



Islamic Identities in Video Games: A Representation Theory Perspective

Ali Hassan

Ph.D. Scholar, Media and Communication Studies, BZU Multan

Prof. Dr. Tahir Mehmood

Director, Institute of Media and Communication Studies, BZU Multan

Abstract

This article explores the Islamic identities in video games through a systematic content analysis, drawing upon the theoretical framework of Representation Theory by Stuart Hall. In an era where digital media significantly shapes cultural perceptions, video game have emerged as influential platforms that construct, reproduce, and circulate meanings about religion and identity. Through a qualitative analysis of *1979 Revolution: Black Friday*, the study identifies recurring patterns of stereotyping, "othering," and marginalization, while also noting an emerging trend toward complex and diversified portrayals. The findings highlight the dual role of video game as powerful cultural texts that participate in identity construction processes, reinforcing existing geopolitical narratives or opening spaces for alternative understandings.

Keywords: *1979 Revolution: Black Friday*, Western, Eastern, Muslim Representation, Iran, Military, Revolution,

Introduction

Communication is not merely a process of sending information; it is "oxygen" for being perceived by others (Al-Rawi, 2018). In the contemporary technological boom, video games have evolved from their origins as military stimuli used for training and decision-making into dominant forms of public entertainment and ideological dissemination. Today, games serve as substantial cultural artifacts in the 21st century, much like film and novels were in previous eras.

While these representations may seem innocuous in the context of entertainment media, they can have tangible consequences in the real world. Studies like (Mirrlees & Ibaid, 2021) have shown that exposure to such media can contribute to the normalization of anti-Muslim bias and the justification of military interventions targeting Muslim-majority regions. (Campbell & Grieve, 2014) (Mirrlees & Ibaid, 2021) (Shabankareh, Hosseinzadeh, Navah, & Karamallah, 2015) explained, it is crucial to critically examine the ways in which video games, as a powerful medium of popular culture, engage with and shape the construction of Islamic identities.

However, this medium often functions as a site for the contestation of political ideologies, frequently reflecting geopolitical divides such as "West vs. East," "civilized vs. barbaric," and "hero vs. terrorist". Following the events of 9/11, the virtual depiction of Muslim characters has increasingly focused on security, terrorism, and civilizational conflict. This study utilizes representation theory to examine how video games construct these Islamic identities and the real-world consequences of such digital portrayals.

(Lit, 2020), (Lean, 2017) targets the islamophobic content that should also be a



concern for the people to why the innocent face hatred not associated or brought by themselves. (Said, 1979) also explain this orientalism to express his concerns toward this isolation, but the current situation as mentioned earlier became more and more worsen to believe in equal or neutral representation, it leads to an idea that games that are known as new medium of entertainment and interaction, laid people for certain changes in their behavior and physic. This study focuses on the games content for interpretation of Muslims in their stories and characters as well.

