

Article

The Development of Video Game Representations of the Middle East

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Abstract

This article critically explores the historical representation of the Middle East in video games until 2002 and following the 9/11 event. Using thematic analysis, we identify four main themes and discuss how this representation shifts with time, offering a brief overview of the broader context. I argue that there is a clear association between political developments and this western representation, for we can clearly observe changes from the romantic, exotic, and orientalist views of the region and Arab and Muslim figure shown within the realms of the Arabian Nights theme to a more militant figure and dangerous place due to featuring armed conflict in the Middle East such as the first Gulf War. Though not included in the discussion, 9/11 introduced a more negative and Islamophobic representation that is associated with Islamist terrorism, and it marks the latest development in these themes.

Keywords

Video games, media representation, Middle East, Arabs, Islam, Muslims

Introduction

In this critically exploratory article, I attempt to offer insight into the mapping of the Middle East with emphasis on the Arab and Muslim representation in western video

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games. This paper does not discuss the Middle Eastern video game production such as *Quraish*, *Under Ash*, or *Under Siege* (Al-Rawi & Consalvo, 2019; Šisler, 2009 & 2014) that attempted to offer a counter narrative to Western representations of the Arab Muslim character. Previous research focused on selected samples of Western representations in the video game industry, but my intention here is to provide a more holistic overview of the development of this representation, for there is a clear lack of literature on using larger samples of video games.

Similar to other mediums, video games play a major role in disseminating specific political narratives. Bown (2018) shows that games possess ideological constructions that promote foreign policy and encourage certain values on their players, while Daniel Muriel and Garry Crawford (2018) argue that video games need to be considered a “lens” that helps us “understand contemporary social life” and “political rationalities.” In other words, video games can be seen as a way “to persuade and to express ideas” (Bogost, 2008, p. 507). With that in mind, Al-Rawi (2008) discusses how video games represent American culture and politics and act as tools for spreading stereotypes and political objectives, suggesting that video games have a role in shaping the views of U.S. decision-makers and the general public. The work of Saber and Webber (2017) is highly beneficial to review propaganda in video games, for they developed previous definitions of representation focusing on major narratives produced by video games and their political messages, suggesting seeing video games as a structure of social and political meanings. Kapell and Elliott (2013) similarly point out that past experiences in video games can be a form of history.

Despite being a relatively new medium, Russworm and Malkowski (2017) believe that media representation in video games still follows a conventional stereotypical approach and is less willing to focus on more meaningful diversity. More than a decade ago, Bogost (2008) pointed out the significance of taking video games seriously and Šisler (2009) argued that shallow representations may be more visible in games than in other media given the lack of elite media critique and academic focus. When thinking about the Arab and Muslim world, the stereotypes in video games need to be systematically studied, especially as political and international developments emerge and digital technologies continue to evolve. Given the record of clichéd American and European media constructions of the Middle East (Mirreles & Ibaid, 2021; Šisler, 2006), it is no surprise that stereotyping and generalizations of the Arab and Muslim world extend from television and films to the video game industry, for stereotypes are present in different genres and remain “an intrinsic part” of different video game genres (Leonard, 2004, p. 5).

There is no doubt that for some parties, there are some invested interests in creating and disseminating video games carrying ideological messages, for state support for and interventions in the video games industry are not new and are noted around the globe. Phillip Penix-Tadsen (2019), in his book *Video Games and the Global South*, highlights cases where “governmental support has been cited as a key piece of the puzzle that leads to successful game development and a sustainable game development ecosystem” (p. 23). Several case studies cited by Liu (2013) consider government

intervention as a moving power for countries attempting to enter the industry. Cases include Canada (Dyer-Witheford & Sharman, 2005), Korea (Jin, 2011), Japan (Aoyama & Izushi, 2003), Ireland (Kerr & Cawley, 2011), China (Cao & Downing, 2008; Liu, 2013; Nie, 2013), and the United States (Schulzke, 2013). Strong associations between state involvement and the success of video games raise important points about delivering ideological messages in media productions.

The U.S. Army, for example, can be considered the leader in terms of state-supported video games. Such interest from the Army in video games began in 1960 when the military financed certain technologies used in video games (Shaban, 2013). Herman (1997) traces the origins of video games and the Army's involvement back to the Cold War as part of nuclear research. Similar to the evolution of the Internet and other technological products that were initially the result of American military projects (Losh, 2006), the military's involvement was essential for developing video games (Herz, 1997). Ottosen (2008) argues, for example, that video game technologies like simulations provide the Department of Defense a cheap alternative to evaluate weapon systems and perform training exercises. While this interest continued to develop, it was later reflected commercially in several games as well, like *Desert Storm*, *Battle of 73 Easting*, *Marine Doom*, and best-seller *Quake* (Ottosen, 2008). The military–entertainment complex describes the unclear union between media genres and military power in the US (Huntemann & Payne, 2010). Before that, the conceptualization of the military–industrial complex demonstrates power through a triangle between political, military, and industrial institutions (Der Derian, 2009). Video games are another strategy that helped the U.S. government convey its political and ideological messages through various methods used by the Pentagon (Al-Rawi, 2008), such as influencing views on the Middle East during the War on Terror. Several studies note the strong connection between the American military and the gaming industry (Halter, 2006; Lenoir, 2000; Stone, 1996). For example, Kuma Reality Games company was created by a group of retired American military officers in 2004 in New York City (Šisler, 2014), and the development of its *Kuma War* game involved support from the American Department of Defense (De Riso, 2013). Both sides consider this connection mutually beneficial because civilian game developers often rely on the military for funding while the military can benefit from disseminating favorable messages and the technology produced (Schulzke, 2013). At the same time, such games were tools for training (Lenoir, 2000).

