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Islamophobia, and the Global
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Tanner Mirrlees

Ontario Tech University, Oshawa, Ontario, Canada

Taha Ibaid

Independent Researcher, Oshawa, Ontario, Canada

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Tanner Mirrlees

Ontario Tech University, Oshawa, Ontario, Canada

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ABSTRACT: This article argues that digital war games communicate misleading stereotypes about Muslims that prop up patriarchal militarism and Islamophobia in the context of the US-led Global War on Terror. The article’s first section establishes the relevance of the study of digital war games to feminist games studies, feminist international relations, and post-colonial feminism. The second section contextualizes the contemporary production and consumption of digital war games with regard to the “military-digital-games complex” and real and simulated military violence against Muslims, focusing especially on the US military deployment of digital war games to train soldiers to kill in real wars across Muslim majority countries. The third section probes “mythical Muslim” stereotypes in ten popular digital war games released between 2001 and 2012: *Conflict: Desert Storm* (2002), *Conflict: Desert Storm 2* (2003), *SOCOM U.S. Navy SEALs* (2002), *Full Spectrum Warrior* (2004), *Close Combat: First to Fight* (2005), *Battlefield 3* (2011), *Army of Two* (2008), *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007), *Medal of Honor* (2010), and *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* (2012). These games immerse players in patriarchal fantasies of “militarized masculinity” and place a “mythical Muslim” before their weaponized gaze to be virtually killed in the name of US and global security. The conclusion discusses the stakes of the stereotyping and othering of Muslims by digital war games, and highlights some challenges to Islamophobia in the digital games industry.

Keywords: feminism, Empire, war, militainment, digital war games, Islamophobia, anti-Muslim stereotypes

*INTRODUCTION: THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR,
THE CULTURAL INDUSTRIES’ “MYTHICAL MUSLIM,”
AND DIGITAL WAR GAMES*

The othering of Muslims by Western Empires is an old phenomenon (Bakali 2016a; Said 1994), but from the 1970s forward, and especially in the post-9/11 context of the Global War on Terror, Islamophobia—fear and prejudice towards and hatred of Muslims—has enabled the US Empire to justify controversial wars in Muslim-majority countries, spread vilifying stereotypes of Muslim peoples, places, and practices, and made violence against real Muslim people in the US and elsewhere seem uncontroversial or even necessary to the protection and promotion of ideas of American and “Western” security (Beydoun 2019; Gottschalk and Greenberg 2008; Karim 2000; Kumar 2012; Kundnani 2015; Morey and Yaqin 2011; Saval 2017; Zine 2019). Donald J. Trump’s Islamophobia-infused election

campaign in 2016 and subsequent presidency have given such hateful Islamophobic ideology a boost. In the age of Trump, US citizens, especially Republicans, view Muslims far less positively than adherents to other religions, and anti-Muslim hate crimes have surged: violent assaults on Muslims recently surpassed post-9/11 levels (Johnson and Hausloh 2017; Kishi 2017).

US cultural industries have played a significant role in making Islamophobia popular by producing and selling a wide range of cultural products—TV shows, Hollywood films, and news stories—that convey misleading stereotypes of Muslims (Altsultany 2012; Bakali 2016b; Guterman 2013; Hussain 2010; Kamalipour 1995; Karim 2000; Kozlovic 2009; Kumar 2012; Kundnani 2015; Morey and Yaqin 2011; Said 1981; Shaheen 2008, 2014). One stereotype is the Muslim as Arab (and the Arab as Muslim), as the cultural industries sometimes frame all Muslims as Arabs, and all Arabs as Muslims. A second stereotype is the Muslim as a “foreign” national, not a US born or naturalized citizen who works hard, pays their taxes, and obeys the law like other citizens. Even though there are over three million Muslim-American citizens (about 1.1% of the total US population) (Mohamed 2018), cultural industries have depicted Muslims as foreign nationals: Egyptians, Iraqis, Pakistanis, Palestinians, Libyans, Moroccans, Somalis, Syrians, and Yemenis. A third stereotype is the violent Muslim. The majority of Muslims are peaceful, but numerous cultural products have portrayed them as murderers, con artists, rapists, and abusers of women. A fourth stereotype is the Muslim terrorist. Every religion’s history has its share of violence, but the cultural industries sometimes make violent extremism seem unique to Islam. On the whole, Muslims reject those who commit violence in the name of their faith, but media culture has frequently depicted Muslims as violent “Islamic extremists” who are intolerant of others and hateful towards Jews and Christians. Most of the 1.8 billion Muslims on the planet are not violently anti-American, and Muslim Americans are in no way sympathetic to terrorism, yet, the cultural industries’ fifth stereotype is the anti-American Muslim who rejects the US democratic capitalist way of life and plots to harm or kill Americans (Altsultany 2012; Bakali 2016b; Guterman 2013; Hussain 2010; Kamalipour 1995; Karim 2000; Kozlovic 2009; Kumar 2012; Kundnani 2015; Morey and Yaqin 2011; Said 1981; Shaheen 2008, 2014).