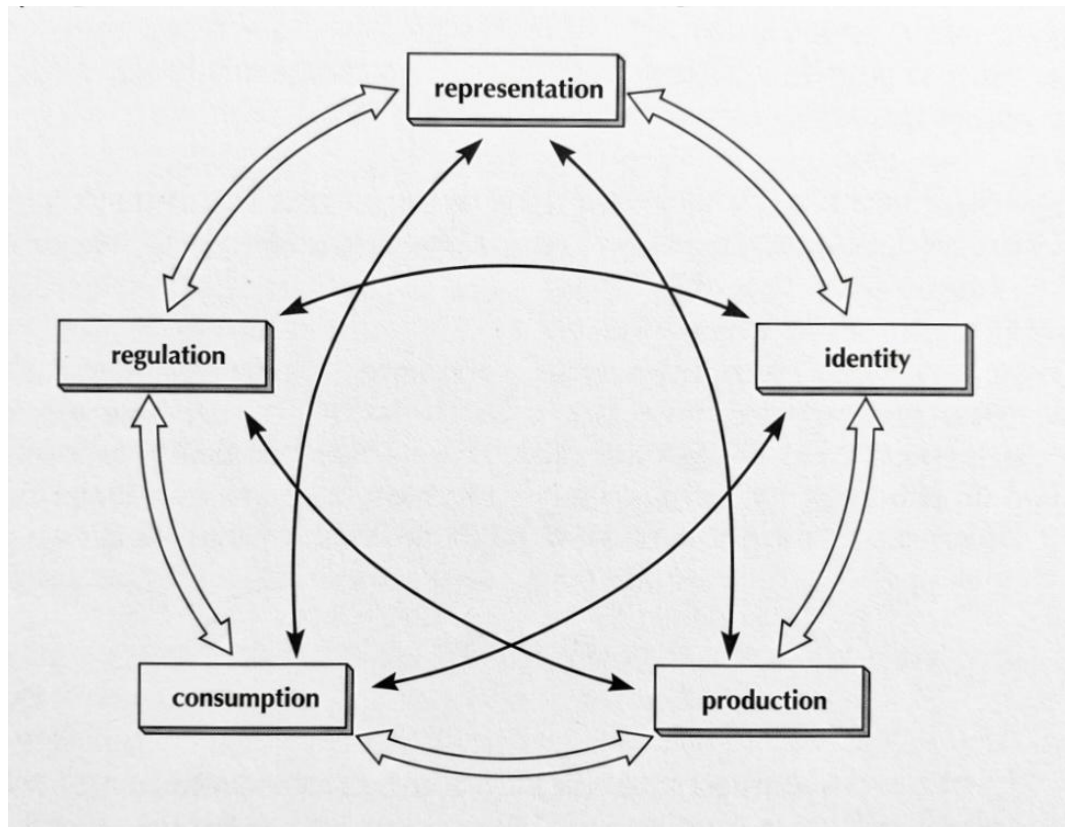
The identity existing and perceived both influence its consumers. By probing into the visual and content representations, the aim is to light the ways in which Islamic identities depicted, conveyed, and perceived within the gaming community. Through this exploration, we hope to deepen our understanding of the complex dynamics of game play in the portrayal of Islamic identities.

Theoretical Framework

The core of this analysis rests on Stuart Hall's Representation Theory, which posits that representation is an active process involving both production and interpretation. Media does not directly reflect reality; rather, it constructs reality through a lens shaped by culture, ideology, and power politics. In the context of video games, representation is further complicated by interactivity. Unlike film or TV, players do not just watch representations; they participate in them. When gameplay rewards the defeat of "Muslim-coded" enemies, players become active participants in reinforcing specific ideological narratives.

Complementing Hall's work is Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, which critiques the Western history of prejudice toward Middle Eastern cultures. Digital Orientalism extends this colonial-style representation into interactive media, where character designs, language, and settings associated with Islam are often linked to extremism or "backwardness".

As we know that media does not directly reflect reality but it construct in different manners. Because what we see in media specially games shaped by cultures, ideologies and power politics. For example, a simple difference in representation could change the whole scenario like (Kanji, 2018) writes that criminal activities that conducted by Muslims gets 1.5 times more coverage than others, and labeled as terrorism, but on other hand the number of Non-Muslim attacks are larger but still receive low representation. Therefore, this theory is going to use to analyze the content and their construction as well. The "circuit of culture" (Hall, 1997), explains the relationship between the culture, identity and the representation.



Literature Review

Research suggests that digital media content significantly affects audiences in terms of identity, culture, and physical behavior. Video games frequently resort to "simplistic, ideological and stereotypical portrayals" of marginalized groups. Mobile war games and its effects had a strong link with the violent effects of violence in media and the effects of mobile as well but Marchand & Hennig-Thurau (2013) explains that video games had build a strong contribution in global entertainment economy. The psychological arousal, competition, social interaction and self-efficacy are the driving forces to play games. Games become a mass phenomenon with the growing number of users and as well as the revenue of games. Benedicta, (2020) explains the need of courses for gaming in schools and university to make it streamline in studies as well. However, Ratan, Zaman, Islam, & Hosseinzadeh, (2021) said that the growing numbers of smartphone users had many psychological and physical effects on their studies.

