JENEEN NAJI AND MSUGHTER IWAR
National University of Ireland, Maynooth

Simulated stereotypes turning the unreal real: An analysis of representations of the 'Other' in traditional media forms and digital games

ABSTRACT

We live in a world in which we constantly interact with distant cultures through media forms. The media, as the name implies, does not provide a direct link to these different cultures but barely mediates this interaction by presenting constructions of these cultures. This article explores the representation of Muslims in traditional and digital media forms. Specifically the representation of Muslims in two contemporary image constructors, news and games, is explored as well as the corresponding inter-connectedness of these representations. Whilst there has been previous research into the representation of Muslims in news and similarly in video games, none compare and contrast the representational methods of these two image constructors in the way this article does. This article performs a comparative study of Muslim representation in these two seemingly unconnected forms towards the goal of identifying similarities and differences of representation using Muslims as a case study.

The digital realm is often purported as a pantheon for society with the freedom of digital publishing and communication allowing minorities to represent themselves and yet there is evidence to suggest that this is not the case. Existing content incorporates and reflects the general imagination of the Middle East prevalent among the western public as well as the audience's expectation of particular genres – which have themselves been influenced by news media. What exists here is a complete cycle of ignorance reproducing false representation. This logic seems to dictate construction of representation in both forms.

INTRODUCTION

We live in a world in which we constantly interact with distant cultures through media. The media, as the name implies, does not provide a direct link to these different cultures but barely mediates this interaction by presenting constructions of these cultures. The images that are constructed are called representations and according to Branston and Stafford (2010: 106), 'some media re-present, over and over again, certain images, stories, situations. This can make them seem 'natural' or 'familiar' – and thereby marginalise or even exclude other images, making those unfamiliar or even threatening'. This routine form of representation leads to a limited imagining of particular groups, identities and situations, which itself leads to stereotyping.

Stereotypes are not merely descriptive; they exist within a historical context and contain both descriptive and evaluative aspects (Gorham 1999; Seiter 1986). Stereotyping works by clinging on to easily perceived features of the group that is being represented and then suggesting that these are the causes of the groups' position. Furthermore, stereotypes attempt to insist on absolute differences – between 'us' and 'them' – whereas the notion of a spectrum of differences would be more appropriate (Branston and Stafford 2010: 108).

The representational dichotomies apparent in mainstream media of 'us and them' has been usefully explored and researched by well-known academic heavyweights such as Chomsky (1991), Said (1978), Dyer (1984) and Richardson (2004) to name but a few. The focus of this article within this well-established field is to explore how Muslims are represented in not only traditional media forms such as news but also the emerging digital realm. There has been to date extensive research into the representation of Muslims in news (Akbarzadeh and Smith 2005; First and Avraham 2003; Avraham, Wolfsfeld and Aburaiya 2000) and in video games (Sisler 2008; Souri 2007; Leonard 2006), however, these research studies do not include a comparison and discussion of the interconnectedness of the representational methods on these two media platforms that this article provides. This article will interweave the existing research on the representation of Muslims in both mainstream media and games in order to elucidate the interconnectedness and enormous impact that these two media forms have on each other in terms of the propagation of stereotypes and their corresponding impact on society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section details previous research into Muslim representation by popular media, specifically news and games. It will cover existing research on the construction of Muslim 'Other' in two significant areas: (1) mainstream media (2) digital games.

1. Constructing the Muslim 'Other' in mainstream media

The criminology book *Bin Laden in the Suburbs* (Poyting, Noble and Tabar 2004) focuses on the rising fear of the Muslim 'Other' in Australia over the last decade. It speaks specifically on how otherwise peaceful and law-abiding communities of Middle Eastern origin are persistently represented as villains by both the sensationalist media and opportunist politicians, because of a handful of crimes committed by some of their members. The main argument that the book presents is that the 'Arab Other' has come to exist as the 'folk devil' of our time; specifically, that is, in Australia where the research takes place from 1998 to 2003.

Of course it is important to note that the word Arab is not and should not be synonymous with the word Muslim, as such this article has chosen to focus on Muslim representation not Arab representation, as it is the representation of Muslims in mainstream media that can be the most problematic. Nonetheless the fact remains that the predominant representation of Arabs in the media is as extremist Islamists. As Karim (2006: 118) points out, the 'adjective "Islamic" is frequently used by journalists to describe the criminal activities of terrorists in ways that would be inconceivable in referring to similar actions carried out by members of other religions'.

Australia, however, does not stand alone in this type of representation. There is evidence of this narrow-sighted understanding of Muslims in the United Kingdom, the United States and their closest foreign ally, Israel (First and Avraham 2003; Akbarzadeh and Smith 2005; Sisler 2008). This misconception is derived from the understanding of Muslims as a homogenous people and not a religion, with multiple races and varying cultural practices. The way in which western cultures have come to 'know' Muslims and Islam is largely through what is termed *Orientalism*, which is the historically situated western construction of non-western cultures as the 'Other'; as alien, distant, antiquated, irrational, sensual and passive (Said 1978: 96–97).

According to Richardson (2004: 5) *Orientalism* represents 'systems of representation framed by the hegemonic political forces of colonialism, post-colonialism and neo-colonialism, which act towards bringing "the Orient" into "Western" consciousness, Western dispensation and under Western dominion'. This definition suggests that the act of framing a race in an Orientalist manner is a tool for establishing and maintaining power. 'The orientalist approach to Islam can be summarised as essentialist, empiricist and historicist; it impoverishes the rich diversity of Islam by producing an essentialist caricature' (Richardson 2004: 5). This caricature is essentially the generic Muslim representation that is propagated by western media; this is the 'Otherness' that is constructed.

