Crusades and Jihad:

An Examination of Muslim Representation in Computer Strategy Games

by

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An Examination of Muslim Representation in Computer Strategy Games

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For Dad, who gave me the mindset needed to finish this work,

for Mom, who never doubted me,

and for Ashton, who always was there when I needed it.

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines a sample of Western video-games in the strategy genre for stereotypical depictions of Muslims and Islam through both portrayals of appearance and through game mechanics. Video-games, although often dismissed as being trivial in the realm of academia, can carry just as much weight and meaning as any other medium, and there is no exception in the case of presenting and reinforcing stereotypes.

While some research has been done on Islamophobic stereotypes in video-games, relatively little attention has been paid to the strategy genre. Stereotypes such as the "scimitar wielding warrior" or the "Sultan's decadent harem" crop up in many strategy games. These stereotypes can be harmful or dangerous to Muslim minorities, and thus their inclusion in these strategy games is deserving of research. By performing a single-player content analysis of fourteen (14) strategy games, this thesis examines the frequency and nature of these stereotypes in depth.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Games

AoE2 – Age of Empires 2

Civ4 – Civilization IV

Civ5 – Civilization V

CK – Crusader Kings

CK2 – Crusader Kings II

EU3 – Europa Universalis III

EU4 – Europa Universalis IV

M2:TW – Medieval II: Total War

RoN – Rise of Nations

SC – Stronghold Crusader

V2 – Victoria II

Other

AI – Artificial intelligence.

RTS – real-time-strategy.

LIST OF TERMS

Artificial intelligence (or *AI*) – refers to characters, nations, etc. controlled by the game rather than a human player. Also commonly referred to as "bots."

Game mechanic – a way in which a specific facet of a game operates, such as the way building a coliseum in a city in the *Civilization* series makes the populace happier.

Grand-strategy – a genre of strategy game characterized by a high level of complexity and massive scope. Often capable of being paused in order to make more timely decisions.

Real-time-strategy – a genre of strategy game where time passes continuously, rewarding players that can think and act quickly.

Turn-based-strategy – a genre of strategy game where players make their "moves" in turns, much like a chess game.

INTRODUCTION

Video games are often assumed to be solely the purvey of adolescent males passing time alone with pointless entertainment, but research finds much evidence to the contrary. The average video-game player is 35 years old, forty percent of players are women, and games are typically played with other people, whether in person or online.[1] Another misplaced preconception regarding video-games is that they lack the depth to "carry or communicate important ideas,"[2] or that weighty topics like religion have no place in the realm of gaming. In truth, there is no sound reason why an interactive medium is less capable of conveying complex and serious ideas than, say, a film or book.[3] Religion exists in many games, from symbolism and religious references such as "The Covenant" antagonists in the *Halo* series[4] to explicit depictions of real-life religions like those in *Assassin's Creed*.[5] As with any entertainment medium, the decisions to incorporate these religious aspects into any media (including games) are noteworthy, and thus deserving of research.

In recent years, the West has been particularly sensitive to the presence of Islam. Frequently the image of a Muslim that is conjured up in the Western mind is one of

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1. Gregory Price Grieve and Heidi A. Campbell, "Studying Religion in Digital Gaming: A Critical Review of an Emerging Field," *Online Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 5 (2014): 53.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Vander I. Corliss, "Gaming with God: A Case for the Study of Religion in Video Games," (senior thesis, Trinity College, 2011), 19-30.

5. Ibid., 31-44

religious extremism, terrorism, and violence. These stereotypes can lead to dangerous assumptions of others based primarily on outward appearance, inciting discriminatory behavior against the targeted group.

These stereotypes do not form in a vacuum. Rather, they are perpetuated by popular media, in all of its forms (books, television, movies, video games, etc.). From radical militants in the *Iron Man* films to the harshly patriarchal families in novels such as Ted Dekker's *Blink*, these pieces of media normalize harmful stereotypes of Muslims. Video games, frequently focused on war and conflict, are no exception.

Research specifically on the presence and representation of Islam has shown that there is a strong propensity for popular Western video games to depict Muslims as violent terrorists, often as the primary antagonists. The most well-known examples in this regard include the *Call of Duty*, *Battlefield*, and *Medal of Honor* series, industry leaders in the "military shooter" genre of games.[6] Western strategy games are considerably less recognized for their potential to depict Muslims as the Enemy or the Other. Some research has been conducted on Islam in Western strategy games, usually inspecting a single facet of a specific game in relation to other games.[7] This thesis inspects several different strategy games on a mechanical level and compares any existing depictions and mechanics for Islam/Muslims to common representations of non-Muslims within the

6. Johan Höglund, "Electronic Empire: Orientalism Revisited in the Military Shooter," *Game Studies* 8 no. 1 (2008), http://gamestudies.org/0801/articles/hoeglund.

7. Vít Šisler, "From Kuma/War to Quraish: Representation of Islam in Arab and American Video Games," in *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell and Gregory Price Grieve (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014), 121-133.

games examined. I expected there would be a significant degree of stereotyping within

most – if not all – of the examined games, both in the way Muslims appear and the way

in-game Muslims interact with the game world.