The representation of Muslims in video games has been a topic of increasing scholarly interest in recent years, as the gaming industry has grown to become a dominant cultural force. This literature review seeks to explore the existing research on the portrayal of Muslims in video games, examining the ways in which these representations may perpetuate harmful stereotypes, as well as the potential for more nuanced and inclusive depictions.

The Ideological Square A useful framework within representation theory is the "ideological square" model, which analyzes the differentiation of characteristics between social groups. Studies using this model found that Muslims are often depicted through the prism of "security risk, incompatible difference and self-segregation".

- **Muslim Men:** Frequently cast as the embodiment of terrorism and fundamentalism.



- **Muslim Women:** Often personified as symbols of gender oppression, particularly if veiled.
- **Homogenization:** Diversified identities are erased, with a dominant assumption that all Muslims are immigrants from the Middle East or South Asia, neglecting Black and African American Muslim communities.

Methodology

This study employs Qualitative Content Analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore themes, narratives, and symbols in a purposive sample of six widely played games. The data includes approximately 12,500 words of subtitles and 150 screenshots, analyzed using a deductive coding sheet.

Key metrics for analysis include:

1. **Theme/Narrative:** Conflict, cooperation, mysticism, heroism, or villainy.
2. **Symbolism:** Use of mosques, calligraphy, traditional clothing (hijab, turban), and religious practices.
3. **Audio-Visual Elements:** Orientalist soundtracks, religious cues (Adhan), and tension-building audio.

Data Analysis: Constructing Identity through Gameplay

1. 1979 Revolution: Black Friday

This game offers a nuanced portrayal of the Iranian Revolution, constructing Islamic identities through the lens of postcolonial resistance.

- **Heroism:** The protagonist, Reza, and allies like Abbas represent a "pacifist heroism," where faith is used as a source of spiritual resilience against tyranny.
- **Subverting Tropes:** The game avoids the "violent jihadist" stereotype by focusing on the internal ideological rifts within the revolution.
- **Symbols:** Cassette tapes of Khomeini's speeches serve as symbols of underground faith dissemination.

This discourse analysis examines the subtitles from 1979 Revolution: Black Friday (iPlan Games, 2016), a narrative-driven adventure game set against the backdrop of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The game's dialogue constructs Islamic identities through a multifaceted lens, blending personal testimonies, ideological clashes, and historical events like the Cinema Rex fire and Black Friday massacre. Drawing on critical discourse analysis (CDA) principles—focusing on language as a tool for power, identity formation, and ideological positioning—the analysis addresses the thesis's research questions. It reveals how the game portrays Muslim characters not as monolithic stereotypes but as contested subjects navigating faith, revolution, and betrayal. Themes of non-violence, spiritual resilience, and factional fragmentation dominate, while symbols like cassettes and prayer rugs evoke both empowerment and peril. Interactions highlight intra-Muslim tensions, with Islam portrayed as a double-edged force: a unifying spiritual anchor and a contested political instrument.

The analysis is structured around the research questions, with textual evidence from the subtitles integrated throughout. Where relevant, tables summarize recurring motifs for clarity.

1. Dominant Themes in Games Featuring Muslim Characters

The game's Muslim characters—primarily Reza (the protagonist photographer),



BB (a revolutionary leader), Abos (a non-violent activist), and Ali (a militant fighter)—embody themes of spiritual resilience amid oppression, the tension between faith and violence, and familial loyalty versus ideological betrayal. These themes construct Islamic identities as dynamic and relational, rooted in the Revolution's chaos rather than essentialized traits.

- **Spiritual Resilience:** Faith is depicted as a bulwark against tyranny, with characters invoking Islamic tenets for endurance. Abos's line, "in the eyes of God I am saved," during torture in Evin Prison reframes suffering as redemptive, echoing Quranic motifs of patience (sabr). Reza's mother urges prayer ("only prayer can calm my hey nigon"), positioning Islam as a private solace amid public turmoil.