A predominant depiction of Muslims is one of a backward group who are seen to be victims of their own inability to govern or organize themselves (First and Avraham 2003: 11). It is also important to point out the gendered nature of these representations.

> Dominant stereotypes portray men as foreign (and more recently local) terrorists or extremists, whereas women are constructed as repressed hijab wearers who need to be liberated from patriarchal oppression and violence. These Western perceptions of Islam and Muslims further suggest that they are intolerant of other religions and Western cultures.
>
> (Akbarzadeh and Smith 2005: 4)

Akbarzadeh and Smith (2005: 4) also cite Dunn (2001: 291) who states that 'the negative constructions of Islam which circulate at (inter)national levels include Muslims as fanatical, intolerant, militant, fundamentalist, misogynist and alien'. These are stereotypes that are directly linked to contexts of war, conflict, violence, disunity and sexism. Akbarzadeh and Smith's (2005) research into the representation of Islam and Muslims in the media further asserts that there is a deliberate 'Us' and 'Them' dichotomy, which represents them (Muslim) falsely and, ultimately, has become the dominant dialectic when discussing Muslims (Akbarzadeh and Smith 2005: 4).

It is worth mentioning here Inez Mahony's (2010: 739) comparative analysis of Australian and Indonesian mainstream news coverage, 'taken from the week following the 2002 Bali bombings, the 2004 Australian Embassy bombing in Jakarta and the 2005 Bali bombings' in which media reinforcement and propagation of stereotypical images of Muslims is illustrated. Mahony informs us that although 'the Australian media's framing of issues relating to terrorism and Islamic groups in Indonesia generates a hegemonic Orientalist image of Indonesian Muslims, Indonesian media treatment of the same issues is more moderate, presenting a very different picture' (739). Clearly however the alternative form of representation here is in fact that which has been generated by the 'Other' in this case the Indonesian Muslims, so it is unsurprising that they offer an alternate, more moderate view. Concurrently it is clear that the western mainstream media's representation of Muslims generally conforms to common stereotypes.

A more recent example is the controversial article on the Boston marathon Bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnev, by Janet Reitman (2013) in *Rolling Stone* magazine. The controversy that arose was not in fact due to the content of the article, which conformed to the damaged fundamentalist Muslim victim stereotype such as those discussed to date, but rather the fact that his image was the front cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine. There was fear and concern that using the image of the bomber on the cover was in fact turning the bomber into a type of rock star. American retailers removed the magazine from their stores amid fears that the *Rolling Stone* editors were 'rewarding a terrorist with celebrity treatment' (Saul 2013). Interestingly this was the one aspect of mainstream media coverage of this Muslim that did not portray him as a victim or the 'Other', in fact it imbued him with a certain kind of power usually reserved for charismatic rock stars on the cover of *Rolling Stone* and reaffirmed his familiarity as a young white westerner. So it is unsurprising therefore that it was in fact this very aspect of representation that the general public objected to.

News media plays a major social role in meaning-making through the construction of news. News outlets – print, online or broadcast journalism – are major sites of meaning-making and the journalists and media houses are described as 'image makers' because of their approach to constructing news. They use a process of continually presenting pictures and words of different social identities. In this way, they create an affiliation of different groups in the mind of their viewers and define 'us' and 'them' and our national awareness, which is also an artificial social product pertaining to an imagined community (Kellner 1995: 67).

Branston and Stafford (2010: 335) emphasize that reliable news outlets that offer accurate information and analysis are necessary to develop complex modern social orders. What we can infer from this observation is: whoever has control of news media can lay claim to some sort of control of social order however limited this may be. To this effect, studies have shown links between

Muslim portrayal in the news and public opinion about relevant issues (Kamalipour and Carilli 1998).

Research carried out by Deprez and Raeymackaers (2010) revealed that an imbalance exists within the international news media. Also, Shoemaker and Reese (1996) carried out research to ascertain why imbalance can arise in news. Their research revealed that one of the primary reasons for an imbalance was in the way correspondents/journalists function and more importantly, the way they are individually influenced. This imbalance in representation by international news media outlets can be described as an institutional failure in their primary task, which is to provide accurate information about current affairs.

2. The digital Muslim 'Other': Simulations of representations

The speed at which news travels globally in this Internet age is also a phenomenon worth taking note of. News can now travel from local to international context, and from formal to informal ones through satellites, broadband, blogs, tweets and multimedia messaging services within a very short space of time. The result of all this is that the Internet is decentralized in a way that previous media have not been, for example broadcast television is highly centralized with a 'one to many' model and is prone to elite control in a way that the Internet is not (Slack and Wise 2006: 150). However it is important to also remember Slack and Wise's (2006: 141) warning, that a common tendency when discussing new technologies is 'to treat them as if they were completely revolutionary, capable of (*sui generis* as it were) changing everything and likely to do so' instead of what they quite often are: digital reflections of the analogue world. For example, one consequence of contemporary technological enhancements is that false information or representation in news is able to gain a global audience rapidly. The Internet's potential to propagate commonly held false notions and negative stereotypes is just as great as its perceived ability to give a voice to the voiceless.