Circulated far and wide by myriad cultural forms, these five stereotypes of Muslims as “Arab,” “foreign,” “violent,” “terroristic,” and “anti-American” often intersect and combine to form what we call a *mythical Muslim* that shapes ideas, beliefs about, and perceptions of real Muslims, and popularizes Islamophobia. Much research on the US cultural industries’ Islamophobic repertoire centers on how TV shows, Hollywood films, and news products perpetuate simplistic and often harmful Muslim stereotypes (Bakali 2016b; Guterman 2013; Hussain 2010; Kozlovic 2009; Shaheen 2008, 2014). However, there is a lack of research on how digital games may popularize Islamophobia (Balela and Munday 2011; Šisler 2008). Over a decade ago, Vit Šisler demonstrated how “action games and especially first-person shooters” represent “Arabs and Muslims as enemies” (2008, 214), flatten out “the diverse ethnic and religious identities of the Islamic world” into “a monolithic representation” (215), and “incorporate” the “Orientalist imaginations” of the Western public (214). Some recent journalism concurs with Šisler’s assessment, noting that many digital games exploit stereotypical clichés about Islam and represent Muslims as “the other people,” and the enemies of the US and the West (Akbar 2017; Lee 2016; Takahashi 2016). Another strand of research on the topic concentrates on the development, modification, and use of digital games by terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah, Al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) for “jihadist propaganda” (Al-Rawi 2018; Lakomy 2019). Yet, there is a dearth of current literature on the US

cultural industries' creation of digital war games that popularize patriarchal militarism and Islamophobia for the Global War on Terror and support military training, propaganda, and violence.

Contributing to this area of research, this article argues that digital war games communicate and reinforce stereotypes of Muslims and prop up patriarchal militarism and Islamophobia in the context of the US-led Global War on Terror. Our first section establishes the relevance of the study of digital war games to feminist games studies, feminist international relations, and post-colonial feminism. The second section contextualizes the contemporary production and consumption of digital war games with regard to the military-digital-games complex and real and simulated military violence against Muslims, focusing especially on the US military deployment of digital war games to train soldiers to kill in real wars across Muslim majority countries. The third section probes mythical Muslim stereotypes in ten popular digital war games released between 2001 and 2012: *Conflict: Desert Storm* (2002), *Conflict: Desert Storm 2* (2003), *SOCOM U.S. Navy SEALs* (2002), *Full Spectrum Warrior* (2004), *Close Combat: First to Fight* (2005), *Battlefield 3* (2011), *Army of Two* (2008), *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007), *Medal of Honor* (2010), and *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* (2012). These games immerse players in patriarchal fantasies of "militarized masculinity" (Kline, Dyer-Witheyford, and De Peuter 2003) and place a mythical Muslim before their weaponized gaze to be virtually killed in the name of US and global security. The conclusion discusses the stakes of this stereotyping and othering of Muslims by digital war games and highlights some challenges to Islamophobia in the digital games industry.

ISLAMOPHOBIC DIGITAL WAR GAMES: A FEMINIST ISSUE

This study of Islamophobic digital war games aims to contribute to this special issue's transnational feminist study of digital media Islamophobia, as related to three intersecting areas of feminist theory, research, and politics: feminist game studies, feminist international relations, and post-colonial feminism.

Feminist digital games researchers are concerned with how digital games buttress patriarchy, industrially, symbolically, and culturally, and they demonstrate how the digital games industry has long been owned by men, game developers are predominantly male, and many games overrepresent men as heroes and underrepresent or convey sexist stereotypes of women for the visual titillation of male players (Consalvo 2012; Gray, Voorhees, and Vossen 2018; Malkowski and Russworm 2017; Solnit 2014). When Anita Sarkeesian called out the industry's patriarchy, men (many of the "alt-right" variety) launched a misogynistic hashtag harassment campaign (#GamerGate) against her (Consalvo 2012; Solnit 2014, 30). Nonetheless, more women have begun entering the games industry, creating women-friendly games, crafting multi-faceted representations of women, and supporting a vibrant feminist gamer community (Gray, Voorhees, and Vossen 2018). Digital games are clearly a significant feminist issue. Yet, digital war games specifically seem to be largely shielded from the impacts of these important feminist interventions, as they continue to be produced and sold, year after year, accompanied by much male fanfare, expenditure, and game play (Huntemann and Payne 2010). Some franchises, such as *Call of Duty*, generate upwards of a billion USD in revenue for their owners (Activision-Blizzard 2019). While North American feminist game studies scholars, workers, and players challenge the industry's patriarchy, it is also important to scrutinize how sexist digital games may be shaped by the geopolitical and economic structures of empire, war, and Islamophobia. This study aims to shed light on how digital war games serve these oppressive ends.

Feminist international relations researchers have interrogated how empire and war rely upon patriarchy (Wibben 2018; Cohn 2013; Enloe 1989, 2000; Khalid 2015; Shepherd 2014; Sjoberg and Via 2010; Wibben 2018). Far from being gender-neutral, war is a patriarchal enterprise that is regularly accompanied by sexual violence against women in militaries, in military families, and in the countries at war (Huq 2019; Vojdik 2014). Furthermore, war shapes and is shaped by gendered power relations as it constructs and consolidates sexist binaries of masculinity and femininity (Khalid 2015). For example, wars often construct men as active warfighters and heroes, rational decision-makers and planners, bodies uniquely fit to serve and fight (Blackburn 2018; Taylor and Vorhees 2018). In contrast, wars construct women as passive cheerleaders of male combat, caregivers who, from households on the home front, do unpaid reproductive labor to sustain military men's work, and weak and helpless victims who need strong military men to defend or rescue them from other men (Blackburn 2018; Taylor 2018). War enlists many men to fight, kill, and die on behalf of nation-states to prove their patriotism and display their masculinity to other men, and to women as well (Blackburn 2018; Taylor 2018). During war, militarized forms of masculinity are constructed by military command and control structures and institutions, official propaganda and recruitment campaigns, basic training regimens, and news and popular militainment products, including digital war games, which script male military heroes who traverse and conquer other places and exercise brute force to exterminate enemies (Blackburn 2018; Kline, Dyer-Witford and De Peuter 2003; Mirrlees 2014; Stahl 2006, 2010). As Nick Robinson (2016) argues, war games espouse a "gendered militarism" by placing "significant emphasis on the links between militaristic values and masculinity" both in "the gameplay and narratives within these games and in associated promotional materials" (255). War is clearly a feminist issue, and so it is pertinent to examine how digital war games perpetuate the US Empire's patriarchal militarism by putting players in the boots of militarized masculine heroes.

