- or does the pleasure involved lie in some level of acknowledgement of the fact that such agency is, precisely, *not* available in the outside world? (2006, p. 207)

Juul's framework can still be useful, however. For example, his conclusion that "relying too heavily on existing theories will make us forget what makes games games" (Juul, 2001). This extremely important as the act of playing requires that we cannot look at video game text in the same was as we do other media, as Galloway (2004) also argues.

We can borrow from the literature on witnessing to understand the significance of this point. As Peters (2001) writes, media can allow us to witness events without actually being there at that moment in space and time. However this is a problematic form of witnessing as we are not actually there. "To view something through a mediated form allows for the ontological depreciation of being a copy…. Presence is fragile and moral; recordings have durability that survives in multiple times and space" (p. 718). Video games exist as an interesting contrast to other media in this sense however, as presence is a highly important part of the game play experience. "[P]laying a game requires at least points or periods of temporal convergence where the time of the game world and the time of the playing merge- and the player can actually *do* something" (Juul, 2001). Video games allow players the experience of being involved in an event "*as it happens*" (Peters, 2001, p. 719, italics in original). Moreover, they are part of a progression in 'mass media's' attempt to "cultivate a sense of intimate relations between persona and audience" (p. 217).

Video games, as they require active participation from players, are a unique step in "this quest for authentic connection" (Peters, 1999, p. 177). And yet

video games allow us to, some extent, to overcome the problematic aspects of witnessing Peters describes: "In witnessing we look backwards on events we did not realize we were observing, restoring deleted files from memory.... The present is blind to what the future will value" (Peters, 2001, p. 722). Video games allow us the chance to replay the events we have just witnessed, to change the outcome, to see what other outcomes might be possible. In the case of the Arab-produced video games this is manifested in the opportunity to reenact historical events from an Arab perspective. Video games, in this sense, are a unique medium. Understanding the importance of this interaction between player and video game, and how this interaction imbues the text with meaning, is critical to interrogating video game representation.

Gamers: Localizing Play

The act of playing, while pervasive in human societies (as well as many other species), is still deeply embedded in the cultural practices of various groups. Likewise, the experience of gaming is potentially, though it seems this has not been widely researched, informed by socio-cultural context. Thus while video games produced in one culture are often consumed, via the trans-national structure of the industry, in very different cultures (discussed in Consalvo, 2006) it would be erroneous to assume that the experience of the games is universal. That is not to say that one may not find similarities in gamers attitudes towards gaming across cultures (such comparisons are made in this paper), but merely to stress the importance of locating video games in the specific contexts in which they are played.

The gamers from the Middle East that answered my questions played on virtually every video game console as well as personal computers. They played a range of games including first person shooters (FPSs), role-playing games (RPGs), action-adventure games, racing games, and strategy games. My local contact, a student from Syria, was the only one who had ever heard of the Arab-produced video games discussed in the press articles. Having played the games he noted that both *UnderAsh* and *UnderSiege* were "not good enough to compete against the American games." (Personal Correspondence, ----March 27, 2007). There were also some forum members who posted comments without replying to the survey, who had played Afkar Media's games. One felt that *UnderAsh* had an admirable goal, however the technological sophistication of the game was not equal to imported games. While another respondent argued that Afkar Media was working with what they had, the first emphasized that good game play is more important to a game's impact than good political intentions. This, as was previously discussed, is why neither a purely narratological nor a ludological approach to analyzing games can capture the complexity of representation in this medium

I have seen similar results in my interviews with other marginalized video game players in my other research projects (ranging from work on gaming in Finland, female gamers, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender gamers). Gamers in all of these studies felt that the game experience should not be overlooked when developing a game that portrays a traditionally underrepresented group. As expressed in an article from Kotaku.com

> 'We do want to put Arabs in games and show that we have a civilization, we respect other people, and that we are not aggressors,' says 26 year-old Mohamad Hamzeh. 'But it's hard

> to really get into a game like *Under Siege*. When you are in 2005 and you find a game that was released in 1995 that was much more advanced, it is not good. You must feel the challenge in the game. They are paying so much attention to the political and religious part, they are not concentrating on the technical parts of the game.' Gamers don't want political or religious games, but simply good games. And that is universal. (Ashcraft, 2006)

Unlike most types of media, the active engagement of gameplay requires interplay between interesting stories and good game mechanics. All of the respondents to my questionnaires noted that gameplay, graphics, and quality of narrative are important to creating a good game.

Another assumption made by press articles and academic discourses about representation in video games, is that it is an active concern of players. Those that responded to the discussion thread, in general, did not feel that problematic representation of Arabs in Anglo produced games were important.