So does the digital realm really give voice to the voiceless? The lingua franca of the Internet is English and digital access requires a relatively sophisticated level of education and technological access. Bunt (2006: 154) outlines that accessibility is a critical point to include in any discussions of Islam and technology and he cites the *Arab Human Development Report* (United Nations Development Programme: 2003) that discusses the relatively low levels of Internet access in Arab countries. This would indicate instead that in fact the Internet gives voice to predominantly English-speaking groups with access to technology, this therefore can easily be seen to advantage western countries.

First and Avraham (2003: 2) outline how the symbolic reality in which the representational process takes place is comprised of various means of expression including literature, art forms and the media. First and Avraham (2003: 2) explain how the representational process is dynamic, and affected both socially and symbolically by a changing reality. In this sense it is therefore important to remember the reciprocity of representation in both forms of media: mainstream news and digital games. Clearly this draws on Chomsky's (1991: 35) arguments regarding 'Representation as Reality' and it is therefore evident how the representation of the Muslim 'Other' in political-social reality contributes to the creation of the symbolic reality in which we find cultural objects such as digital games. The symbolic reality in turn contributes to distortion of the social reality, which in turn influences the political-social reality and so on and so forth.

Notably this is similar to what Giddings (2007: 423) proposes regarding video games in that we view 'simulations as being generative of a range of possible phenomena, events or trajectories: as tools for the imagination – a prosthetic imagination – producing speculative, not definitive, knowledge' (Giddings 2007: 423). Digital games are simulations in the sense that, they are created by the computer, a simulating machine (Hayles 2004: 71). This view is further confirmed by Murray (2012) who states that by

> harnessing the procedural power of the computer to represent objects and processes we can create simulations, working models of complex systems that can be run with controlled variations and that aspire to reproduce the complexity we recognize in natural and social systems.
>
> (Murray 2012: 53)

So therefore digital games can be seen as simulations *of* representations. We can see traces here of the postmodernist simulacra of Deleuze (1983) and Baudrillard (1983), a copy of a copy. This does not mean however that the copy (in this case the digital game) has less substance than the original, as through their creation they themselves are also 'real'. The dissembling of the simulacrum is so effective here that it goes beyond presenting itself as a good copy – it claims the ontological possibility of being the original (Giddings 2007: 422). The impact of these simulations on their audiences is notable.

There is in fact a growing presence of digital games in every aspect of our lives. Statistics show that the worldwide online gaming community's population stood at 217 million in 2007 (comScore 2007) – and this figure does not take into account the other percentage of gamers that play exclusively offline. This makes the area of video games a rich field for research into what sort of values and ideas are being transmitted by this media platform and also, how representation and racial politics is constructed with regards to Muslims.

Research has shown that digital games are a centre for learning. Everett and Watkins's (2008) research into this area focuses on how young people interact with digital games while learning about race and difference in the world. Their framework pushes for an assessment of popular game titles, their maker's intentions and how they 'reflect, influence, reproduce, and thereby teach dominant ideas about race' (2008: 141). Prior to such research into the field of video games, there was an emphasis on studying the role of television in multicultural awareness. In their research into the relationship between children and television, Berry and Asamen (2001: 363) argue that, 'fact or fiction, real or unreal, television programs create cognitive and affective environments that describe and portray people, places and things that carry profound general and specific cross cultural learning experiences'.

This exact same thought can be applied to video games now. This is especially because, according to Everett and Watkins (2008: 141), video games are competing with television for the time and attention of media users and therefore a more rigorous focus should be put on digital and interactive forms when researching what influences race education. This point is echoed by Frasca (2004: 21), who argues that

> video games not only represent reality but also model it through simulations [...] this form of representation is based on rules that mimic the behaviour of the simulated systems. However, unlike narrative authors,

simulation authors do not represent a particular event, but a set of potential events. Because of this, we have to think about their objects as systems and consider what laws govern their behaviours.

<div align="right">(Frasca 2004: 21)</div>

The fact that video games model reality means they have the power to affect cognition. Based on this prognosis, we can assume that if there is a false or narrow representation of a race on this platform, it will have real-life consequences on the players' understanding of the real world.

We can establish that this systematic and conscious misrepresentation already persists with regards to Muslims. In his analysis, Shaw (2010) argues that

in the years since the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and the beginning of simultaneous wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the representation (both in and out group) of Muslims in video games and elsewhere have been written of with a palpable urgency.

<div align="right">(Shaw 2010: 2)</div>

This is not surprising for one sole reason: on a commercial level, video game publishers probably felt that this was the perfect time to cash in on the vilification of Muslims, especially if they were catering to an American/European audience. What we are considering, however, is the consequence of this financial motive on the real-world understanding of Muslims.

This article asserts that a schematized image of the world is what exists in video games. Usually, the 'hero' of the game is one of the few characters depicted with a background and personality. Most of the other characters are represented using distinctive, recognizable symbols. This also applies to the setting of most of these games. These games were analysed during research carried out by Sisler (2008) and feature Muslim representation usually in a Middle Eastern setting that alluded more to fantasy and quasi-historical contexts than to reality. These games include *Prince of Persia* (Mechner, 1989), *The Magic of Scheherazade* (Culture Brain 1989), *Arabian Nights* (Krisalis 1993), *Al-Qadim: The Genie's Curse* (Cyberlore Studios 1994), *Beyond Oasis* (Ancient 1995), *Persian Wars* (Cryo 2001) and *Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones* (Guillemette 2005). All these games share similar Orientalist imagery.