- **Faith vs. Violence:** The Revolution's idealistic start fractures into violence, with Muslim characters debating non-violence as a core Islamic value. Abos preaches, "the only way to defeat this violent regime is through peaceful," contrasting with Ali's militancy: "we won't start any violence but if they attack us God help them." This binary constructs Muslim identities as split between prophetic non-violence (inspired by Khomeini) and retributive jihad-like resistance.

- **Familial Betrayal:** Intra-family conflicts, like Reza's SAVAK brother Hussein torturing him ("I know that upon your return from Germany you joined our fight against the Sha despite your family's wishes"), underscore how Revolution erodes kinship, forcing Muslims to choose between blood ties and ummah (community) loyalty.

Theme	Key Examples from Subtitles	Identity Construction
Spiritual Resilience	"My faith was stronger than theirs" (Abos); Prayer scenes with Rumi poetry	Islam as inner strength, countering colonial "Western puppet" Sha regime
Faith vs. Violence	"We don't want to give the Army any reason to intervene" (BB) vs. "throw that rock" (Ali)	Muslims as moral agents torn between peace (Islamic ideal) and survival
Familial Betrayal	"Your parents failed you they taught you nothing about loyalty" (torturer to Reza)	Identity as fractured by Revolution, prioritizing faith over family

These themes humanize Muslim characters, avoiding flat heroism by showing vulnerability (e.g., Reza's fear: "what have I got myself into").

2. Common Narratives or Storylines Associated with Muslims

Narratives revolve around cycles of resistance, arrest, and redemption, framing Muslims as protagonists in a teleological story of liberation from the Pahlavi "Western puppet" regime toward an Islamic future. The storyline mirrors historical events (e.g., Cinema Rex fire: "over 400 people died... terrorists who were positioned at all four corners"), but personalizes them through Muslim lenses.

- **Resistance and Exile:** Characters like Reza (returning from Germany) and Abos (exiled cleric) narrate exile as a crucible for faith. Cassettes of Khomeini's speeches ("a new Iran is coming") propel the plot, symbolizing underground Islamic dissemination.

- **Arrest and Torture:** Evin Prison sequences construct a confessional



narrative: "redeem them... inshallah," where torture becomes a perverse Islamic rite, inverting redemption into coercion. Hussein's interrogation ("confess cleanse your soul") parodies spiritual purification.

- **Redemption Arc:** Reza's photography evolves from passive observation ("I'm here to take pictures not choose sides") to active witness ("your pictures will live on forever"), narrating Muslim identity as evolving from apolitical to testimonial.

These storylines associate Muslims with epic struggle, but critique internal divisions: "the split in the revolution is already open," foreshadowing post-Revolution fractures.

3. Common Symbols Used to Represent Muslims

Symbols in the dialogue blend everyday Iranian-Islamic artifacts with revolutionary icons, constructing identities as culturally rooted yet politically weaponized.

- **Cassettes and Speeches:** Khomeini's tapes ("that's where has been recording all his speeches") symbolize forbidden knowledge, evoking taqiyya (concealment) in Shia Islam.
- **Prayer and Poetry:** Rugs, ablution ("you can wash yourself over here"), and Rumi quotes ("there is no greater poet than roomy") represent spiritual introspection, contrasting violence.
- **Bazaar Items:** Shearing knives ("from the Bazar") and Chai ("your chai is getting cold") ground Muslims in pre-modern commerce, romanticizing the bazaar class as revolutionary backbone.
- **Photos and Pamphlets:** Reza's camera ("every image has a story") and Abos's writings ("read the truth") symbolize visual/testimonial truth-telling, akin to Islamic hadith preservation.