The Development of the Arab and Muslim Representation

One of the first themes to emerge in the representation of the Arab and Muslim figure in video games is related to the *Arabian Nights*. Similar to Robert Irwin's (2003) claim about the old history of using the *Arabian Nights* in Hollywood films, I argue that the same can be applied to its adaptation in the video gaming industry, for we see pinball and slot machine games dating back to the 1950s.¹ Here, there is a clear romanticization of the region as well as the Arab and Muslim figure, often using the Middle East as an exotic setting filled with mystery, magic, and wonder.

Another popular theme is related to other mysteries surrounding archeological sites by especially using the exotic background of Egypt to create an adventurous and entertaining setting. In Orientalism (1978), Edward Said critically highlights the problematic aspects in the above literary depictions which reflect a western colonial framework, viewing the Middle East region as inferior, alien, and exotic. This framework became part of the intellectual basis of the Western colonial projects in the region in the early twentieth century. After the 9/11 attack, it mainly evolved into what is known as a Neo-Orientalist framework that is briefly discussed below.

The subsequent thematic representation of the Arab and Muslim in video games started to become even more sinister and negative especially in the early 1990s, featuring deadly armed conflicts in the Middle East ranging from the Crusades, the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, and the 1991 Gulf War on Iraq. In relation to the Crusades, however, the representation is not entirely negative. Šisler (2009), for example, mentions that video games that depict Palestine represent a historical lens with an emphasis on the Crusades. This includes games like *Age of Empires 2*, *Stronghold Crusader*, *Civilization III: Conquests*, *Civilization IV*, and *Assassin's Creed*, in which players are able to select an Arab and Muslim hero, army, or character, and not only a European one. While some of these games like *Stronghold Crusader* positively show Muslim rulers like Saladin, the Kurdish leader who defeated the Crusaders in Jerusalem, as a noble prince, this depiction of Saladin is still considered as part of “Orientalist tendencies” that praise some Christian figures at the expense of the other (Šisler, 2009, p. 279). In *Civilization IV*, a game that presents players with the option to choose between four Christian and four Muslim rulers, it is considered an exception to the standard approach used to represent Arabs and Muslims, at least when thinking about American games. In the game, developers considered religious and cultural sensitivity (Šisler, 2009, p. 279), especially when describing features of Islamic civilization. For example, the game corrects misconceptions about loaded concepts like the principle of Jihad (Šisler, 2006, p. 6). Šisler (2014) also said that the game did not follow the Orientalist approach when representing Muslims nor did it cast them as the enemy (p. 126). Similarly and in their detailed analysis of the *Assassin's Creed* (2007) game, El-Nasr et al. (2008) presented a multi-cultural review and praise of the game by incorporating insight from players who have different cultural backgrounds. Other balanced video games include the simulation *PeaceMaker* (2007) game that was produced in three languages (English, Arabic, and Hebrew) in which the player attempts to create peace between Israelis and Palestinians.² More recently, *Assassin's Creed Mirage* (2023) offers an interesting and engaging game by delving into the history of the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad, while offering a balanced representation of the local culture.

Aside from historical video games on Middle Eastern wars, modern armed conflict games on the Arab–Israeli War, such as war simulations, strategy, and first-person shooter games, are overwhelmingly biased and oftentimes Islamophobic. To give an example, the flight simulator video game *Israeli Air Force*, which was released by Electronic Arts in 1988, is situated in the context of the 1967 and 1973 wars and presents the wars from an Israeli perspective only, allowing players to fly war planes and

conduct airstrikes on Egypt, Syria, and Jordan ([Šisler, 2009](#), p. 276). It is not surprising that games about the armed conflict present the war exclusively from “the developers’ political and ideological viewpoints” (p. 284).

Indeed, many more games were produced following the 1991 Gulf War, making the Middle East and Arab countries a new popular armed conflict zone for war video games ([Robinson, 2012](#)). I also argue that the seeds of Islamophobia in video games started at this stage. As an example, tactical first-person shooter games like *Delta Force* by NovaLogic in 1998 allow players to be part of the United States’s Delta Force unit to fight different Arab countries that joined forces to form a terrorist group ([Šisler, 2006](#)). Released years later in 2003, *Command & Conquer: Generals*, also had an Arab military unit named the Global Liberation Army that merged a number of Arab armies together. But in this game, players are able to choose this military unit along with the armies of the United States and China. Yet, the Arab Army remains stereotypically depicted as an angry gang of militias with AK-47s who use car bombs and suicide bombers to fight their enemies, compared to the advanced weapons and technologies of the armies of the United States and China ([Šisler, 2006](#)). Interestingly, in the games *Conflict: Desert Storm* and *Conflict: Desert Storm II* (2002) that take place in the 1991 Gulf War, players can only choose between American or British squads. These limited options eliminate the presence of many other Arab countries that fought in the war like Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Syria, “as if it was a battle between American/British forces and Iraqi soldiers” ([Leonard, 2004](#), p. 6). In this respect, [Thomson \(2009\)](#) notes that producers and designers of the game recreated *Desert Storm* in a way that ignores the importance of air-power and high technology in the war and instead focuses on a story that celebrates American human action and the popular western hero narrative.