This type of representation is not far from that which Edward Said (1978) discussed in his seminal work on Orientalism – Islamic society is viewed as a timeless and exotic entity. Sisler (2008) drew from his work for his research, asserting that 'fine arts and photography, which presented the "Middle East" in a naive and historicizing way, had served to exclude it from "modernity", and thus endorsed the patronising and colonial approach of real politics'. This particular study observed the visual signifiers used by video game producers to create the Orientalist Middle Eastern impression and found a strong correlation. These visual indicators included motifs such as headscarves, turbans, scimitars, tiles and camels; character concepts such as caliphs, Bedouins, djinns, belly dancers and Oriental topoi such as deserts, minarets, bazaars and harems (Sisler 2008). However, this does not apply to all games especially those which seek to portray a contemporary setting of the Middle East. These games mostly use different imagery, narrative and gameplay – albeit still lacking representational accuracy.

According to Sisler (2008), 'unlike the fine arts, video games often contain a narrative. Although this usually serves only as an introduction to a larger "quest", together with the images and gameplay it shapes the broader connoted message of the game as a whole'. The majority of the games analysed in his study were to follow a similar plot: it begins with the kidnapping of a woman (princess, sister, daughter) by an evil character (vizier, caliph, demon) and usually, the objective of the game is to save her and gain revenge. Some games play it out so that either the woman (princess) is the final reward for the hero or the hero's mission is to escape from the oppression from an evil caliph. Sisler (2008) argues that, 'although these narratives are typical for common medieval fantasy settings, such imagery is particularly dominant in the frame of reference to the "Middle East", reinforcing stereotypical notions of arbitrary cruelty and barbarism'. The conclusion of Sisler's (2008) research is that the general depiction of the Middle East in these games is fantastical and all the signifiers used are to give the player an Oriental impression.

The research by Sisler (2008) into the area of Muslim representation in video games has revealed that mainstream news channels afford the general narrative that video game publishers choose for their stories. Sisler's (2008) research shows that in-game representations of Muslims have to be contextualized in a broad narrative structure that covers Islam as it appears in news and popular media. The research also reveals that the dominant mode of Muslim representation by European and American publishers follows the stereotypical generalizations and clichés that news media also propagate.

Another interesting facet of the 'us' versus the 'Other' dichotomy in the video games production landscape is how the 'Other' has chosen to represent themselves in opposition to western publishers. Most academic articles into Arab-produced games have mainly set a comparative dialectic with western-produced games (Sisler 2006; Galloway 2004). Shaw (2010: 2) argues that, 'media coverage of these games naturally situates them as reactions to the representation of Arabs in Anglo-produced video games and as peripheral to mainstream games'.

The Muslim 'enemy' in video games

The Sisler (2008) research into video games extends into an analysis of how the representation of the enemy is constructed. The idea that in most action games, the point of the game is to kill the 'Other' or 'Others' who are usually in opposition to 'us' had been covered before (Dahlberg 2005). What the Sisler (2008) research hoped to find out in this aspect was exactly how this 'Other' was constructed by the game producers. The researchers found that the Middle East is a favourite virtual battleground for most action war games, with no less than six games using this setting. These games include, *War in the Gulf* (Oxford Digital Enterprises 1993), *Delta Force* (NovaLogic 1998), *Conflict: Desert Storm* (Pivotal Games 2002), *Full Spectrum Warrior* (Pandemic Studios 2004), *Kuma/War* (Kuma Reality Games 2004) and *Conflict: Global Terror* (Pivotal Games 2005).

The events of September 11, 2001 have proved to be singularly significant because of the new meaning it brought to video games. It marked an increase in video games where the objective is to fight 'terrorism', combat games in the Middle East and in the general militarization of the digital entertainment public sphere. Prior research has revealed three distinct features of this: (1) increasing collaborations between the games industry and the military in the

United States, (2) games are being used as a public relations tool for promoting the US Army and recruitment, and (3) games are being used as a means of explaining and vindicating the 'War against Terror' (Sisler 2008).

According to Sisler (2008), 'when a game is set in a particular Middle Eastern country and based on real conflict, the retelling of the narrative inevitably reshapes its comprehension and evaluation, schematizing complex political relations into a polarized frame'. This means that the actual construction of the narrative and game-play feeds social consciousness.

Another important facet discovered during the analysis of these games is that they are provided with an overwhelming amount of technical information about weaponry and technology of war, but fail to provide background for the deeper understanding of the conflict and its outcome (Sisler 2008). This mode of construction adopted by the western video game industry reinforces the polarized form of the 'good self' and the 'evil other' – with Muslims/Arabs usually occupying the latter – without providing any further explanation of the reasons for the conflict (Sisler 2008).

Counter-constructions in video games

There is a growing impression by individuals and game designers in the Middle East that Muslims and Arabs are being misrepresented by western produced games. Roumani (2006) quotes Radwan Kasmiya, executive manager of the Syrian company Afkar Media who states 'Most video games on the market are anti-Arab and anti-Islam […] Arab gamers are playing games that attack their culture, their beliefs, and their way of life. The youth who are playing the foreign games are feeling guilt'. The interview carried out by Roumani (2006) found that a few attempts have been made to counter this misrepresentation but almost all these games differ in their methods and philosophical approach.