> I don't know the reason behind creating such games. About the "Bad Guys" part, there were only few games that portrayed such image. Why would war games view Arabs or Muslims as bad guys? I don't know maybe they were trying to be realistic since most of the wars that happened during the past decade were actually against Arab or Muslim countries. Or maybe something else, who knows? And same reason can go for most of the Arab Games the only wars that they witnessed were against US or Israel. So I guess…vice versa. (Personal Correspondence, March 27, 2007)

This again is similar to responses I received in my other research. Indeed, a common thread throughout my research has been that audiences often give a

cultural production account of why the minority group which they are a member of is not represented. They assume that once and if they are recognized as a viable market that identifier will make its way into popular texts.

Further, it is worth admitting that direct asking is not necessarily the most thorough method of analyzing audiences' feelings about media representation. It is possible that upon being asked directly if one prefers games with representations of X one is being asked to value one's X-ness over all other aspects of one's identity. When a single aspect of one's identity is used to define one's consumption preference, it is an act which essentializes on many levels. Moreover, such questions assume that a particular identifier is central to the interviewee's identity. Also a larger, more geographically, gender and age diverse sample may have led to more variation in responses.

Evident in these discussions with gamers is that concepts of representation must be rethought in digital game studies. It is true that games do not exist in a "ludological vacuum" (Chan, 2005, p. 29), but neither can we ignore the extent to which play affects audience readings. King and Krzywinska assert that many factors can shape how players receive a given game text. The degree to which these "contextual associations" impact the experience of playing, exist on a spectrum of possibilities. Play can be purely abstract, completely grounded in external contexts, or more likely somewhere in-between. "What is required here… is analysis of the game-as-playable-text- the material offered by the game itself- and consideration of a number of different ways in which the game text might be experienced from one occasion to another" (p. 65). The cognitive demands of various games can, for instance, trump the socio-political context behind the game.

This is similar to work on educational television and games which argues that the extent to which material is central to gameplay or narrative impacts how well audiences learn material (Clark, 2003). In a different example, Machin and Suleiman find that "for many computer game players naturalism is experiential rather than perceptual" (2006, p. 18). Their interviewees engage very different conceptions of 'realistic,' much of which are based in the player's identity, political ideology, and motivations for playing. Finally, King and Krzywinska also emphasize that not all players are equally attuned to issues of foreign and domestic politics or identity politics, or at least do not think about them in regard to their video game play. As noted briefly before, the assumption that players and producers that *can* identify as members of a particular group necessarily *will*, and that this will affect how and what media they consume or produce.

Conclusion

A great deal of global media discourse has focused on the production of Arab video games as reactions to the negative portrayals of Arabs in U.S. video games. This discourse, similarly, pervades academic analyses of these games. This paper argues for examining these games in a way that situates them in local contexts of production and play. Games can be examined in terms of producer intent, claims of authenticity, and even in relation to modernity. Further, by expanding on the lessons learned from looking at video games as texts within socio-historical cultural locations, we can begin to unpack the nuances of game representation in light of the unique interactive qualities of the medium. From very cursory research with gamer audiences, we can see the importance of game quality to reception of in-game representations.

Bringing together all of this information we can begin to think about new ways of talking about in-game representation of various groups. For example, some arguments against focusing on video game representation claim that they are free play spaces where 'real world' identities do not matter, thus ignoring the ideological implications of the way games are designed, however. By focusing on production and the game texts we can look at the way particular ideologies are encoded into the virtual play spaces. Game code very clearly directs how we are allowed to play within a given gamespace (King & Krzywinska, 2006). Not all encoded play is equal however. Some games very clearly define the gaming experience for players via pre-assigned avatars, a clearly defined storyline, or specific tasks. Others allow players to explore more, have more avatar options, have more narrative options, and various other changes to the play experience. However, these options are encoded into the game and thus greatly tied to the game designers' cultural values, identity, etc. Thus, while it is possible to image a game that is designed so a player can more readily create an experience that fits their own desires this potential is limited by imaginations and perspectives of the programmers.

Players are not necessarily slaves to the game code, of course. Cheat codes allow players to reshape the gaming experience (Consalvo, 2007; King & Krzywinska, 2006). Moreover, players can use the options made available in the game in ways producers did not necessarily intend (King & Krzywinska, 2006, p. 17). Game modification, or 'modding,' also allows individuals or groups to subvert games which are encoded with ideologies that are different from their own. The game *Quest for Bush*, for example, was created by the Global Islamic

Media Front by modifying the code for the game *Quest for Saddam*, released in 2003 by Petrilla Entertainment (Vargas, 2006). However, while game content may be altered, the game logic, setting, motivations, etc. may still hold some shadow of their genesis. As Machin and Suleiman argue when comparing *Delta Force* (NovaLogic, 1998) and *Special Forces* (Hezbollah, 2003), "both games realize the same discourse of war, a discourse that is American in its origin" (2006, p. 17).