Eventually, a more important surge in the representation of Arabs in video games happened after the 9/11 Global War on Terror ([Lowood, 2008](#)), the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the emergence of ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) around 2014. There is no doubt that the aftermath of the September 11th attacks represented a mark of increased American first-person shooter war video games that negatively depict the Middle East and the Arab World, frequently using Islamophobic narratives. This began a wave of war video games that was only part of a larger “pedagogical project of U.S. war practices” and a strategy to militarize entertainment ([Leonard, 2004](#), p. 1). According to Al Kassimi, the 9/11 events enhanced the perceived “threat and fear of Arab ‘primitive’ culture” by further promoting “neo-Orientalist imaginaries informing concepts of Islamophobia, the barbarian thesis, despotism, and the mental incapacities of the ‘Arab mind’” ([2021](#)). This type of post 9/11 neo-orientalism began to broadly exclude Turkey and India from the Western public discourse and focus instead on highlighting “the binarism between the superior American values and the inferior Arab cultures” ([Altwaiji, 2014](#), p. 313). The post 9/11 era was not only manifested in increased military interventions in the Middle East but also in a variety of cultural productions such as novels and literary works ([Altwaiji, 2023](#)) that often reflect the U.S. government’s policies and interests in the region.

The post-9/11 world made the Middle East and Arab countries change from the preferred war zone to the default one in war video games and designated Arabs as the ideal computer-controlled enemy. The top-selling military first-person shooter games like *Battlefield 3*, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*, and *Call of Duty: Black Ops II* are in hostile desert-like environments in countries like Iraq, Somalia, and Afghanistan, where the player is an American soldier with a weapon assigned to destroy and conquer the space they are sent to (Russworm & Malkowski, 2017). Young's (2015) mimetic analysis of the themes of violence, identity, and space in the *Splinter Cell: Blacklist* game highlights similar ideas of soldiers dominating spaces in foreign countries like Libya and Iran. In this game, the enemy found in Arab countries is more ambiguous and defined as "a universally hostile, volatile and morally irredeemable Other" (Young, 2015, p. 159). The enemy often portrayed in war video games did not appear out of nowhere but was the result of years of negative media representations and discourse on Arabs following the first Gulf War which oriented the Iraqi male, for example, as the preferred American public enemy (Allen, 2011). Stripped of civilians, players are taking part in a mission that cannot hurt citizens or cause damage to the lives of peaceful communities (Leonard, 2004; Young, 2015). This virtual chaotic and inhabited space, often defined by its aggression and violence, is regularly created and adjusted to become an environment where all its areas, objects, people, and surroundings are placed "to serve warfare's strategic needs" (De Riso, 2013, p. 153). In brief, there was an overwhelming dehumanized, racist, and Islamophobic representation of the Arab and Muslim character in contemporary western video games following 9/11 events. Because the majority of games in the Middle East are related to this theme, I did not include them in this article. This paper attempts to answer the following research question: What are the major themes that emerge from the representation of the Middle East in video games produced before 2002?

Method

As I wanted to understand the bigger picture in relation to the representation of Arabs and Muslims in video games until 2002, I worked with two other researchers using over 14 video game online databases and repository sites³ as well as Weiss's video game archives (2011, 2012, & 2016) to get the sample. To identify these online sites, I consulted with a number of video game scholars and conducted several Internet searches. However, the sample is limited to games released before 2002 because the number of video games dramatically shifted as mentioned above and seen in Figure 1.⁴ In total, there were 238 video games including two arcade games from the 1960s and 70 s featuring the *Arabian Nights*. As mentioned above, the year 2002 showed a dramatic increase in the frequency of these games, and there is no doubt that the 9/11 event led to changes in the media representation of the Middle East, reducing it to violence and terrorism. In fact, many video game titles contained the word "terror" in them such as *Terrorist Takedown 2: US Navy SEALS* (2008), *Stealth Force: The War on Terror* (2005), and *Strike Force: War on Terror* (2009).

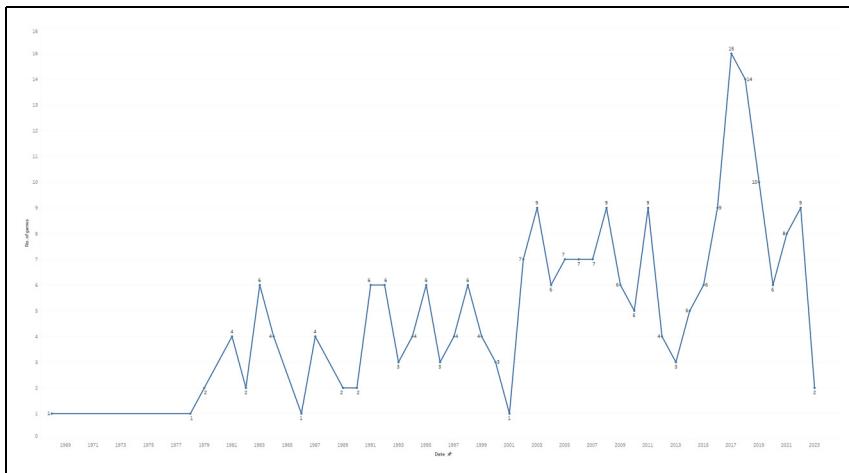


Figure 1. A visualization of the release dates of 238 video games dealing with the Middle East. Source: <https://www.mobygames.com/> using the Middle East context search option from the beginning until October 10, 2023.

To get the sample, I worked with two research assistants and searched for the following words in the sites mentioned above, sometimes in combination with the terms or options of “retro games” and/or “Middle East setting”: Saracen, terrorist, terrorism, terror, Arab, Middle East, Islam, Muslim, Syria, Libya, Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt, Palestine, Palestinian, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia.