According to Sisler (2008), a direct answer to games such as *Delta Force* (NovaLogic 1998) came from the Central Internet Bureau of Hezbollah in 2003 through an action game, entitled *Al-Quwwat al-Khasa/Special Force* (Solution 2003). This is a game that serves the promotional purposes for the Hezbollah movement. The game-play and narrative deals with the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon and the glorifying role of the Hezbollah in the retreat of the Israeli Army. Two distinct types of Muslim heroes are presented in this game: the first is controlled by the player and is described to be a fearless warrior fighting against the odds and outnumbered by Zionist forces, while the second is a fallen comrade constructed to serve the role of a martyr. Sisler's (2008) analysis is that

> essentially, the concept of the game is not different from western first-person shooters: it has merely reversed the polarities of the narrative and iconographical stereotypes mentioned above by substituting the Arab Muslim hero for the American soldier. The primary difference is that instead of stressing camaraderie and brotherhood between the individual members of a beleaguered army platoon, it stresses the soldier's Muslim identity and higher obligation to Hezbollah as a part of a collective spiritual whole.

> (Sisler 2008)

The Syrian game *Tahta al-Ramad/Under Ash* (Dar al-Fikr, 2002) approaches self-representation differently, using the First Intifada as historical context.

This game is particularly emotional in the way that it presents the story to the player, starting with the Palestinians' conflict with Israeli soldiers at the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. The hero of the game, Ahmad, is introduced in the first mission. This scene involves Palestinians throwing stones at Israeli soldiers who in turn answer with rifle shots and the scene is given emotion through the shouting, shooting and moaning of the wounded. The players' task in the first mission is to escape the shooting at the demonstration alive and then the story progresses into the classic narrative of the hero joining the Palestinian resistance. Sisler's (2008) analysis of this game concludes that, overall, it is found lacking in the technical and graphics department, but what it does provide is a Muslim/Arab character that represents their reality.

According to Sisler (2008),

> *Special Force* (Solution, 2003) and *Under Ash* (Dar al-Fikr, 2002) can be considered as the first attempts to participate in video games' construction of Arab and Muslim self-representation. Although the first is blatantly ideological and propagandistic, whereas the latter pales in technological comparison with similar US and European games, for the first time the Middle-Eastern gamer is offered congruence between their political reality and its in-game mimesis.
>
> (Sisler 2008)

This is evidence of reactionary measures that Middle Eastern video game producers have implemented in order to oppose the ways they have been represented by western publishers.

DISCUSSION

It is clear therefore that mainstream media and digital games show evidence of a stereotypical type of representation. The first general observation we can make refers to the mode of representation in both media forms. In video games, the 'Orientalist' imagery is usually exploited in adventure and role-playing games that portray the Middle East in a quasi-historical manner. However, first-person shooter games usually present the Middle East in a conflictual framework, representing Arabs and Muslims as the enemy (Sisler 2008).

The representation of Muslims in news also reveals a degree of stereotypical representation. A good percentage of the articles analysed have shown evidence of narrative that reinforces the dichotomy of 'Us' and 'Them', often with racial undertones. The stereotypes that these articles usually stick to are the image of Muslims as unclean, social deviants and security threats. These stereotypes are all being propagated against the backdrop of the 'War on Terror'. Heightened security concerns have made the Muslim community an easy target for an extraordinary level of media scrutiny (Akbarzadeh and Smith 2005: 36).

These news stories are constructed as a result of the journalists' understanding and familiarity with Islam. Akbarzadeh and Smith (2005: 36) assert that journalists are shaped by their social environment and are open to a range of political and ideological influences. Some of these influences are openly hostile to Islam and that understanding is incorporated into their construction of news stories covering Muslims and Islam. This is one of the major reasons for constant misrepresentation of Muslims and ties into the issue of general ignorance with regards to them.

However, representation in video games takes another shape. It is inferred by Sisler (2008) that the pivotal reason for the type of representation in video games relates directly to the link between production and consumption. These western video game producers develop these games with their western consumer-base in mind. Therefore, they tend to incorporate and reflect the general imagination of the Middle East prevalent among the western public as well as the audience's expectation of particular genres – which probably have been influenced by news media. What exists here is a complete cycle of ignorance reproducing false representation. Karim (2006: 116) explores this idea concisely when he mentions that 'the more closely a journalist report reproduces the common stereotypes of a particular people, the greater the likelihood that it will be highlighted in a newspaper'. This logic seems to dictate construction of representation in both media forms.

Another significant aspect of Muslim representation is that the negative images that are produced are not always due to the actual construction of the news stories, the video game narrative or the editorial choice of words. Often even when the story or video game is constructed without misrepresentation, the content might have a significant impact on the overall impression left behind. This is especially obvious with the way 'terrorism' is covered in both media platforms. News stories and game narratives are almost always rooted in the negativity of these events and the senseless nature of terrorism. All this makes it difficult to avoid linking Muslims to terrorism even when the journalist or game producer follows a professional mode of construction avoiding stereotypes. In this sense we can see the very real application of Barthes extension of the 'trope' concept in his semiotic analysis of culture. Barthes emphasized the importance of difference in the creation of meanings (Gottdiener 1995: 27). The deconstructivist postmodern phenomenological approach extends definitions through that which things are not. In this instance the games produced by Middle Eastern game publishers define themselves in direct opposition to western game publishers and produce games that are very distinctly not western-produced games. However this very position in turn reinforces the existence of the very thing that they are in opposition to.

We have explored how counter constructions are produced to resist the representation that exists on these platforms. Arab game designers found two significant ways to resist representation. The first was an attempt to reverse the stereotypical depiction, narrative and game-play evident in western produces games (such as *Special Force*) or by humanizing the Muslim characters in these games and using an Islamic narrative (such as *Under Siege* [Kasmiya 2005]). Sisler (2008) argues that

> The awareness of racial schematizations does not necessarily lead to attempts to destroy or subvert the schematizing framework itself. On the contrary, many Arab game producers have appropriated the first-person shooter genre with its polarized cultural frame in order to present an Islamic and Arab point of view.
>
> (Sisler 2008)

Therefore the resistance that occurs here merely mirrors the false misrepresentation that western producers institute; in a way we could say that both regional producers are part of the same hypocrisy.

