

Representation of Middle Eastern Islamic Locality in Video Games

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Abstract: This article analyzes the depiction of Middle Eastern Islamic locality in video games that has a bad image. This research uses qualitative research method and a literature study approach. It reveals the representation of the Arab world and Muslims in video games developing after the September 11 attacks. The representation had significant impacts on Muslims around the world. It can damage the positive image of Islam and Muslims in the world community. The representation of Muslims in video games, such as in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* and *Kuma/War*, uses stereotypes in Western societies. Muslims appear to be terrorists and live in a country that seems isolated.

Keywords: Video Game, Islam, Muslim, Representation Theory, Stuart Hall.

A. INTRODUCTION

Based on the data Marketwatch (2020) conveyed, the video game industry is currently bigger than the film and music industry. It is also the result of the Covid-19 Pandemic that has very significant impacts in various sectors, especially the economic sector. The Covid-19 Pandemic has increased the production of the video game industry. It has made people prefer to stay at home to avoid the virus. People who choose to stay at home are looking for fun and safe entertainment at a low cost. Video games are becoming the choice as digital entertainment amidst a pandemic. Marketwatch data says that the lockdown caused by the spread of Covid-19 helped global sales of

video game products increase by 20% and reach nearly 180 billion dollars by 2020. Video game industry experts and observers do not see any possibility of a decline in video game production in 2021.

The story adopted in the video game continues to grow. The use of stories based on historical events is increasingly in demand by video game players. At first, the stories in video games contain the genre First Person Shooter (FPS). Most video games with the FPS genre have a storyline about the World War. However, since two planes hijacked by Islamic militants of Al-Qaeda crashed into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11, many video game developers have created video games with war background stories such as the US invasion of Afghanistan or Iran. Some video games, such as *Desert Storm*, *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, or *Kuma/War*, depict conflicts between the United States and Middle Eastern countries. The storyline raised in some of the video games is quite sensitive for the Muslim community.

The image of Islamic life in video games is interesting because it creates a stereotype that Islam is identical to the Middle East. It appears in the depiction of the characters and behavior according to the imagination of Western society. The image of Islam is only limited to Islam in the Middle East, although in fact, Islam is very various. Therefore, this study will reveal the efforts of creators to understand the locality and character of Islam in the Middle East. This article aims to provide new insights and knowledge regarding how much influence video games have on society, as well as how they portray the image of Islam through Middle East locality in a video game. In addition, the researcher will also analyze the public's response to the depiction of Islam in video games.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses qualitative research methods and a literature study approach. There are three steps in the process of compiling this research. First, looking for data sources from books or articles in scientific journals that discuss video games in general. Second, revealing previous studies related to how video games depict ethnicity, race, and religion through storylines and characters in video games. Third, processing and analyzing these data. As a basis for analysis, the researcher uses the theoretical framework of Stuart Hall (1997). The theory is about representation, and it can reveal the image of Islam in the video game.

Stuart Hall (1997) states that representation is a part of the processes produced and exchanged in a culture. The use of language aims to represent the real-world to others. This representation involves the use of language, symbols, and images to signify objects. There are three approaches to explaining how language represents meaning: reflective approach, intentional approach, and constructionist or constructive approach. No one can separate representation from culture. Hall added that the word “culture” itself is a shared value obtained from a group or society (Hall, 1997: 5-24).

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Islam in Video Games

In a video game, players see various shapes and visual images. The players can feel a more significant experience through displayed visualization, such as the movements of the main and supporting characters, dialogue between characters, symbols, and setting. Many components in video games make video games suitable digital entertainment for players, apart from watching movies. According to Mitchell (1984), an image is a sign that provides a window into another world. Mitchell added that we need to consider two things in the imaging phenomenon in general. First, we can intend many things as images, such as pictures, sculptures, optical illusions, maps, diagrams, dreams, hallucinations, displays, designs, poetry, patterns, memories, and ideas. Second, although images can be many forms, they have nothing in common with one another (Mitchell, 1984: 504). Therefore, as said by Mitchell, video games have a variety of images.