To identify the major themes, we used applied thematic analysis after reviewing each video game’s description, playing it, or watching its demo on YouTube. For the majority of the games, we used a Word document to copy the official game’s title, description, and release date, and took screenshots either by playing it or viewing other online sources in order to systematically document our research process. In general, thematic analysis is based on grounded theory (Guest et al., 2011), and it is a qualitative research method that employs inductive reasoning and coding (Riger & Sigurvinssdottir, 2016). This is also known as “emergent coding” (Wimmer & Dominick, 2013, p. 168) because it relies on the collected data itself to understand the common features of each theme. We identified themes based on the observation of commonalities, repeated descriptions, and patterns in representations (Guest et al., 2011; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Four major themes were identified including: *Arabian Nights*, archaeology, educational, and armed conflict games. These themes are not always mutually exclusive, for there are sometimes some minor overlaps, but we used the overreaching and dominant representation as our guide in identifying the main theme for each video game as it pertains to the Middle East representation. For example, a few games that engage with the *Arabian Nights* theme contain background stories derived from archaeology, and the same applies to some armed conflict games that sometimes use archaeology only in

the background. One game, for instance, deals with armed conflict in the ancient world in which some events occur around the archaeological sites of and characters from ancient Egypt. Though we have not explored the latest theme which deals with terrorism, some games that fall under the armed conflict theme make ample references to sinister characters having evil and terrorist intentions.

Using a shared Excel sheet, we identified 175 relevant video games by listing each game's name, release date, and theme. For transparency, we shared the complete list on a public data repository which can help other researchers build on this study ([Figshare, 2023](#)). The csv sheet also helped in visualizing the content using the Academic license of Tableau (see [Figure 2](#)).

Finally, there were three games such as *Zim Sala Bim* (1984) that we could not categorize into the aforementioned themes, so we assigned “other” to them. These games deal with stereotypical depictions of the Middle East in the middle ages without necessarily alluding to the *Arabian Nights*.

Discussion

As stated above, this article explores the representation of the Middle East, especially the Arab and Muslim figure in video games before 2002. To answer the research question, I structured the discussion below based on the four major themes that emerged from reviewing over 175 video games collected from a variety of sources.

Theme 1: Arabian Nights

The earliest and most popular theme that emerged in video games before 2002 dealing with the Middle East is that of the *Arabian Nights*. There are 71 games that deal with

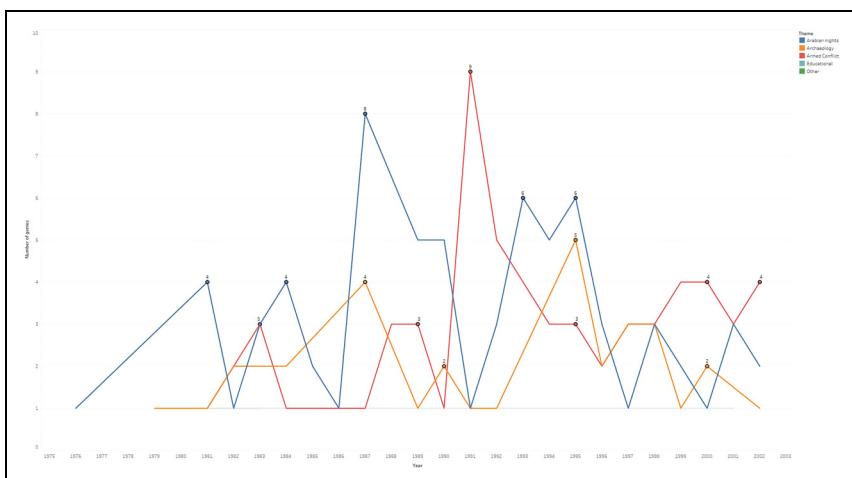


Figure 2. A visualization of 175 video games based on their themes and release dates.

this theme, constituting 40.5% of the sample. We can observe from [Figure 2](#) that it continued to be a dominant theme throughout the previous decades, indicating a western fascination with the mysterious and magical tales of Sinbad, Aladdin, and the genies. There are a variety of game genres that use this theme, often revolving around adventure and challenge such as rescuing an Arabian princess and defeating evil actors like wizards or thieves while dodging ferocious animals such as tigers, snakes, and scorpions. For example, *Arabian Adventure* (1981) is based on a series of text-based combat adventures (see [Figure 3](#)) revolving around Sinbad rescuing Princess Jasmine who is kidnapped by Rex, the wizard. To play, one must enter two words (a noun and verb) to indicate the required action which needs to involve asking a genie for assistance in defeating different monsters and fearful creatures like moving skeletons.

Indeed, the above game is very basic due to the early development of the video game industry. In the following decade, more advanced games were introduced such as *Disney's Aladdin* (1994) (see [Figure 4](#)). The game is set in the fictional Agrabah city where Aladdin attempts to survive and rescue Princess Jasmine by going to many challenging places such as Sultan Jafar's palace while making use of the magical carpet and lamp.