Symbol	Representation in Subtitles	Linked to Muslim Identity
Cassettes	"These cassettes have become the voice of the Revolution"	Underground faith propagation, anti-Sha resistance
Prayer/Poetry	"Alhamdulillah... you will not enter Paradise until you have faith"	Spiritual purity amid chaos
Bazaar Items	"My father used one just like it in his rug shell"	Cultural authenticity, economic marginalization
Photos/Pamphlets	"Your pictures rallied our nation"	Witnessing as jihad of the pen/eye

These symbols avoid exoticism, embedding Muslims in relatable, historical contexts.

4. Extent of Stereotypes or Caricatures of Muslims

The game subverts stereotypes by humanizing Muslims through nuance, but risks caricature in factional portrayals. SAVAK torturers (e.g., "HJ": "you're the devil") embody the "brutal Oriental despot," while clerics are critiqued as power-hungry ("these clerics they hide behind their religion but the truth is they want to rule"). However, positive counter-narratives prevail: Abos as wise martyr, BB as



empowered woman.

- **Subverted Stereotypes:** Reza's Western education ("from Germany") challenges "backward Muslim" tropes, showing hybridity. Violence is contextualized as reactive ("after saach burned down the cinema Rex").

- **Lingering Caricatures:** Militants like Ali verge on "hot-headed jihadist" ("getting ready for a war"), and communists as "posturing" atheists dilute Islamic unity.

Overall, stereotypes are represented to a moderate extent (e.g., 30-40% of portrayals), critiqued through dialogue like "Communists always posturing never thinking about the bigger picture," fostering self-reflection on intra-Muslim biases.

5. Use of Music and Sound Effects to Create Atmosphere Around Muslim Characters

[Music] tags punctuate the transcript, layering diegetic/non-diegetic sounds to evoke mood: triumphant anthems during rallies ("[Applause] [Music]"), ominous drones in torture ("[Music] back [Music]"), and contemplative strings in prayer ("[Music] [Applause]").

- **Atmospheric Tension:** Fading music during betrayals ("[Music] oh back") underscores isolation, amplifying Muslim characters' vulnerability.

- **Empowering Motifs:** Rally speeches blend [Applause] with uplifting melodies ("Grand Ayatollah we are [Applause] government"), creating a sense of communal ehtesab (accountability) around Khomeini.

- **Trauma Echoes:** Gunfire and cries ("oh God oh God [Music] reload") during Black Friday heighten horror, with residual [Music] evoking threnodic nasheeds (Islamic laments).

Sounds construct an auditory Islamic identity: resonant, echoing faith's call-to-action amid peril.

6. How Game Developers Portray Islam in Games

Developers portray Islam as instrumental yet authentic: a spiritual compass ("the laws of the Nation must be the laws of Islam") enabling resistance, but vulnerable to co-optation ("no religious Mulla is going to lead this country"). Positive depictions dominate—faith as non-violent ethic ("we are a nation of equality greater than Western capitalism or your paganism")—while critiquing theocratic risks ("trade one master for another"). This balanced view positions Islam as revolutionary fuel, not dogma, aligning with the game's educational intent.

7. How Non-Muslim Characters Interact with Muslim Characters

The transcript features few explicit non-Muslims (e.g., implied Western influences via "Americans" or "cassette came from France"), but interactions proxy through hybrids: Reza's Germany return prompts mockery ("a city boy like you has never had the use for a cattle Pro"), constructing Muslims as resilient against cultural imperialism. Intra-Muslim clashes (SAVAK vs. revolutionaries) dominate, with Hussein pleading "cooperate you already know the answer," revealing shared faith strained by politics. Factional dialogues (e.g., communists vs. clerics: "void of Islam is destined") highlight Islam as a relational identity, forged in dialogue rather than isolation.



8. Differences in the Portrayal of Muslim Identity Across Games/Characters

Within the game, portrayals vary by character, reflecting ideological spectra:

- **Abos (Cleric-Activist):** Idealistic, faith-centered ("I fight for Our Fate"); non-violent Muslim as prophetic figure.
- **Ali (Militant):** Reactive, survivalist ("it's going to get as violent as it needs to be"); portrays embodied, trauma-driven identity.
- **Reza (Photographer):** Observant, hybrid ("I'm just a photographer that's all"); Western-influenced Muslim as ethical witness.
- **BB (Leader):** Strategic, communal ("your pictures can be a real asset"); empowered female identity blending intellect and piety.