Video games don't just contain linear characters like fictional characters that don't have any background. The development of the video game industry encouraged new ideas regarding characterization. Now, the characters in video games have a certain race, ethnicity, gender, and religion. It indicates that video game developers are increasingly serious about developing the industry in a more realistic direction. However, the depiction of race, ethnicity, gender, and religion in the video game does not make the video game itself acceptable to society. According to Russworm (2017), society will always criticize video game developers if they fail to describe race, diversity, and inclusiveness. At first, white racial figures appeared too often because there was an idea to include various diversities to video games, which led to debates between the

community and video game developers. Therefore, video game developers must be careful in presenting racial and religious diversity in video games now. According to Khamis (2007), new digital technology marks the beginning of a new era of self-definition and self-representation for Arabs and Muslims in the world.

Video game developers not only have to be careful about the development of diversity, but they also have to pay close attention to writing storylines and what real-life events to include. As said before, many video games now adapt events that occur in the real world as background stories, such as the video game *KumaWar* released in 2004. *KumaWar* is a war video game with a third-person shooter (TPS) developed by a video game developer from New York, United States. *KumaWar* gives its players the experience to feel the military situation in Iraq and Afghanistan. Šisler (2008) says that *KumaWar* also navigates the player through cities in Iraq and Afghanistan, including holy sites and mosques. They also display the characters of Sunni and Shia Muslims mostly portrayed as enemies within the narrative of rebellion, international terrorism, and religious fundamentalism (Šisler, 2008: 109).

According to the article *Shooting the Arabs: How video games perpetuate Muslim stereotypes* written by Nicole Lee (2016), Islam has a very negative image, and it is not only related to events that have happened recently. The media have been lying to Muslims for years. The film series *Homeland* also depicts Muslims, especially those of Arab descent, almost always as enemies. Rami Ismail (2016), founder of Vlambeer, an independent video game studio based in the Netherlands, said that the political and cultural upheaval against Islam in recent years has made Muslims or Arab descendants as enemies in digital media, including video games.

Besides *KumaWar*, there is a video game *Call of Duty*. *Call of Duty* is a franchise from Activision which is famous for its World War II genre since 2003. Entering 2007, *Call of Duty* changed its storyline to be more modern and took the background of the story in the Middle East. Several levels in *Call of Duty* had become controversial among the public and several countries have to ban the distribution of the game in order to prevent political tension. Some video games can have quite a dangerous impact not only on a person's behavior but also on the political stability of a country.

According to Rami Ismail (2016), many criminals in *the Call of Duty* are Muslim. One of the characters is Khaled Al-Asad, who appears in one of his

series entitled *Modern Warfare*. Ismail explained that players in the game have to shoot Arabs. Therefore, according to Ismail, Muslim blood is the cheapest blood in the world. According to Dr. Romana Ramzan (2016), a game design lecturer at Glasgow Caledonian University in the United Kingdom, there are four stereotypes of Muslims in video games, (i) women who always wear a hijab, (ii) men who always have a beard, (iii) aggressive and violent characteristics, and (iv) always carry an AK-47. Several other stereotypes also illustrate that Muslims always shout *Allahu Akbar* in the habit of raising camels or goats. Šisler (2008) categorizes several stereotypes of Muslims in video games. First, the exploitation of stereotypes tends to be cliché and reductive. Second, portraying Muslims as a threat. Third, always associating Islam with terrorism. Fourth, marginalizing the true representation of Muslims (Šisler, 2008: 111).

Ramzan (2016) adds that the real problem is that a Muslim should not be categorized and reduced into a specific identity because a Muslim is not necessarily an Arab and an Arab is not necessarily a Muslim. According to Ismail, not all Muslims speak Arabic like the world's largest Muslim country, Indonesia, which is not near the Middle East. However, many people are not aware of this fact and focus more on countries in the Middle East. According to Witteborn (2007), the stereotype of terrorism itself after the September 11 attacks is increasingly common in the Western video games industry. Since then, Arab and Muslim identities have been politicized through reciprocal relationships ascribed to Islam, Arab identity, and terrorism. Witteborn added that, at that time, many Muslims emphasized their identity because they felt they needed to pursue Islam to others to justify their identity. According to el-Nawawy (2009), misinterpretation of Muslims has a broad impact. Most Muslims now find themselves misinterpreted as an isolated and marginalized minority who reject integration with other cultures and religions or as a terrorist group that violently attacks others and threatens their safety (Nawawy & Khamis, 2009: 4).