News media have resisted representation in a different manner. An example of which is the 'Self' stories, which explore the daily experiences of

Muslims and demonstrate how ordinary Muslim families are while including their cultural difference. These articles 'overcome the psychological wall that separates the non-Muslim readership from their Muslim neighbours. Self-stories break the "Us" and "Them" dichotomy and make a significant contribution to overcoming religious and racial tension' (Akbarzadeh and Smith 2005: 37).

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, so far through the discussions and analyses in this article we can infer that not one single factor leads to stereotyping. However, the primary danger with regards to stereotyping and misrepresentation is that these images that are produced affect social consciousness and do not offer a real portrayal of the other culture – particularly when these images are not challenged positively. Dyer (1984: 27) emphasizes this point when he purports that

> righteous dismissal does not make the stereotypes go away, and tends to prevent us from understanding just what stereotypes are, how they function, ideologically and aesthetically, and why they are so resilient in the face of our rejection of them.
>
> (Dyer 1984: 27)

Therefore continued systematic and well-researched academic reflection of representation in video games and news is necessary. The complexity of Muslims deserves to be covered thoroughly on both these media platforms. This will serve as both educational for society and liberating for the misrepresented. Finally, proper representation would serve to stifle ruling groups who benefit from misrepresentation of other cultures. Dyer (1984) sums this up concisely when he states:

> The establishment of normalcy through social- and stereotypes is one aspect of the habit of ruling groups – a habit of such enormous political consequences that we tend to think of it as far more premeditated than it actually is – to attempt to fashion the whole of society according to their own world-view, value-system, sensibility and ideology. So right is this world-view for the ruling groups, that they make it appear (as it does to them) as 'natural' and 'inevitable' – and for everyone – and, in so far as they succeed, they establish their hegemony.
>
> (Dyer 1984: 30)

This article also concludes that, although it is perceived and suggested that the digital space (specifically the Internet) may offer 'non-Muslims' a chance at greater understanding of Islam (Bunt 2006: 153) in fact we can see the opposite taking place. If we are to use games as an example of a digital cultural product this is in fact reinforcing stereotypes rather than breaking them down. Granted yes we can see the Internet has offered 'marginalised and minority perspectives to network between themselves' (Bunt 2006: 156), yet there is little evidence to date of it offering greater communication and understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims, between 'us' and the 'Other'.

In fact digital games can be seen to give a more concrete shape to stereotypical representations of the Muslim 'Other'. As per a game studies approach,

if video games are simulations as they are in fact created by the computer – a simulation machine – then concurrently video games that depict the Muslim 'Other' are simulations of representations creating very real copies of copies that feed back into the social consciousness creating an interminable cycle of false representation.

So what is the solution? What can break this cycle? As Bunt (2006: 154) points out accessibility is a key issue here, until we reach the point that the diffusion of technology has reached those parts of the world which minorities inhabit and that they furthermore develop the skills necessary to not only become consumers but producers of content then the cycle will continue. Unfortunately given the poor nature of infrastructure in the majority of these locations this seems unlikely in the near future. So therefore it is up to us to propagate alternative representations of Islam that do not conform to the 'Us and Them' representation. This means encouraging those Muslims who live in the West (who perhaps to date have been disinclined to raise their heads above the parapet) to speak up and become more involved in mainstream media and digital content creation.

A case in point is the recent success of the play *Disgraced* (2013) which won the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Written by Ayad Akhtar an American actor and writer, the play tells of Amir, 'a dashing New York corporate lawyer of Pakistani extraction hoping for a partnership in a Jewish company' (Coveney 2013). The play offers a much more realistically nuanced representation of the conflicting pulls of a multicultural human being. Whilst of Pakistani extraction Amir has renounced Islam, a move which only gains him contempt from all around, and he finds himself forced into assuming the position of the 'Other' as that is how he is perceived by society and how he ends up behaving as a reaction to the conflict that arises from his constant struggle to join the 'Us'. It is a play that deals with the dichotomies that arise from balancing one's own self-image and representation with those held by society, that comes about by being faced with the simplistic and inadequate view of the world as 'Us and Them'.

REFERENCES

Akbarzadeh, S. and Smith, B. (2005), *The Representation of Arabs and Muslims in the Media*, http://asiainstitute.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0017/571112/Islam-in-the-Media.pdf. Accessed 26 May 2014.

Akhtar, A. (2013), *Disgraced*, London: Bloomsbury.

Ancient (1995), *Beyond Oasis* [Video Game] Sega Mega Drive, Tokyo: Sega.

Avraham, E., Wolfsfeld, G. and Aburaiya, I. (2000), 'Dynamics in the news coverage of minorities: The case of the Arab citizens of Israel', *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 24: 2, pp. 117–33.

Baudrillard, J. (1983), *Simulations*, New York: Semiotext(e).

Berry, G. L. and Asamen, J. K. (2001), 'Television, children, and multicultural awareness: Comprehending the medium in a complex multimedia society', in D. G. Dinger and J. L. Singer (eds), *Handbook of Children and the Media*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, pp. 359–373.

Branston, G. and Stafford, R. (2010), *The Media Student's Book*, 5th edn, London: Routledge.