This is only a very preliminary discussion of how we might rethink video game representation. Further ethnographic research on how players interact with, or think about, game representations is necessary. However, as demonstrated in this paper, many more interesting phenomena can be studied when we look at the contexts of the play and the production of video games. We as researchers might, for example, take more seriously the agency of both creators and audiences when it comes to questions of video game representation, thus moving beyond a merely comparative framework.

Works Cited

Abdel-Latif, O. (2001, November 22-23). Imagining the future. *Al-Ahram Weekly Online* Retrieved February 9, 2007, from http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2001/561/9war3.htm

Addelman, R. (2006, July 31). They're rated 'T' for troubling. *Maclean's, 119,* 61-61.

Agence France Presse. (2002, February 21). Syria Launches Arabs' first video game on Intifada.

Ahmad, M. (2004, October 31). Gamblers head north as Dubai bans video games. *Gulf News*.

Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at Large*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Apperley, T. H. (2006). Genre and Game studies: Toward a critical

approach to video game genres. *Simulation and Gaming, 37*(1), 6-23.

Ashcraft, B. (2006, June 8). Changing Stereotypes or Just Replacing Them? Retrieved February 1, 2007, from http://kotaku.com/gaming/religion/changing-stereotypes-or-just-replacing-them-179205.php

Associated Press. (1995, October 6). Islamic Video Game- Iran's Latest Way to Promote Religion.

Barnett, M. (1998). *Dialogues in Arab Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Blumer, J. (1996). Recasting the Audience in the New Television Marketplace? In J. Hay, L. Grossberg & E. Wartella (Eds.), *The Audience and Its Landscape* (pp. 97-112). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Cassell, J., & Jenkins, H. (2000). *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Chan, D. (2005). Playing with Race: The Ethics of Racialized Representations in E-Games. *IRIE, 4*, 24-30.

Clark, D. (2003, November 20). *Computer games in education and training.* Paper presented at the Learning by playing: can computer games and simulations support teaching and learning for post-16 learners in formal, workplace, and informal learning contexts?, Presentation at LSDA Seminar.

Consalvo, M. (2006). Console video games and global corporations: Creating a hybrid culture. *New Media and Society, 8*(1), 117-137.

Consalvo, M. (2007). *Cheating: gaining advantage in videogames*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Costikyan, G. (1998). Don't Be a Vidiot: What computer Game Designers Can Learn from Non-Electronic Games. Retrieved April 10, 2007, from http://www.costik.com/vidiot.html

Cringley, R. X. (2006, May 15). Shoot First, Ask Questions Later. *Infoworld.Com*.

Douglas, N. (2000). Grrls & Gaming on ABC News. In H. Jenkins & J. Cassell (Eds.), *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* (pp. 331-334). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Ewen, S. (1976). *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Galloway, A. R. (2004b, November). Social Realism in Gaming. *Game Studies* Retrieved August 20, 2009, from http://gamestudies.org/0401/galloway/

Garcia Canclini, N. (1995). *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Ghattas, K. (2002, July 9). Syria: Video Game Features Virtual Intifada. *Inter Press Service*.

Ginete, A. M. G. (2006, December 27). Children caught in virtual world.

Bahrain Tribune Retrieved January 24, 2007, from http://www.bahraintribune.com/Printpage.asp

Grossman, D., & DeGaetano, G. (1999). *Stop teaching our kids to kill: a call to action against TV, movie & video game violence* (1st ed.). New York: Crown Publishers.

Halter, E. (2006, September). Islamogaming: Looking for Video Games in the Muslim World. *Computer Gaming World, 266,* 38-41.

Harnden, T. (2004, February 21). Video games attract young to Hizbollah. *The Daily Telegraph,* p. 18.

Huntemann, N., & Media Education Foundation. (2002). *Game over: gender, race & violence in video games*. Northhampton, MA: Media Education Foundation.

Imam, T. (2002, March 5). Intifada game hard to market. *United Press International*.

Juul, J. (2001). Games Telling Stories?: a brief note on games and narratives. *Game Studies, 1*(1).

Kerr, A. (2000). Media diversity and cultural identities. *New Media and Society, 2*(3), 286-312.

Kerr, A., & Flynn, R. (2003). Revisiting Globalisation Through the Movie and Digital Games Industries. *Convergence, 9*(1), 91-113.

King, G., & Krzywinska, T. (2006). *Tomb Raiders & Space Invaders: Videogame Forms & Contexts*. New York: I.B. Tauris.

Koster, R. (2005, October 11). Video Games and Online Worlds as Art. Retrieved April 10, 2007, from http://www.gignews.com/raph1.htm

Kraidy, M. (2005). *Hybridity: or the Cultural Logic of Globalization*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Lee, P. S. N. (1991). The absorption and indigenization of foreign media cultures: A study of a cultural meeting point of the East and West: Hong Kong. *Asian Journal of Communication, 1*(2), 52-72.