2. Islamic Locality in Video Games

Mistakes related to Islamic stereotypes often occur in video games. Several video games, such as *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2007), *America's Army* (2002), *Conflict Desert Storm II: Back to Baghdad* (2003), *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down* (2003), *Counter-Strike: Condition Zero* (2004), or *Kuma/*

War (2004) have a mission level in the Middle East or a fictional place that is as similar as possible to the Middle East regions. In these games, the setting depicts the Middle East with traditional stereotypes, such as deserts, camels, Bedouins (Badawi/Bedouin), and caliphs.

On the other hand, US soldiers appear brave, strong, and modern in a video game. They carry sophisticated weapons and equipment. The depiction aims to give a positive image by contrasting the technology and equipment used by people in the Middle East. It implicitly gives the impression that the Arabs (Muslims) who live in the middle of an arid desert have tough, traditional, and outdated characteristics in using modern technology. In these video games, the depiction of Middle Eastern people as terrorists is evident by emphasizing the use of their war equipment in the form of a lumbering truck or a car containing a suicide bomb with ragged people carrying an outdated Russian-made weapon, AK-47. In addition, if you look closely, video games have developed after the September 11 attacks. It is as if the September 11 attacks were proof of the justification for the characters of the Arab nation and Muslims in general that is identical with terrorism, fundamentalists, and suicide bombings. It is not surprising that many Muslim societies object to this depiction of the Middle East.

Dima Saber and Nick Webber's research published in the journal *Media, Culture, & Society* (Edition Vol. 39 No. 01), confirms that regions in the Middle East are considered "favorite places" for US troops to fight against various kinds of terror (Saber & Webber, 2017: 78). Robinson (2012) states that the emergence of video games related to contemporary conflicts, especially after the September 11 attacks, has prompted many researchers from the fields of art, humanities, and social sciences to call for the study of video games more seriously (Robinson, 2012: 510). In addition, the trend of war-themed video games based on the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq created a sales boom in the commercial market (Stahl, 2006: 118).

Therefore, this phenomenon is basically an orientalization in video games. According to Edward Said (1997), Western digital media basically inherited the Western mainstream orientalism system based on political identification. Western digital media is an emphasis on Arab and Muslim representations in the Middle East based on a series of dichotomies between civilized, modern, democratic, and peace-loving (Western) and uncivilized, ancient, totalitarian, and cruel (Arab) (Said, 1997: 173).

Before the controversy related to the video game *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*, there was a game called *Six Days in Fallujah*. The game is a product of a video game developer from Texas, United States, Atomic Games. Atomic Games planned to release the video game in 2009. However, due to criticism from the public and activists, Atomic Games must cancel the launch of *Six Days in Fallujah*. *Six Days in Fallujah* itself has a background story based on real events known as the Battle of Fallujah. The incident was a conflict between US troops and the rebels in Al-Fallujah, Iraq, in 2004. It caused many deaths. The victims consisted of 27 US soldiers, 1200 to 2000 rebels, and 600 Iraqis (300 of whom were women and children).

Objection and criticism on the video game *Six Days in Fallujah* emerged because there was a mosque in the video game. At first, there is a scene where US soldiers destroy a mosque in Al-Fallujah. The incident is based on original footage that depicts how US troops deliberately blew up the mosque building in Al-Fallujah. Atomic Games also argues that some of the scenes in this game are sensitive scenes for Muslims.