Post-colonial feminist scholars have long been concerned with the rise, fall, and lasting effects of empires, especially as related to the gendered and racialized power hierarchies and asymmetries they construct and maintain (Abu-Lughod 2013; Amos and Parmer 1984; Kumar 2012; Rich 2014; Spivak 1993). Post-colonial feminists also shed light on how old and new empires have enlisted feminist discourse into the project of racist and sexist military conquests. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1993) famously summed up the British Empire's self-justification of its colonial project in India as one in which "white men are [imagined to be] saving brown women from brown men" (93). The US Empire's post-9/11 wars in Muslim-majority countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq were likewise promoted through the idea that white American military men are saving brown Muslim women from bad brown Muslim men (Abu-Lughod 2013; Khalid 2015; Kumar 2012, 44–8; Rich 2014; Thobani 2007). The US and its allies sometimes framed their incursions as part of a benign liberal feminist mission to bring freedom, democracy, and human rights to "foreign" Muslim women (Khalid 2015; Kumar 2012; Jiwani 2009; Pratt 2013). Meanwhile, in the US and elsewhere, many Muslim women had their freedoms and human rights infringed upon by undemocratic US state security practices that violated their privacy, mobility, and dignity; right-wing news media "moral panics" that vilified them as unassimilable and dangerous others; and white supremacist men's movements that subjected them to hate, violence, and terror (Abu-Lughod 2013; Alimahomed-Wilson 2017; Huq 2019; Kumar 2012; Perry 2012; Zine 2006). Empire's expansion, racism, and sexism are important to post-colonial feminists, and this study of digital war games is relevant to their concerns. Specifically, this study considers how digital war games perpetuate imperial feminism by constructing players as (mostly) white

male American military heroes who war across Muslim countries, killing brown and bad Muslim men, sometimes to save civilian Muslim women.

For all of the above reasons, this study of how digital war games supports the US Empire's wars, patriarchal militarism and militarized masculinity, and Islamophobia, is relevant to the projects of feminist games studies, feminist international relations, and post-colonial feminist anti-imperialism. The next section considers the military-digital-games complex's war gaming-training platforms.

THE MILITARY-DIGITAL-GAMES COMPLEX: TRAINING TO KILL WITH DIGITAL WAR GAMES

Video games are developed, produced, marketed, published, and consumed all over the world, but the US is a major centre of the games industry (Mirrlees 2016). In fact, in 2019, the US overtook China as the world's biggest digital game market (Wijman 2019). This games industry produces and sells interactive digital commodities year after year, and millions of consumers pay to play them on personal computers and on consoles such as PlayStation 4, Microsoft Xbox One X, and Nintendo Switch. Digital war games are big business (especially when the US is waging real wars), and these games more often than not immerse players in the role of Anglo-American male military protagonists who use extreme violence to secure the US (and its allies) from some kind of antagonistic threat (Leonard 2004; Mirrlees 2014; Payne 2016; Stahl 2006, 2010). Many people play games for fun, and it is possible to distinguish between the US military's real wars and playable war games. That said, digital war games are much more than entertainment, as they are "militainment" products that result from and express a convergence between the real wars being fought by the US military and the simulated wars people play (Stahl 2006, 2010).

For each of the US Empire's 21st-century wars, the links between the US military's real wars and first-person war shooter simulations have been palatable, thanks in part to the consolidation of a "military-digital-games complex" (Mirrlees 2014, 2016). The US military runs a number of agencies that initiate digital war game research and development projects, contract digital corporations to make war games, and use or procure the digital war games sold on the market by US firms (Andersen and Kurti 2011; Halter 2006; Huntemann and Payne 2010; Leonard 2004; Mirrlees 2014, 2016; Payne 2016; Stahl 2006, 2010). An institutional convergence of the US military's institutions, policies, and personnel and digital capitalism's developers, publishers, and players exists, and this military-digital-games complex shapes the design, production, promotion, and interactive stories of some (though certainly not all) digital war games. In any case, all digital war games risk desensitizing players to war's embodied horrors and deterring democratic deliberation about war's causes and consequences (Payne 2016; Stahl 2010).

The military has employed games for recruiting new personnel to its ranks, promoting a positive image of itself to the public, and rehabilitating PTSD-suffering Afghanistan and Iraq war veterans (Andersen and Kurti 2011; Halter 2006; Huntemann and Payne 2010; Leonard 2004; Mirrlees 2014, 2016; Payne 2016; Stahl 2006, 2010). The US military also uses digital war games to train soldiers for real wars (Halter 2006; Vargas 2006). The military's training mission is immense, and each year the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines use digital games to train soldiers how to fight, apply new battle doctrines, complete battle tasks, and use new weapons technologies (Halter 2006).

An early example of the US military's redesign of a commercially available game for training was the US Army and Sculptured Software's Multi-purpose Arcade Combat Simulator