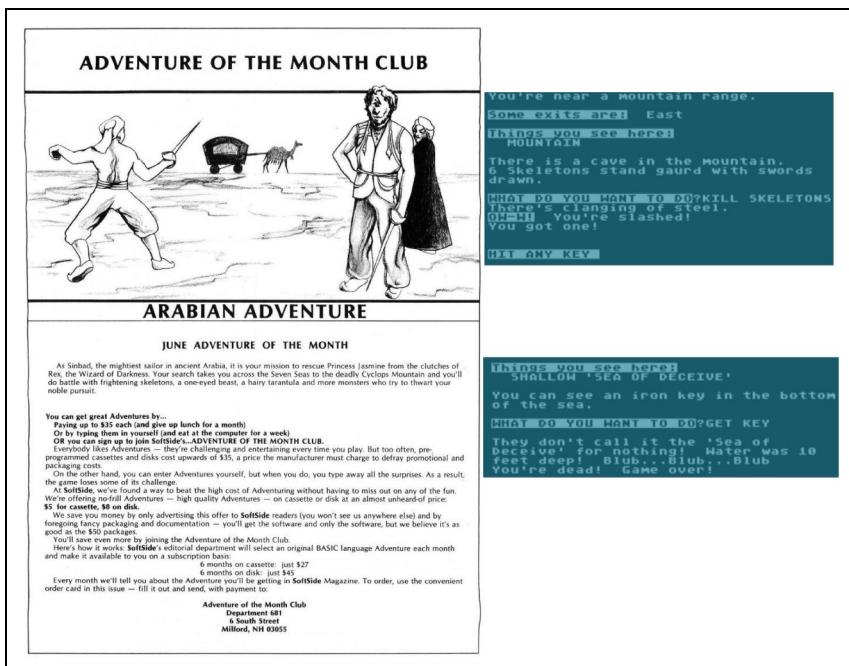


Figure 3. The text-based Arabian adventure game.



Figure 4. Disney's Aladdin video game showing Aladdin's adventures.



Figure 5. Arabian magic game and the representation of Arab women.

As mentioned above, the representation of the Middle East and the Arab and Muslim figure follows a romanticized and exotic pattern where we find multiple gendered and ethnic stereotypes. There are, for example, many evil-looking Middle Eastern characters who speak in unrecognizable language to suggest malicious intent, while women are featured mostly to be rescued by men. In some cases, such as *Arabian Magic* (1992), powerful women are sexualized by mostly showing them in revealing clothes dressed as belly dancers (see [Figure 5](#)), denoting a sexist view.

Theme 2: Archaeology

The second theme revolves around archaeology, and similar to the above games, they mostly include adventure, mystery, and challenge genres. There are 35 games making up 20% of the overall sample. This is the third most dominant theme. The overwhelming majority of game settings, however, are based in Egypt, largely ignoring other Middle Eastern countries that also have long civilizational histories. Again, there are recurrent stereotypes used by showing the desert as a defining topographical feature of the place. For example, *The Sands of Egypt* (1982) survival game is set in the Sahara Desert in the late nineteenth century with the goal of finding Tomb Ra ([Figure 6](#)). The player is lost in the desert and needs to collect gems and souvenirs, avoid snakes, and regularly find water to survive. Similar to *Arabian Adventure*, this is another basic text-based game. Ironically, the player is described as the aristocratic British explorer, Sir Percy, which seems to be inspired by the colonial British officer, Sir Percy Cox (1864–1937), who was instrumental in creating the borders of many modern Middle Eastern countries. Here, Arab and Muslim characters have no

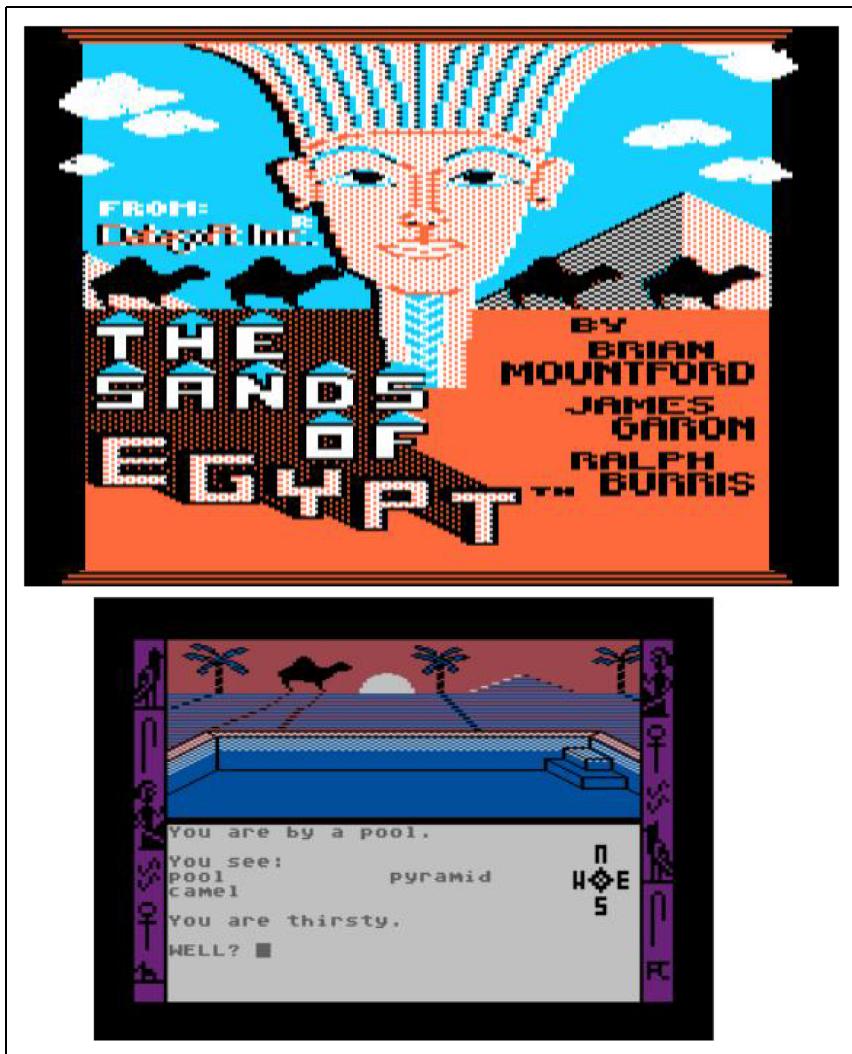


Figure 6. The sands of Egypt game featuring the theme of archaeology.

agency, but the region's background is used as an attractive setting. At the same time, the western-based colonial figure is introduced as the potential hero who can solve archeological mysteries and miraculously survive the harsh hot weather.