Nicole Lee (2016) also explains that this problem also occurs in some video games. There are depictions of Arab and Muslim countries that are often inaccurate, erroneous, and even insinuating in some video games. The problem appears in one of the levels in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* that displays Arabic writings in Karachi Pakistan, even though the Pakistani people do not use Arabic. Most Pakistanis in Karachi speak English or Urdu. Farah Khalaf (2016), a Palestinian-Iraqi video game developer from New Zealand, often hopes that a video game can depict cities in the Middle East as they are, not as cities in the middle of a desert.

The misrepresentation of Islam and Middle Eastern countries exist because many video game developers come from the West. Western video game developers do not follow Islamic developments, so they give misrepresentations in their products. They even tend to generalize and reduce Muslims like stereotypes about nations in the Middle East. They must conduct in-depth research on the national cultures in the Middle East and the spirit of Islam as a religion of peace. The aim is to give Arab and regional figures in the Middle East a more accurate and proportional depiction. In this way, the image of Islam in their video games is impartial and tendentious.

Although some video games fail to portray true Islam and tend to cause polemics in society, several other video games represent Islamic culture well.

So, the wider community more accepted these video games. The video game, entitled *Quraish*, aims to provide its players with a more culturally relevant representation and inform the world community about Islam and Muslim culture. *Quraish* is a video game released in 2005 and developed by a video game developer from Syria, Afkar Media. Through *Quraish*, players can witness the origins of Islamic history and replay important battles of early Islamic history, including the collapse of the Iranian Sassanid Empire and the Byzantine Empire (Şisler, 2008: 109).

Besides *Quraish*, which presents the experience of Islamic history for its players, *Assassin's Creed* franchise series has also succeeded in presenting the Islamic world. Even though *Assassin's Creed* (2007) was a product by a video game developer from Paris named Ubisoft, it researched seriously historical experts in his creative process. Therefore, *Assassin's Creed* has excellent accuracy. According to Rami Ismail (2016), *Assassin's Creed* describes Istanbul as a city with spirit, sparkles, and several historical characters such as Sultan Suleiman and Selim II of the Ottoman Empire.

Walid (2020) said that, in the end, there are video game characters from Arab who do not represent Arabs as terrorists. The characters use Arabic throughout the storyline in *Assassin's Creed*. Walid added that an Arab character in *Assassin's Creed* named Altair Ibn-La'Ahad is not the first Arab protagonist in a video game. Some of the early video games featured Arab protagonists, though they never were successful, such as *Beyond Oasis' Prince Ali* (1994) and *Arabian Nights* (2001). Altair Ibn-La'Ahad is the most iconic character with the most significant impact on the broader video game culture.

Based on the researcher's observations, video games with detailed storylines containing Islamic history are still rare. Besides providing new insights and knowledge related to the Islamic world, the players can also get a broader perspective on Islam. The creative process will also be better if the developers involve Islamic historians to collect data based on Islamic historical records into video games like Ubisoft with its product, *Assassin's Creed*. It is not only an opportunity for one video game developer to introduce the image of Islam in an educational and fun way but also an opportunity for Muslims around the world. Therefore, Muslim experts in digital products must start seriously thinking about the real image of Islam through various cultural and artistic products, such as video games.

D. CONCLUSION

The depiction of the Arab world and images of Muslims in video games has grown more and more after the September 11 attacks. It has had significant impacts on Muslims all over the world. It absolutely can damage the image of Islam and Muslims for the world community. Muslim representations in video games, such as *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* and *Kuma/War*, show stereotypes held by people in the West. The lack of research on Islamic culture is a primary factor in the misunderstanding among Western video game developers. Other Western video game developers should emulate how Ubisoft depicts race, ethnicity, and culture in a video game. The involvement of historical experts is the right decision in making video games. They must involve experts to maintain the accuracy of representation and avoid mistakes.

The negative representation of Muslims does not only occur in video games but also in movies. As in video games, Muslims are depicted as terrorists and live in a country that seems isolated. Not only Muslims, but they also portray countries in Eastern Europe with a negative image in digital media as enemies and terrorists. Therefore, there is an urgent need for more in-depth and extensive research into how countries in Eastern Europe are portrayed in digital media.

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