Machin, D., & Suleiman, U. (2006). Arab and American Computer War Games: The influence of global technology on discourse. *Critical Discourse Studies, 3*(1), 1-22.

Marchand, R. (1985). *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Marks, N. (2006). Games without frontiers. *British Medical Journal, 333*(863).

Mernissi, F. (2006). Digital Scherazades in the Arab World. *Current History, 105*, 121-126.

Middle East Company News Wire. (2003, October 2). Middle East PlayStation Experience at GITEX Computer Shopper expected to attract over 50,000 visitors.

Middle East Company News Wire. (2004, December 4). Middle East emerges as prime growth market for graphic solutions.

Middle East Company News Wire. (2005, March 24). Sony Computer Entertainment announces launch of its first-ever gaming title in Arabic.

Nieborg, D. B. (2006). Mods, Nay! Tournaments, Yay!- The Appropriation of Contemporary Game Culture by the U.S. Army. *fibreculture* Retrieved February 12, 2007, from http://www.journal.fibreculture.org/issue8/issue8_nieborg_print.html

Ohmann, R. (1996). *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century*. New York: Verso.

Peters, J. D. (1999). *Speaking Into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Peters, J. D. (2001). Witnessing. *Media, Culture and Society, 23*, 707-723.

Roumani, R. (2006, June 5). Muslims craft their own video games. *Christian Science Monitor,* p. 7.

Said, E. W. (1994). *Orientalism* (25th Anniversary Edition ed.). New York: Vintage Books.

Semmerling, T. J. (2006). *'Evil' Arabs in American Popular Film: Orientalist Fear*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Sender, K. (2004). *Business, not politics: the making of the gay market*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Shaheen, J. G. (2001). *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*. New York: Olive Branch Press.

Sherry, J. L. (2001). The effects of violent video games on aggression - A meta-analysis. *Human Communication Research, 27*(3), 309-331.

Sisler, V. (2006). Representation and Self-Representation: Arabs and Muslims in Digital Games. In M. Santoineous & N. Dimitriadi (Eds.), *Gaming Realities: A Challenge for Digital Culture* (pp. 85-92). Fournos, Athens.

Sutton-Smith, B. (1986). *Toys as Culture*. New York: Gardner Press.

Taylor, T. L. (2006). *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

The Economist. (2003). Jihad in cyberspace. *The Economist, 366,* 42-42.

Thompson, C. (2006, July 23). Saving the World, One Video Game at a Time. *The New York Times,* p. 1.

Turkle, S. (1997). *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Turow, J. (1997). *Breaking up America: advertisers and the new media world*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Vargas, J. A. (2006, October 9). Way Radical, Dude. *Washington Post*, from http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/10/08/AR2006100800931.html

Waisbord, S. (2004). McTV: Understanding the Global Popularity of Television Formats. *Television and New Media, 5*(4), 359-383.

Wakin, D. J. (2003, May 18). Aftereffects: Beirut. *The New York Times,* p. 24.

Woods, S. (2004). Loading the Dice: The Challenge of Serious Videogames. *Game Studies, 4*(1).

Yee, N. (2001). The Norranthian Scrolls: A Study of EverQuest., 2005, from http://www.nickyee.com/eqt/report.html

Yee, N. (2006). The Labor of Fun: How Video Games Blur the Boundaries of Work and Play. *Games and Culture, 1*(1), 68-71.

Zawawi, S. (2006, December 26). Fighting a Virtual War. *The Saudi Gazette*.

Zeyad. (2003, October 28). Gamers of the world...UNITE. *Healingiraq*, 2006, from htt[://healingiraq.blogspot.com/archives/2003_10_01_healingiraq_archive.html

Notes

[i] From http://www.damascus-online.com/stonethrowers, though due to technical difficulties I was not actually able to play the game once I had downloaded it.

[ii] It is unclear from press articles if this was the actual name of the game however no other name could be found.

[iii] The back and forth between *Assault on Iran* producer Kuma games and the Union of Islamic Student Societies would be a fascinating topic of study in and of itself, however there is no room to examine it in this paper.

[iv] Articles were found via searches through LexisNexis, EBSCOmegafile, and Google, as well as individual searches on the archives of English language Middle Eastern news sources.

[v] The main example of this is Lt. Dave Grossman asserting that as the military used a modified version of the game *Doom* to successfully train soldiers for combat, the commercially available versions of the game are similarly training young children to kill. (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999; Huntemann & Media Education Foundation., 2002).

[vi] This is excluding the extensive amount of work that has been done on the sociological dimensions of Massively Multiplayer Online Games by people like Taylor (2006), Turkle (1997), and Yee (2001), among others.