(MACS). Developed by a Super Nintendo Entertainment System developer for the US Army in 1993, MACS was a shooting simulator developed as a cheap (and fun?) way to train soldiers how to shoot a version of an M-16 rifle. In 2002, the US Army was training soldiers for urban combat in the Muslim-majority countries of Afghanistan and Iraq using a modified version of *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Rogue Spear*. In 2004, the US Army-funded Institute for Creative Technologies worked with Pandemic Studios and THQ to create *Full Spectrum Warrior*: one version of *Full Spectrum Warrior* was released to the market, and the other was used as a training system, particularly for troops deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq. The US Navy used the Virtual Battle System (VBS), a simulator derived from Bohemia Interactive Australia's commercial game *Operation Flashpoint: Cold War Crisis* (2005), to train Marines (Lin 2011). Called VBS 2, "the game allows soldiers to rehearse for missions, and trainers to constantly plug in new information—from a recent mission in Afghanistan, for instance" (Lin 2011). In 2009, another Muslim nation-rebuilding (after destroying) game called *UrbanSim* was training US battalion commanders (preparing for deployment across cities in Iraq) to take the virtual city of Al-Hamra. *UrbanSim* tasked soldiers with killing Iraqi insurgents, establishing civil security, and winning the hearts and minds of the local urban population in a mere fifteen days. In 2011, the US Army contracted the firm Intelligent Decisions to develop the Dismounted Soldier Training System, powered by CryEngine, the software behind *Crysis 2*, a popular Xbox 360 and Playstation 3 game. Since launching in 2002, *America's Army* has become the US Army's most well-known recruitment and training platform, and this Army-funded online game has spread across digital platforms in a multiplicity of forms, the latest being *America's Army: Real Heroes*, which features real US soldiers.

Evidently, the US military considers war gaming a serious business, and throughout the Global War on Terror it has routinely integrated ubiquitously profitable and popular commercial war games into its training regimen. It reportedly encourages its personnel to play digital war games when off duty as a way to prepare for on-duty actions (Stuart 2008). As Romaniuk and Burgers (2017) aver, "The games allow soldiers to take their combat roles home with them and blur their on-duty responsibilities with their off-duty, noncombat routines and lives." The value of digital war games to the US military when training its personnel for war is clearly multi-faceted. Training soldiers to kill with digital games costs less than training with actual weaponry because simulated guns, jets, tanks, drones, and bullets do not cost money to replace when destroyed. Also, training with digital war games eliminates live training's risk of injury and death. Furthermore, digital war games turn training for a most traumatizing experience—killing—into a site of pleasure. "A fun training system means keeping soldiers engaged voluntarily" said Colonel Casey Wardynski (cited in Halter 2006, 204). By making digital war games that are fun to train-play with, and making training for war feel like a fun game, the military-digital-games complex encourages soldiers and civilians alike to perceive real war as a fun game, too. In digital war games, killing is most often compulsory, absolutely necessary to defeating the enemy, progressing to the next level, and winning the war. Unlike real wars, digital war games do not pose a risk of injury or death, as one can kill and be killed over and over again with no real-world consequences. But real wars have human consequences that digital games do not and cannot simulate.

From 1980 onwards, the US has bombed or occupied numerous Muslim-majority countries: Iran (1980, 1987–8), Libya (1981, 1986, 1989, 2011), Lebanon (1983), Kuwait (1991), Iraq (1991–2011, 2014–), Somalia (1992–1993, 2007–), Bosnia (1995), Saudi Arabia (1991, 1996), Afghanistan (1998, 2001–), Sudan (1998), Kosovo (1999), Yemen (2000, 2002–), Pakistan (2004–) and now Syria (2014–present) (Greenwald 2014). Following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the US government launched a Global War on Terror in many Muslim

countries, and real US military forces have killed many Muslims. A recent estimate for the total death toll from the post-9/11 US-led wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan is 480,000—more than 244,000 of them civilians (Hussain 2018). In the next section, we explore how select digital war games train players to perceive some people as Muslims, and stereotype those Muslims as enemies that must be virtually killed.

VIRTUALLY KILLING MUSLIM “ENEMIES” IN DIGITAL WAR GAMES

Numerous digital war games are released each year. To focus our study, we selected ten digital war games released between 2001 and 2012 for analysis: *Conflict: Desert Storm* (2002), *Conflict: Desert Storm 2* (2003), *SOCOM U.S. Navy SEALs* (2002), *Full Spectrum Warrior* (2004), *Close Combat: First to Fight* (2005), *Battlefield 3* (2011), *Army of Two* (2008), *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007), *Medal of Honor* (2010), and *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* (2012).

Our selection criteria for these games are threefold: the time period in which the games were released, the game’s subject matter, and the game’s popularity. Concerning the first factor, the games selected for our study were published between 2001 and 2012, a period typified by the real US Global War on Terror across many Muslim-majority countries. The second factor is the narrative content (the interactive story and characters). Each game immerses players in the roles of Anglo-American militarized masculine heroes and pits these protagonists against killable enemy characters that are implied or likely perceived to be Muslim. The digital games do not all directly claim the enemies are Muslim, but by placing them within or suggesting they originate from actual or imagined Muslim-majority countries, they associate these enemies with territories, regions, and zones that much post-9/11 US foreign policy discourse has constructed as part of a monolithic “Muslim World” (Kumar 2012) Also, by representing the bodies, languages, voices, and practices of these enemies in ways that draw upon the five misleading stereotypes of the mythical Muslim discussed in our introduction, the games imply these enemies are Muslim. In effect, these digital war games may encourage or reproduce widespread perceptions that all people in Muslim majority countries are Muslim (even though that is not the case). A third factor that shaped our selection of digital games was their popularity. The games selected are among the best-selling and best reviewed games in the war game genre released in the time period of focus. Their sales indicate commercial success (each game sold over one million copies) and their reviews indicate widespread US and international critical acclaim (each game scored at least a 7/10 on game review websites such as Metacritic, IGN, and Gamespot). The release time, subject matter, and popularity of these ten digital war games make them important to study, as they have been purchased, played, and enjoyed by millions of people all over the world. And given they represent Muslims and countries associated with the “Muslim World,” it is important to consider how these games’ interactive stories about and images of Muslims may contribute to Islamophobia in society.