Similar to other games, we can observe clear technological developments in the production of video games in the following decade. *Daughter of Serpents* (1992), for example, offers the player the opportunity to engage in an Agatha Christie-like crime mystery challenge. Some of the Arab and Muslim characters are shown as

mysterious and sinister lurking in the dark to harm or assassinate someone such as an exotic woman or a male Egyptian character holding two knives (Figure 7). The latter turns into a lizard after killing another game character, and this is also reflected in the name of the game itself. Once again, the main player is a White



Figure 7. Daughter of serpents showing sinister Arab characters.

western male called Dr. S. Squake, whose task is to solve the murder mystery set in archeological sites.

The one-sided stereotypical games on Middle Eastern archaeology remain quite gendered, for the majority of characters are men. When women are introduced, they are often sexualized, such as the case of Ramaya in the fighting game *Arabian Fight* (1992), who is wearing once again revealing clothes similar to what belly dancers wear. This character is shown as strong, fighting in an Egyptian pyramid setting against mummies, wizards, and an evil-looking green snake woman (Figure 8). Finally, and in some cases, the theme of archaeology is only used as a passing reference in the background like the car racing game *Mad Rider* (1987) that mentions Egypt.

Theme 3: Educational

The third theme is related to five video games which constitute 2.7%, dealing with the Middle East that are educational in nature. These pre-Internet era games are structured around puzzles and produced for children and teens to illustrate basic information about the history and geography of the region. For example, and though this one overlaps with the theme of archaeology, *Archibald's Guide to the Mysteries of Ancient Egypt* (1994) focuses on explaining the ancient history of Egypt by teaching hieroglyphics and detailing the importance of the Rosetta stone (Figure 9). Also, *World Tour: Middle East* (1990) explains the geography of the region like its population, topographical features, and the nature of vegetation presented in the form of puzzles and questions. These are neutral games that attempt to offer factual information on the region.

Theme 4: Armed Conflict

The fourth and last theme which is armed conflict marks a shift in the representation of the Middle East and the Arab and Muslim character in video games because there is a clear delineation of the enemy figure. There are 61 video games that fall within this theme (34.8%), and it is the second most dominant theme. Since I am focused on the video games released before 2002, the three main game settings and events are related to the Crusades, the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, and the 1991 Gulf War.

For the crusading games, *Exile II: XZR* (1988), produced by Telenet, introduces the fictional Muslim character of Sadler, an assassin. The name of the character and the storyline seem to be inspired by Saladin's wars during the crusades. Sadler is the hero of the game, and his role is to unify the different warring parties like the Knights Templar in order to end all religious strife. The player can choose four main Middle Eastern characters: Sadler, Rumi (female character), Kindi (highly religious), and Fakhyle (seems to be a derivation of the Sufi name of faqir). Similar to the *Assassin's Creed* game series mentioned above, there is a largely positive representation of the Middle East region and the Arab and Muslim figure in the games that deal with this historical era. Despite the focus on the sinister and fearful assassin characters,