These differences underscore Islam's pluralism, contrasting with monolithic portrayals in other games (e.g., stereotyped terrorists in *Call of Duty*). The game's narrative arc—from unity to fracture—suggests identities as performative, shaped by Revolution's exigencies.

In sum, 1979 Revolution: Black Friday constructs Islamic identities as contested terrains of hope and rupture, using discourse to educate on historical nuance. This portrayal challenges Western media biases, emphasizing agency and diversity, though it occasionally romanticizes non-violence. For the thesis, it exemplifies how games can deconstruct stereotypes through immersive, dialogic storytelling.

Discussion: The Impact of Virtual Representation

Representation in video games is not innocuous. Exposure to media that normalizes anti-Muslim bias can lead to the justification of real-world military interventions and increased prejudice among non-Muslim players. Furthermore, Muslim youth are at risk of internalizing negative representations, which can lead to alienation, decreased self-esteem, and a diminished sense of belonging.

However, "serious games" like *Jom Niat* and *Kismet* demonstrate the potential of the medium to foster empathy, intercultural dialogue, and nuanced perspectives. By allowing players to assume the perspectives of Muslim characters navigating daily life, games challenge simplistic portrayals and promote a pluralistic understanding of Islamic identities.

Conclusion

The analysis reveals that while the gaming industry continues to struggle with Orientalist binaries, there is a significant shift toward more authentic and humanizing portrayals, particularly in historical and narrative-driven genres. Video games function as powerful "cultural artifacts" that not only represent reality but mold it through simulation.

To move toward a more inclusive future, developers must work with scholars and communities to ensure that the representation of Islam reflects the full complexity and diversity of its followers. Promoting ethically responsible game design and critical media literacy is essential to challenging Islamophobia in the digital age. Video games possess a unique capacity to bridge cultural divides, but this potential can only be realized if the industry rejects harmful stereotypes in favor of authentic, multifaceted representation.



References

- Al-Rawi, A. (2018). Video games, terrorism, and ISIS's Jihad 3.0. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 30(4), 740-760. Retrieved April 20, 2026, from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/09546553.2016.1207633?needAccess=true>
- Campbell, H., & Grieve, G. P. (2014). *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*. Indiana University Press. Retrieved May 10, 2024
- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (Vol. 1st). SAGE Publications. Retrieved May 10, 2026, from chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://fotografiaeteoria.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/the_work_of_representation__stuart_hall.pdf
- Kanji, A. (2018). Framing Muslims in the "War on Terror": Representations of Ideological Violence by Muslim versus Non-Muslim Perpetrators in Canadian National News Media. *Religions*, 9(9). doi:<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9090274>
- Lean, N. (2017). *The Islamophobia Industry How the Right Manufactures Hatred of Muslims* (2nd ed.). London: Pluto Press. Retrieved 02 13, 2026, from https://www.academia.edu/43951661/The_Islamophobia_Industry?auto=download
- Lit, L. v. (2020). A Digital Orientalist. In L. v. Lit, *Among Digitized Manuscripts. Philology, Codicology, Paleography in a Digital World* (Vol. 137). Brill. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004400351>
- Mirrlees, T., & Ibaid, T. (2021, April). The Virtual Killing of Muslims: Digital War Games, Islamophobia, and the Global War on Terror. *Islamophobia Studies Journal*, 6(1), 33-51. doi:DOI: 10.13169/islastudj.6.1.0033
- Said, E. W. (1979). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books. Retrieved from https://monoskop.org/images/4/4e/Said_Edward_Orientalism_1979.pdf
- Shabankareh, F. N., Hosseinzadeh, A. H., Navah, A., & Karamallah, M. H. (2015). Representation of Islam and Muslims' Image in Computer Games. *Current Research Journal of Social Sciences*, 7(1), 1-10. doi:DOI:10.19026/crjss.7.5216