To analyze the representation of Muslims in these digital war games we combined two methodological approaches: a self-ethnography of gameplay, and a para-textual analysis of materials surrounding each game. Our self-ethnography of gameplay involved directly engaging with and immersing ourselves in the simulated worlds of the ten digital games selected for this study. Each game’s “story mode” was played from start to finish (Alvesson 2003; Apperley and Jaymane 2012; Miller 2008). While playing these games, we made first-hand notes about the representation of Muslims, with the goal of determining whether or not the Muslim characters we encountered in each game’s interactive war story perpetuated or challenged the US cultural industries’ figure of the mythical Muslim. In conjunction with this method, we gathered para-textual materials surrounding the ten digital war games, including promotional

trailers, reviews, and walkthroughs (Burt 2007; Burwell and Miller 2016). These para-textual materials supplemented our ethnography of play notes and informed our research about each digital war game's developer and publisher, sales, review scores, playable storyline, plot, characters, and reception. In what follows, we replay our findings by moving from the general to the specific. We describe these digital games' general storylines and characters, and then identify and analyze these games' stereotypes of Muslims as "Arab," "foreign," "violent," "terroristic," and "anti-American."

Conflict: Desert Storm (2002) invites players to step into the boots of members of the US Delta Force and British 22nd Special Air Service (SAS) in the US-led Gulf War of 1991 ("Operation Desert Storm"). The game immerses players in the roles of Sgt. John Bradley, Cpl. Paul Foley, and Cpl. Mick Connors (white soldiers), and Cpl. David Jones (the only Black soldier), American military personnel who are deployed to Iraq to battle Saddam Hussein's Republican Guard and dispatched to Kuwait to push out Iraqi forces. The enemy is the Iraqi Republican Guard, led by Iraq's Supreme Commander, General Aziz (the majority of the killable Guard members are Muslim, but Aziz was a Catholic). To win the game (and the war), the players must virtually kill Iraqi soldiers, infiltrate Iraqi bases, destroy Iraqi artillery, and protect Kuwaiti hostages and the Emir of Kuwait. Released within months of the US's 2003 invasion of Iraq, *Conflict: Desert Storm 2* kicks off where the previous game ended. With Kuwait on the brink of liberation by American and British forces, the Iraqi Republican guard sets fire to several Kuwaiti oil wells in order to do as much damage as possible. US and British forces enter Kuwait to defeat the remaining Iraqi troops and save the Kuwaiti population. In these digital Iraq war games, US military personnel invade one Muslim country to save another, and virtually kill Iraqi Muslim enemies to protect and secure Kuwaiti allies.

While the *Conflict: Desert Storm* games are based on a real war, the story of *SOCOM: US Navy SEALs* (2002) is a work of fiction set between 2006 and 2007. Taking on the role of elite US Navy SEALs (Kahuna, Boomer, Specter, and Jester, all white soldiers) in a transnational battle against terrorist organizations, players must locate and destroy the Iron Brotherhood (that plots to destroy an oil platform and cause a major oil spill in Alaska), Riddah Rouge (that seeks biological weapons in Thailand), Preemptive Strike (that illegally stockpiles Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Congo), and Allah Sadikahu (that has acquired nuclear weapons in Turkmenistan). Facing a terrorist threat, foreign governments call upon the US Navy SEALs to help them defeat the terrorists and save the locals, thus making US military interventions appear to be altruistic. Throughout the story, US Navy SEALs travel the world—Alaska, Thailand, the Congo, and Turkmenistan—shooting and killing enemy soldiers, gathering intelligence, invading enemy bases, and rescuing hostages. Notable villains they virtually kill are Mullah Bahir Al-Qadi and Imad Al-Qadi, the leaders of the Islamic Turkmenistan terrorist group, Allah Sadikahu. Like *SOCOM: US Navy SEALs*, *Full Spectrum Warrior* (2004) stages a fictional war between the US military and terrorists, though these have a real-world referent. After committing several terrorist attacks, Al-Qaeda and the Taliban take refuge in the fictional (Muslim) country of "Zekistan," ruled by a dictator named Mohammad Jabbour Al-Afad. Upon recognizing Al-Afad's terrorists are violating the human rights of the local population and planning to attack Europe, a mostly white but multicultural mix of US military personnel (Sergeant Chago Mendez, Private Asher Shehadi, Private Daniel Shimenski, Private Samuel Ota, Corporal Michael Picoli, Corporal Andre Devereux, Sergeant Eric Williams, and Private Alexander Silverman) and some NATO allies invade Zekistan to bring about a regime change, destroy the terrorists, and save Zekistani civilians. An exception to the rule of white male military heroes in war games, *Full Spectrum Warrior* includes one male Muslim American soldier (Private Asher Shehadi). This figure represents some diversity in the ranks, and invokes US

foreign policy discourse's simplistic binary of the "good Muslim" (modern, secular, and ally of or patriot for America) and the "bad Muslim" (backwards, fanatical, and terroristic enemy of America) (Altsultany 2012; Kumar 2012). In this game, Private Asher Shehadi is scripted as a "good Muslim."