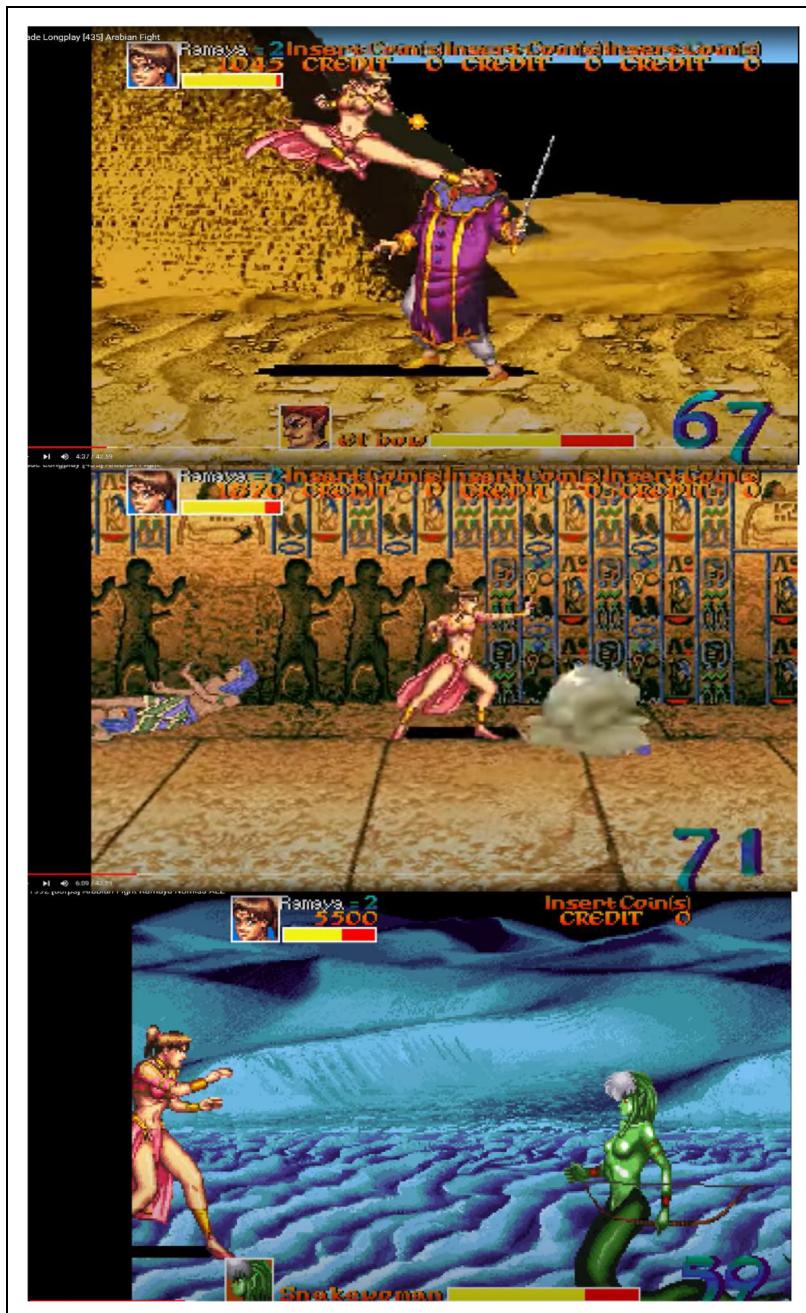


Figure 8. Arabian fight game showing Ramaya wearing belly dancing clothes.

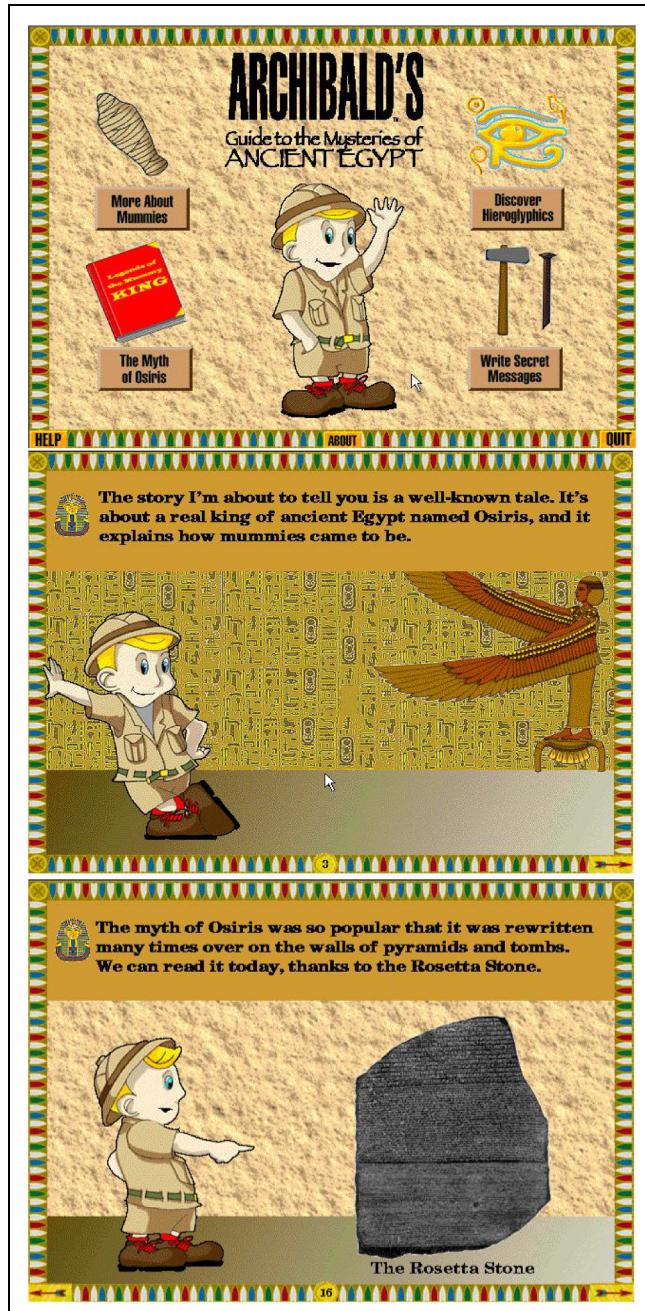


Figure 9. Archibald's guide to the mysteries of ancient Egypt is an educational game.



Figure 10. Jane's combat simulations: IAF simulation game.

the player can choose these Arab and Muslim characters that are shown as the positive ones defeating other bad characters.

The video games discussing modern armed conflict, however, changed this representation, especially due to the Arab-Israeli War. We rarely find any positive representation,



Figure 11. Operation: secret storm inspired by the 1991 gulf war.

and strategy, simulator, and first-person shooter games become the dominant genres. For example, *Jane's Combat Simulations: IAF - Israeli Air Force* (1998) is an aircraft simulation game showcasing the Israeli Air Force that is engaged in six war campaigns including the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, the 1973 October War, and the 1982 War in Lebanon as well as three other imaginary war settings in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon (Figure 10). The goal is to use aircraft like the F-15 to destroy the Arab enemy's strategic land locations, helicopters, and aircraft.

The War on Iraq in 1991 following the invasion of Kuwait created another wave of armed conflict video games where the enemy is an Arab-looking character that must be eliminated. For example, the mission of Agent George, a CIA agent, in *Operation: Secret Storm* (1991) attempts to stop Iraq's usage of chemical weapons and save oil refineries in Kuwait and Iraq by collecting or destroying weapons and bombs (Figure 11). Saddam Hussein and the other Iraqi enemies are shown as having dark skin, mostly wearing Arab traditional headdresses and carrying daggers, denoting a Bedouin-like representation of fighters who lack modern weaponry.