Bunt, G. (2006), 'Towards an Islamic information revolution?', in E. Poole and J. Richardson (eds), *Muslims and the News Media*, London: I.B. Tauris, pp. 153–64.

Chomsky, N. (1991), *Media Control, Second Edition: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda*, New York: Seven Stories Press.

comScore (2007), 'Worldwide Online Gaming Community Reaches 217 Million People', http://www.comscore.com/Insights/Press_Releases/2007/07/Worldwide_Online_Gaming_Grows. Accessed 20 March 2013.

Coveney, M. (2013), 'Theatre review: Disgraced, Bush Theatre, London', *The Independent*, 28 May, http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/theatre-review-disgraced-bush-theatre-london-8634130.html. Accessed 1 September 2013.

Cryo (2001), *Persian Wars* [Video Game] PC, Paris: Cryo Interactive Entertainment.

Cyberlore Studios (1994), *Al-Qadim: The Genie's Curse* [Video Game] PC, Sunnyvale: SSI.

Culture Brain (1989), *The Magic of Scheherazade* [Video Game] NES, Redmond: Culture Brain.

Dahlberg, L. (2005), 'Playing the Other and killing the Other in contemporary video games', In *Critical Legal Conference Annual Meeting (Resistance)*, Kent Law School, England 4–5 September, University of Kent: Canterbury.

Deleuze, G. (1983), *Plato and the Simulacrum*, October, no. 27, pp. 45–56.

Deprez, A. and Raeymackaers, K. (2010), 'Bias in the news? The representation of Palestines and Israelis in the coverage of the first and second Intifada', *The International Communication Gazette*, 72: 1, pp. 91–109, https://biblio.ugent.be/input/download?func=downloadFile&recordOId=873250&fileOId=900988. Accessed 4 March 2013.

Dunn, K. (2001), 'Representations of Islam in the politics of mosque development in Sydney', *Tijdschrit voor Economische en Sociale Geografie (Journal of Economic & Social Geography)*, 92: 3, pp. 291–308.

Dyer, R. (1984), 'Stereotyping', in R. Dyer (ed.), *Gays and Film*, New York: Zeotrope, pp. 27–39.

Oxford Digital Enterprises (1993), *War in the Gulf* [Video Game] Amiga, Atari ST and MS-DOS, London: Empire Interactive.

Everett, A. and Watkins, S. C. (2008), 'The power of play: The portrayal and performance of race in video games', in K. Salen (ed.), *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games and Learning*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 141–66.

First, A. and Avraham, E. (2003), 'Changes in the political, social, and media environments and their impact on the coverage of conflict: The case of the Arab citizens of Israel', *Conflict & Communication*, 2: 1, pp. 1–14, http://www.cco.regener-online.de/2003_1/pdf_2003_1/first_avraham.pdf. Accessed 26 February 2013.

Frasca, G. (2004), 'Videogames of the oppressed: Critical thinking, education, tolerance, and other trivial issues', in N. Wardrip-Fruin and P. Harrigan (eds), *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 85–94.

Galloway, A. R. (2004), 'Social realism in gaming', *The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, 4: 1, http://gamestudies.org/0401/galloway/. Accessed 22 March 2013.

Giddings, S. (2007), 'Dionysiac machines: Videogames and the triumph of the simulacra', *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 13: 4, pp. 417–31.

Gorham, B. W. (1999), 'Stereotypes in the media: So what?', *Howard Journal of Communications*, 10: 4, pp. 229–47, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/106461799246735. Accessed 14 October 2013.

Gottdiener, M. (1995), 'The system of objects and the commodification of everyday life: The early Baudrillard', in D. Kellner (ed.), *Baudrillard: A Critical Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Guillemette, K. (2005), *Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones*, [Video Game] PC, PlayStation, Xbox, Wii, GameCube, Montreuil-sous-Bois: Ubisoft.

Hayles, N. K. (2004), 'Print is flat, code is deep: The importance of media-specific analysis', *Poetics Today*, 25: 1, pp. 67–90.

Kamalipour, Y. R. and Carilli, T. (1998), *Cultural Diversity and the United States Media*, New York: SUNY Press.

Karim, H. (2006), 'American media's coverage of Muslims: The historical roots of contemporary portrayals', in E. Poole and J. Richardson (eds), *Muslims and the News Media*, London: I.B. Tauris, pp. 116–27.

Kasmiya, R. (2005), *Under Siege* [Video Game] PC, Damascus: Dar al-Fikr.

Kellner, D. (1995), *Media Cultures*, London: Routledge.

Krisalis (1993), *Arabian Nights* [Video Game] Amiga, Rotherham: Krisalis Software.

Kuma Reality Games (2004), *Kuma/War* [Video Game] PC, New York: Kuma Reality Games.

Leonard, D. J. (2006), 'Not a hater, just keepin' it real: The importance of race and gender-based games', *Games and Culture*, 1: 1, pp. 83–88, http://www.nideffer.net/classes/270-08/week_07_gender_economy/rimpofrace_leonard.pdf. Accessed 3 March 2013.

Mahony, I. (2010), *Constructing Indonesian Islam in the context of the War on Terror: A critical analysis of how the Australian press framed the 'Other'*, Ph.D. thesis, School of Journalism and Communication, University of Queensland, Australia, http://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:240030. Accessed 15 October 2013.

Mechner, J. (1989), *Prince of Persia* [Video Game] Apple II, Oregan: Brøderbund.