In *Close Combat: First to Fight* (2005), players deploy an elite squad of US marines to Beirut, Lebanon, in a war against a Lebanese militia headed by Akhbar al-Soud, the Atash Movement led by a Muslim cleric Tarik Qadan, Syrian forces led by the Yemeni terrorist General Badr, and Iranian Special Forces' head Adullah Bin Katan. Recognizing that Lebanon is embroiled in a civil war, the United Nations (UN) Security Council sanctions a team of US marines to secure the peace with brute force. In the boots of various US marines, players run around Beirut killing enemy forces, capturing enemy leaders, and rescuing civilians to achieve the overarching goal of securing Lebanon and the rest of the world from the supposed Islamic terrorist threat. In *Battlefield 3* (2011), players are immersed in a fantastical 2014 conflict between the US and Russia-Iran. Russia and Iran's People's Liberation & Resistance (PLR) government, led by the brown-skinned dictator Faruk Al-Bashir, plan to attack Paris and New York City with nuclear weapons of mass destruction. Upon realizing this, the US invades Iran to preempt Russian and Iranian forces from carrying out the terrorist attack. Throughout the game, players don the roles of Sergeant Henry Blackburn (US Marine Corps), Sergeant Jonathan Miller (US Army tank operator), and Lieutenant Jennifer Colby Hawkins (US Army weapon systems officer), a rare example of militarized femininity in digital war games. These white American soldiers battle across Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan, France, and New York, gathering intelligence and virtually killing Iranian and Russian enemies. In *Army of Two* (2008), players take on the roles of two white US Army veterans turned mercenaries (Tyson Rios and Elliot Salem). Employed by the Blackwater-esque Security and Strategy Corporation (SSC), Rios and Salem travel around the world—to Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and China—tracking, capturing, and killing Muslim terrorists while protecting civilians and US assets. Mostly set following the terrorist attack of 9/11, *Army of Two* deploys players as part of the US Empire's expansive private army of contractors and tasks them to kill terrorists such as Abdullahi Mo'Allim (a Somali warlord), Mohammed Al-Habiib (an Al-Qaeda head), Ali Youssef (an Iraqi terrorist), and Cebu Mohammed (leader of the Abu-Sayaff Jihadist network).

In *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007), players take control of the British Special Air Service (SAS) and the US Marine Corps (USMC) characters SAS recruit Sergeant John MacTavish and SAS officer Captain John Price (white soldiers), and Sergeant Paul Jackson of the USMC 1st Force Recon (a Black soldier). The goal is to defeat an alliance between a Russian ultranationalist terrorist organization (led by Imran Zakhaev) and a revolutionary Islamic dictatorship in Saudi Arabia (led by Khaled Al-Asad), which conspires to launch a nuclear weapon of mass destruction at the US's Eastern seaboard. To stop the attack, the British and US soldiers invade Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, Azerbaijan, and Russia, killing enemy combatants, gathering enemy intelligence, and rescuing comrades and civilians. *Medal of Honour* (2010) is set in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and places players in the boots of US Naval Special Warfare Development Group personnel: a Tier 1 Operator, code-named "Rabbit," Delta Force sniper "Deuce," Ranger Dante Adams, and Apache helicopter gunner Brad Hawkins. With these white male characters, players invade Afghanistan in an effort to defeat the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. While the story is largely fictional, it is loosely based on Operation Anaconda, with gameplay missions mimicking the seizing of Bagram Airfield, the Battle of Shah-i-Kot, and the Battle of Takur Ghar. Game missions mostly involve killing Taliban and Al-Qaeda soldiers. The sequel to this digital war game, *Medal of Honour: Warfighter* (2012) immerses players in the white male American military roles of Preacher of Task Force Blackbird

and Stump of Task Force Mako, and deploys them in a cross-border battle (across the Philippines, Yemen, Pakistan, Somalia, Dubai, and Bosnia and Herzegovina) against an Islamist terrorist organization called the Abu Sayyaf group, which is led by Ibrahim al-Najdi and Marwan al-Khalifa, supported by a Bosnian arms dealer and backed by a wealthy Arab banker.

In many of these games, the stereotype of all Muslims being Arab and all Arabs being Muslim seems to frame the enemies. For example, the Muslim Iraqi characters in *Conflict: Desert Storm* (2002) speak Arabic. Similarly, *Conflict: Desert Storm 2* (2003) depicts Muslims as Arabs in the stage “Air Strike” in which Arabic writing appears on street signs in Kuwait and in “Prisoners of War” where Arabic appears on street signs in Iraq. Also, Iraqi soldiers speak Arabic during gameplay in the “Street Battle” stage and in a cutscene during the “Prisoners of War” mission. In *SOCOM US Navy SEALs* (2002), the Allah Sadikahu terrorists have full conversations in Arabic. In chapter 10 of *Full Spectrum Warrior* (2004), one Muslim civilian speaks with the US soldiers in Arabic at length and says “May Allah be with you” to one of the US soldiers, implying that he is not just an Arabic-speaker, but a Muslim Arabic-speaker. In this game, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda forces also speak Arabic. In *Close Combat: First to Fight* (2005), the game’s opening cutscene represents a Muslim terrorist holding a rocket launcher while yelling in Arabic. The *Battlefield 3* (2011) stage “Operation Swordbreaker” takes place in Sulaymaniyah, Iraqi Kurdistan, and Arabic writing is scrawled on the walls, as well as on the shops, hotels, and street signs. In the stage “Fear No Evil,” which takes place in Tehran, Arabic writing appears on walls and shops, even though only about 2% of Iran’s population speaks Arabic. In *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007), the Muslim enemies to be killed in the level called “The Coup” are represented as stereotypical Arabs, with brown skin, facial hair, and keffiyehs (red Arabian scarves) (Shaheen 2014). They shout in Arabic when the player engages them in combat. In *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* (2012), Al-Qaeda terrorists also speak Arabic in the mission “Unintended Consequences” which takes place in Karachi, Pakistan. These games represent being Muslim and Arab to be one and the same.