Games about weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East are also numerous. For instance, *Desert Strike: Return to the Gulf* (1992) features a Middle Eastern General called Kilbaba, which is not an Arabic word, who owns nuclear weapons and threatens to start a Third World War against the United States. The player operates

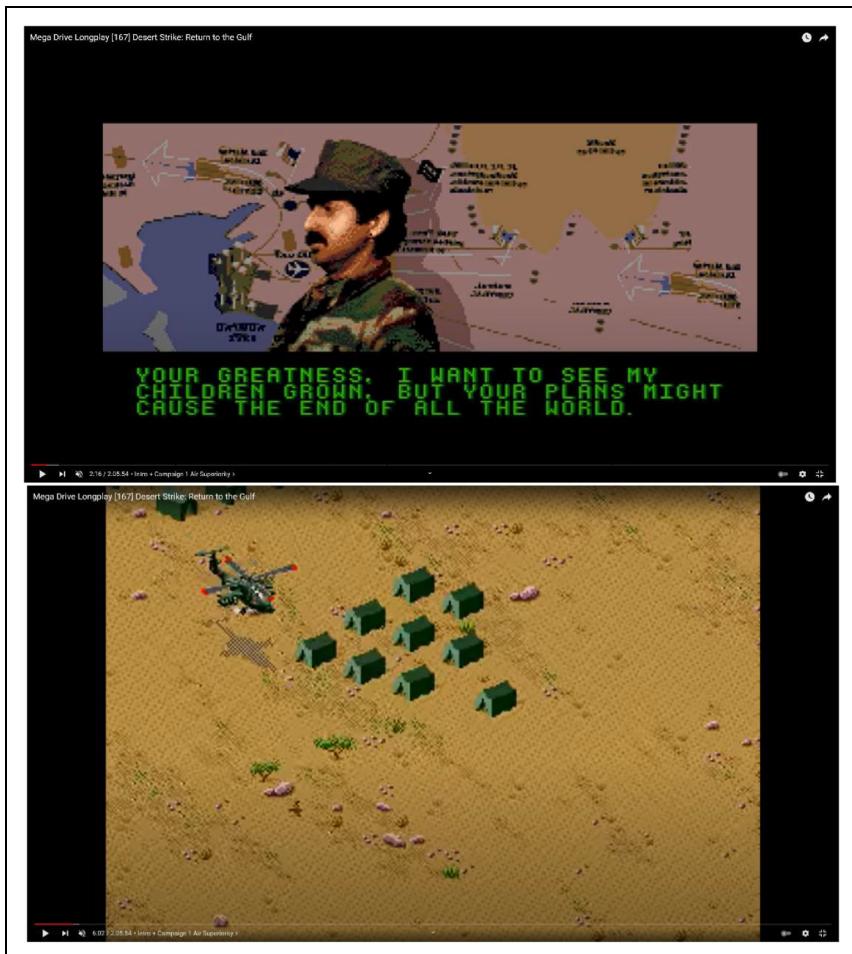


Figure 12. Desert strike: return to the gulf featuring general Kilbaba.

an Apache helicopter whose mission is to eradicate the General and destroy his weapons ([Figure 12](#)).

Finally and despite the fact that we excluded games produced in and after 2002 from our sample, we found one game called *War on Terrorism* (2001) that was released in December of the same year, dealing with Islamist terrorism following the 9/11 attack.

Conclusion

To sum up, video games that deal with the Middle East before 2002 can be largely categorized under four major themes: *Arabian Nights*, archaeology, educational, and

armed conflict. Each theme contains a variety of genres like adventure, crime, horror, e-sports, fighting, racing, first-person shooter, simulation, and strategy. While educational video games seem to have neutral value, other games that revolve around the *Arabian Nights* and archaeology contain cliches and stock figures like sinister and evil-looking Arabs as well as many gendered stereotypes. In many of these games, the Arab and Muslim character largely remains the hero that defeats evil monsters, genies, and fearful animals. However, the Middle East remains a setting that is othered as exotic, strange, and foreign, and the region as well as its people is merely used as an entertaining background piece in these games. Finally, a negative shift occurred when video games began to depict armed conflict, especially covering the Arab–Israeli War and the 1991 military confrontation with Iraq rather than the Crusades. The Arab and Muslim figure becomes the enemy that must be eliminated and the region is represented as chaotic, “barbaric,” and unpredictably dangerous to be contrasted with the “civilized,” technologically advanced, and predictable west. Following the War on Terror, the 2003 War on Iraq, and the emergence of ISIS, the representation has become even more Islamophobic, sinister, and negative, overwhelmingly representing Arabs and Muslims within the framework of Islamist terrorism. In these video games, the Middle Easterners are constantly vilified and are stripped of their humanity, often reduced to a sub-human category in order to justify virtually killing them.

This exploratory article does not claim to have mapped all the available video games produced before 2002 despite consulting multiple sources and online repositories. One major limitation of the study is that most of the games cannot be easily found in the market, so playing each one of them was not possible. We believe, however, that it can be useful in informing other researchers interested in delving deeper into this topic. Future studies, for example, can focus on specific video game companies, time periods, countries, themes, or genres as there are many other under-researched aspects that need to be further investigated.

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Notes

1. See, for example, Gottlieb, D. & Co.'s game, Arabian Knights, in the following link: https://www.arcade-museum.com/game_detail.php?game_id=574
2. For more details, see: <http://www.peacemakergame.com/about.php>
3. <https://archive.org/> (numerous links such as <https://archive.org/details/classicpcgames>) <https://www.mobygames.com/>, <https://www.igdb.com/discover>, <https://rawg.io/>, <https://www.vgchartz.com/gamedb/>, <https://www.wowhead.com/database>, <https://www.arcade-museum.com/>, <http://www.cheatcodes.com/>, <https://lgbtqgamearchive.com/>, https://www.ludicine.ca/index.php?q=en/search/ludographie_horreur, <https://www.museumofplay.org/about/ic heg>, <https://en.wikipedia.org/> (numerous sites like https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lists_of_Sega_games and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Atari_2600_games).
4. I only used one online source to get this sample of 238 video games.

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