Murray, J. (2012), *Inventing the Medium: Principles of Interaction Design as a Cultural Practice*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

NovaLogic (1998), *Delta Force* [Video Game] PC, Redwood: Electronic Arts.

Poyting, S., Noble, G. and Tabar, P. (2004), *Bin Laden in the Suburbs: Criminalising the Arab Other*, Sydney: Institute of Criminology.

Reitman, J. (2013), 'Jahar's World', *Rolling Stone*, August, pp. 46–57.

Richardson, J. E. (2004), *(Mis)Representing Islam: The Racism and Rhetoric of British Broadsheet Newspapers*, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Roumani, R. (2006), 'Muslims craft their own video games', *Christian Science Monitor*, 5 June, http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0605/p07s02-wome.html. Accessed 30 May 2007.

Said, E. W. (1978), *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon Books.

Seiter, E. (1986), 'Stereotypes and the media: A re-evaluation', *Journal of Communication*, 36: 2, pp. 14–26.

Shaw, A. (2010), 'Beyond comparison: Reframing analysis of video games produced in the Middle East', *Global Media Journal*, 9: 16, pp. 1–28, http://lass.purduecal.edu/cca/gmj/PDF_archive/amer_edition/spring2010/GMJ-SP10-grad-article10-shaw.pdf. Accessed 22 March 2013.

Shoemaker, P. J. and Reese, S. D. (1996), *Mediating the Message: Theories of Influences on Mass Media Content*, 2nd edn, New York: Longman.

Saul, H. (2013), '*Rolling Stone* magazine sales double after controversial *Boston Bomber* cover', *The Independent*, 1 August, http://www.independent.co.uk/

news/world/americas/rolling-stone-magazine-sales-double-after-con-troversial-boston-bomber-cover-8741803.html. Accessed 1 September 2013.

Pandemic Studios (2004), *Full Spectrum Warrior*, [Video Game] PC, Xbox, Playstation, Agoura Hills: THQ.

Pivotal Games (2002), *Conflict: Desert Storm* [Video Game] Playstation 2, Xbox, PC and Game Cube, Wimbledon: Sci.

Pivotal Games (2005), *Conflict: Global Terror* [Video Game] Playstation 2, Xbox and PC, Wimbledon: Sci and : Wimbledon & Novato: 2k.

Sisler, V. (2006), 'Representation and self-representation: Arabs and Muslims in digital games', in M. Santorineos and N. F. Dimitriadi (eds), *Gaming Realities: A Challenge for Digital Culture*, Athens: Fournos Centre for Digital Culture, pp. 85–92.

Sisler, V. (2008), 'Digital Arabs: Representation in video games', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 11: 2, pp. 203–20, http://www.digitalislam.eu/article.do?articleId=1704. Accessed 26 February 2013.

Sisler, V. (2009), 'Video games, video clips, and Islam: New media and the communication of values', in P. Johanna (ed.), *Muslim Societies in the Age of Mass Consumption*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 231–58.

Slack, J. D. and Wise, J. M. (2006), 'Cultural studies and communication technology', in L. Lievrouw and S. Livingstone (eds), *The Handbook of New Media*, Updated Student Edition, London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi: Sage, p. 141.

Solution (2003), *Al-Quwwat al-Khasa (Special Force)* [Video Game] PC, Lebanon: Hezbollah.

Souri, H. T. (2007), 'The political battlefield of pro-Arab video games on Palestinian screens', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle-East*, 27: 3, pp. 536–51, http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/scmsAdmin/uploads/006/281/TawilSouri-ProArabVideoGames.pdf. Accessed 4 March 2013.

United Nations Development Programme (2003) *The Arab Human Development Report*, New York: United Nations Publications.

SUGGESTED CITATION

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Dr Jeneen Naji is Digital Media Programme Coordinator and Faculty in the Centre for Media Studies at the National University of Ireland Maynooth (NUIM), where she coordinates and teaches on the BA Digital Media and the BSc Multimedia, Mobile and Web Development in conjunction with the Department of Computer Science. Dr Naji's research is in the area of digital culture, specifically exploring the impact of the digital apparatus on poetic expression. She is also a founding member of the NUIM Digital Arts Research Cluster along with faculty from the Department of Music and Computer Science. Dr Naji is also a member of the international editorial review board of the *International Journal of Game-Based Learning* (*IJGBL*).

Contact: Centre for Media Studies, Iontas Building, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, Co. Kildare, Ireland.
E-mail: jeneen.naji@nuim.ie

Msughter Iwar is a researcher in Multimedia from the Centre of Media Studies at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. His research interests include digital representations, social media advocacy and development studies especially with regards to Third World development and humanitarian assistance. He is currently a Nigerian Ambassador and contributor for *OkayAfrica*, an online magazine that speaks to African and Africa diaspora culture.

Contact: Centre for Media Studies, Iontas Building, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, Co. Kildare, Ireland.

publishers
of original
thinking

Journal of Greek Media and Culture

The *Journal of Greek Media and Culture* is an interdisciplinary peer-reviewed journal that aims to provide a platform for debate and exploration of a wide range of manifestations of media and culture in and about Greece. The journal adopts a broad and inclusive approach to media and culture with reference to film, photography, literature, the visual arts, music, theatre, performance, as well as all forms of electronic media and expressions of popular culture. While providing a forum for the close analysis of cultural formations specific to Greece, *JGMC* aims to engage with broader methodological and theoretical debates, and situate the Greek case in global, diasporic and transnational contexts.

Editor
Lydia Papadimitriou
Liverpool John Moores University