On the whole, these digital war games also represent Muslims as foreign. In *Conflict: Desert Storm* (2002) for instance, the player wars across several Muslim countries in the boots of a virtual American soldier. American Muslims have fought in numerous US wars, but none of the American soldiers in these digital war games—with the exception of the “good Muslim” character in *Full Spectrum Warrior*—are portrayed as Muslim. Similarly, in *Conflict: Desert Storm 2* (2003), no American characters are Arab or Muslim. In *Close Combat: First to Fight* (2005), the enemies of America are Lebanese, Iranian, Syrian, and Yemeni, and there are no Lebanese, Iranian, Syrian, or Yemeni Americans in the game. Again, Muslims are cast as “foreign” others, not part of the American national self. One stage of *Battlefield 3* (2011) is set in New York City, but there seem to be no Muslims living there. Similarly, the Muslim characters in *Army of Two* (2008) are Afghani, Somali, Iraqi, and Chinese, not American. In *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007), Muslims of many nationalities are shown, but no American soldiers or civilians are represented as Muslim. Once again, the Muslim is cast as an un- or non-American other, not part of the American nation. *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* (2012) follows suit. The player invades several Muslim countries such as Somalia, Pakistan, Dubai, and Yemen. However, there are no Muslims represented in the American states or cities played through in the game.

These digital war games by and large cast Muslims as violent, ruthless, aggressive, and heartless savages who seek to cause human suffering with no remorse. In *Conflict: Desert Storm* (2002), the Iraqi army commits several violent acts against both Arabs and non-Arabs, and through *Conflict: Desert Storm 2* (2003), Iraqi soldiers capture and torture US soldiers in the “Prisoners of War” mission. In *SOCOM U.S. Navy SEALs* (2002), members of the Allah Sadikahu terrorist group scream “*Allahu Akbbar!*” when trying to kill Americans, and in the

“Mouth of The Beast” mission, one terrorist declares “We must detonate these bombs . . . to prove our greatness.” In *Full Spectrum Warrior* (2004), Al-Qaeda and Taliban forces commit several atrocities against the civilian Zeki population. In chapter 5, the bodies of dozens of dead Zeki citizens are found rotting in a dump in the middle of the streets, having been slaughtered by terrorists. In the intro cutscene, one terrorist fires a rocket launcher at a non-hostile NATO vehicle moving along the streets. Due to the fact that Al-Qaeda and the Taliban claim to be Islamic groups, the instances of violence committed by Muslims in the game imply that Islam is a violent religion. In *Close Combat: First to Fight* (2005), Islamic extremists commit several violent acts towards innocent civilians. In the fourth mission, the Atash movement and Lebanese militia invade the American University of Beirut, killing students. In the briefing for Mission 10, it is mentioned that General Badr of the Syrian army takes over and threatens a hospital that treats Marines. In the *Battlefield 3* (2011) stage “Fear No Evil,” the evil Muslim dictator Faruk Al-Bashir live broadcasts the killing of an American soldier and posts it on the Internet for the world to see. In *Army of Two* (2008), Somali Muslims are represented as violent, as their faces are painted with skulls and cross bones, and the warlord Abdullahi Mo’Allim packs a gold-plated AK-47 and seems obsessed with violence. In the *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007) stage, “The Coup,” the Saudi Arabian dictator Khaled Al-Asad claims that he aims to defeat the West in front of his soldiers. Upon hearing this, his men raise their guns in the air and fire while shouting in Arabic to celebrate. In *Medal of Honor* (2010), the Taliban is depicted using ruthless tactics during combat. For example, in the stage “First In,” the Taliban use defenseless bodies of tied up hostages as “human shields.” They use a dead man’s body as a bomb when they strap an explosive to it and tie his body to a wheelchair. All in all, these games create an image of Muslims as a violent people.

Furthermore, these digital war games represent many Muslims as terrorists. In *SOCOM US Navy SEALs* (2002), the Allah Sadikahu terrorist group is comprised of Muslims. In *Full Spectrum Warrior* (2004), Al-Qaeda and Taliban forces commit acts of terror throughout the game’s story. The only mosque that appears in the game is a hideout for the Black Brigade terrorist group, and this conflation of a mosque with terror suggests that Islam itself is a religion of terror. In *Close Combat: First to Fight* (2005), Islamist extremists commit several terroristic acts. In the briefing for Mission 7, for example, Atash radicals, supported by Major Abdullah Bin Katan and the Iranian Special Forces, take control of American University buildings, trapping student hostages inside. *Battlefield 3* (2011) follows suit, as the main enemies throughout the campaign are Iranian Muslim soldiers employed by the terroristic People’s Liberation & Resistance (PLR), and in various missions, these terrorists take over a public school and a bank holding civilians hostage. In *Army of Two* (2008), four out of the five key enemy leaders are Islamic extremist terrorists. In *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007), the secondary antagonist, Khaled Al-Asad is a Muslim terrorist. In “The Coup,” Al-Asad’s men take the president of Saudi Arabia, Al-Fulani, hostage while they ruthlessly shoot and kill unarmed civilians on the street whilst shouting in Arabic. In *Medal of Honor* (2010), the two main enemy combatants are the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. In the stage “Breaking Bagram,” the player invades a Taliban base harbouring dangerous weapons and finds several dead civilian hostages tied up in chairs, presumably tortured to death.

Additionally, these digital games largely represent Muslims as an anti-American people. In the *Army of Two* (2008), the majority of the campaign’s events revolve around the Al-Qaeda terrorist attacks of 9/11. In the Somalia mission, the terrorist Mo’Allim chastises US troops for being part of a global Empire: “Well look who it is . . . Johnny American. You think you own the whole world. That you can go wherever you please, take whatever you want. But this is not your country.” In *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007), Muslims seem to express

resentment or hatred for the West. In the stage, “The Coup,” Al-Asad states that the Saudi monarchy colludes with the West and encourages his followers to free themselves from “foreign oppression” and restore independence to their country by delinking from the West by way of a violent insurrectionary revolution. In the stage, “Charlie Don’t Surf,” Al-Asad’s propaganda posters depict his soldiers attacking American soldiers and they scream “The Americans!” in fear upon being engaged by US forces. In *Medal of Honor* (2010), Al-Qaeda expresses hatred for America and targets Americans.

In sum, these digital war games convey stereotypes of the Muslim as “Arab,” “foreign,” “violent,” “terroristic,” and “anti-American,” and frame the Muslim as an enemy Other to virtually kill. These digital war games are a significant popular cultural site where the stereotypes that constitute the mythical Muslim are produced and circulated, and where real civilians and soldiers are invited to virtually play out mostly white male military fantasies of killing of Muslims. Where women show up in these digital war games, they are represented as “victims” in need of “saving” by the US military, and in a rare instance, a member of the US military.

CONCLUSION: CHALLENGING ISLAMOPHOBIC DIGITAL WAR GAMES

When at war, nation-states teach their citizens to fear and hate groups of people and whole countries by constructing them as enemy threats to security and as cultural others. By frequently conflating Islam with terrorism and Muslims with terrorists, the US security state and cultural industries have taught many Americans to see Muslims not as human beings but as enemy threats and as others (Kumar 2012). The US Empire’s Global War on Terror and Islamophobia march in lockstep, and as demonstrated by this article, digital war games play a powerful role in popularizing Islamophobia. The US military relies upon digital war games to train its personnel to kill in the context of ongoing US wars, incursions, and interventions across many Muslim countries. Also, many popular digital war games released by the US’s globalizing digital games industry between 2001 and 2012 put players in the boots of mostly white male Anglo-American soldiers and empower them to virtually invade, occupy, and intervene in Muslim countries to kill Muslim enemies, sometimes to save Muslim women and children, but most of the time, to secure America and the West.

The digital war games analyzed in this study convey a mostly negative representation of Muslim people. They largely vilify Muslims as the US Empire’s enemy other and as a threat to American and Western security. They immerse players in interactive war stories where heroic white military masculinities fight against mostly brown Muslim enemies, kill them, and secure America and the globe from this threat. Dubiously, the few Muslim civilians in these games are depicted as victims of other Muslims. As such, they are rendered beneficiaries of the US’s wars and military masculinities, which “help,” “save,” or “rescue” them, a conventional imperial feminist trope. In effect, these digital war games add to the cultural repertoire of Islamophobia in the US and wider world and contribute to the notion that the US is an exceptional global military superpower that uses its immense masculine might for good, for defeating Muslim terrorists, and for saving civilians from evil.

The representation of the Muslim in digital war games as the US’s enemy other should not be treated lightly, as this representation intersects with and seems to support the official rationale for the US’s real Global War on Terror in Muslim countries: to secure the US and its Western allies from terrorist organizations and the states that support them. Also, the representation of Muslims in digital war games as the enemy other to the US and its allies places unnecessary public attention on and may instigate anxiety about real Muslims in the US and elsewhere. This, in turn, may sanction an intensification of state surveillance and policing of

Muslims and support the ongoing disproportionate allocation of public resources and national security projects to combatting the perceived threat of Muslim terrorists instead of greater terrorist threats, such as white supremacists.

Produced, consumed, and played during a period wherein Islamophobia is a real and growing social problem, the mythical Muslim of digital war games adds insult to injury. When the major Islam-related representations available in digital war games are so negative, there is a risk that players who have never interacted with a real Muslim person will take the digital myth of the Muslim to be true. That the predominant play activities connecting all of these digital war games are the virtual killing of Muslims is also troubling. When Islamophobia intertwines with war propaganda and when digital war games glorify violence against Muslims, is it a surprise that real Muslims are afflicted by hate crimes? Digital games do not cause people to perpetrate hate crimes, but they may prime or desensitize people to the violence against Muslims perpetrated by the US military while at war in Muslim countries and by the white supremacist terrorists in the US who believe Islam to be incompatible with Western “civilization” and see Muslims living in the US as a sign of “white genocide.” At the very least, these digital war games reinforce and normalize negative and stereotypical perceptions of the threat and violence of the mythical Muslim.

Practically, we hope this study will inform the future labor of digital war game developers and the leisure of war game players. Developers should make a concerted effort to create more multi-dimensional representations of Muslims in digital war games, and players need to understand that the motley group of Muslim enemy characters designed into digital war games do not reflect the majority of real Muslim people who live, work, and play in the US and around the world. While the US entertainment industry has faced pressure from American Muslims to stop stereotyping Muslims in films and TV shows, the digital game industry is only beginning to face similar pressure (Ahmad 2019), but more pressure is needed. By drawing attention to the social stakes of the mythical Muslim of digital war games, we encourage developers to think twice before perpetuating it. Game developers should stop negatively stereotyping Muslims in their games and start producing digital games that counter such vilifying images (Ahmad 2019). In that regard, if more Muslim game developers were included and represented in the US digital games workforce, Muslims might be better positioned to represent themselves, tell their own stories about Muslims in the US and elsewhere, and counter Islamophobic stereotypes in digital games (Ahmad 2019).

Of course, provoking such a change would require a more widespread public discourse about and campaign against Islamophobia in digital games. For instance, the Council on American–Islamic Relations (CAIR) might pressure game developers to change their ways. Advocacy groups like CAIR, journalists, and academics could also work together to directly inform game developers about the real-world implications of their mythical Muslims, and encourage the depiction of more complex images. If a change in the way that Muslims appear in digital games is to be brought about, then it is pertinent that those with the power to design, produce, publish, and sell the games in which Muslims are repeatedly vilified as the enemy other are made to care and made to change their designs. We hope that this study contributes to steps being taken in that positive direction. But critical knowledge is only one step, and many more political steps are needed to transform this knowledge into a material force. A radical change to the representation of Muslims in digital war games would have a greater chance for success with the revitalization of the US and global peace movements. After all, “There will be no end to the war against Muslims . . . unless there is an end to the war on terror” (Saval 2017), and there may be no end to Islamophobic digital war games unless there is an end to the real wars in the Muslim countries they simulate.

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