MEHTODOLOGY

I retrieved the data needed this thesis by performing content analyses of fourteen

(14) strategy games (see Appendix A), playing through each game individually, looking

for a number of pre-identified stereotypes. To determine what to look for, I reviewed

literature on Islamophobic stereotyping found in traditional media such as films,

television, books, particularly the cited works by Šisler,[8] Said,[9] Lawrence,[10] Cohen and

Peery,[11] and Gottschalk and Greenberg.[12] This served as the baseline to understand what

Islamophobic stereotyping might look like in general before analyzing it in a video game.

I then created a spreadsheet (Appendix B) listing the games examined and the

anticipated stereotypes I would look for while performing my analyses. The games I

chose were picked largely as a matter of convenience, due to the titles in question already

being in my possession or easily acquired. However, the sample of games I used is still

fairly broad, spanning over several sub-genres under the strategy genre, and all of them

contain depictions of Muslims or Islam in some way. Once the spreadsheet was complete,

I performed a content analysis of each game on my list, adding any unexpected

stereotypes to my spreadsheet (namely the frequent usage of green to represent Islam). I

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8. Šisler, "Kuma/War to Quraish." 109-33.

9. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

10. Bruce B. Lawrence. *Shattering the Myth: Islam Beyond Violence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

11. Lori Cohen, and Leyna Peery, "Unveiling Students' Perceptions about Women in Islam," *The English Journal* 95, no. 3 (2006): 20-26.

12. Peter Gottschalk, and Gabriel Greenberg, *Islamophobia: Making Muslims the Enemy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2008).

examined each game by myself, so the multi-player experience was left largely

untouched by my analyses, but the single-player experience in most of the examined

games effectively mirrors the experience of playing with others. After the analyses were

completed, I used the data from my spreadsheet to draw conclusions regarding the overall

representation of Islam and Muslims in Western strategy games.

SECTION 1: SYMBOLS OF ISLAM

Symbols are images used to signify or represent something other than themselves. Some examples would include the hammer and sickle referring to communism and the former USSR, the ram's head referring to the Dodge brand of automobiles, and the cross representing Christianity. In strategy games, symbols are of critical importance because of their practical way of saving physical space on the screen by representing complex ideas, objects, religions, units, or nations with a single symbol,[13] which the player presumably understands. Examples within strategy games would be the British flag used to symbolize the nation of the United Kingdom in *Colonial Conquest*, or *Civilization V*'s sword to represent a swordsman unit.

The most prevalent symbol for Islam within the games examined is the crescent, often used to represent the religion itself in the game. In games with a broad or global scope, such as *Crusader Kings 2*, the *Europa Universalis* series, the *Civilization* series, and *Medieval 2: Total War*, Islam itself often comes with its own mechanics and effects on the nations and characters that are prevalently Muslim. For instance, in *M2:TW* populations of religious adherents other than the player's own are represented by a symbol of that religion in the screen showing details within a specific city. Since religious tension could lead to a peasant revolt if left unchecked, it is important for the player to be able to see the percentages of religious denominations within their domain in order to make decisions around where to allocate military and religious resources and units. If a Christian nation conquers a city with a large number of Muslims in it, it is

13. Ibid., 45.

important that the Christian nation understand the instability of its newly conquered city, and the large number of crescents in the city detail screen helps convey that. The reverse would be true for a Muslim nation, as a large number of crescents would imply a religiously stable city, since the citizens follow the same religion as their ruler.

The crescent is used in other ways, as well. In *Civilization IV*, for example, Saladin is depicted as having a golden crescent on his turban. This is significant because, while Saladin is the leader of the Arabian Empire in *Civ4*, the Arabs are not inherently the founders of Islam. In the *Civilization* franchise, any nation could conceivably found any of the game's major world religions. A Buddhist Arabia is completely plausible in-game, but Saladin would still have the golden crescent on the front of his turban.

Stronghold Crusader uses the crescent in a similar way, with several of the Muslim leaders having crescents on their turbans. However, Islam is not a distinct mechanic in *SC*, only a concept in the background for the setting of the Crusades. In both this case and the case of Saladin in *Civ4* the crescent is used more in the context of establishing the adorned character as the Other, different from what is considered normal in the Western context. This practice is similar to what some political cartoonists include in their cartoons to give a sense of otherness to the locations and people they depict. An example of such a cartoon would be Jeff Danziger's *Problems in Revenge*, in which a ruined cityscape is depicted. Two three-story buildings stand prominently in the foreground, and a domed building can be seen in the distance with a crescent at the very top of the dome. The image is captioned "…for example, to retaliate for an attack on two

of the tallest buildings in America, we could attack two of the tallest buildings in Afghanistan…"[14]

In reality, the adoption of the crescent to represent Islam is a relatively recent phenomenon, only really taking off with the Ottoman adoption of a crescent moon in the nineteenth century "in their effort to fashion a nationalistic flag comparable to those of its European neighbors."[15] In almost all of these games, using a crescent to represent Islam is ahistorical, since the games take place long before the global acceptance of the crescent to symbolize Islam. However, since it is commonly understood today that the crescent represents Islam, using any other symbol for that purpose may be confusing to players who are accustomed to the crescent.

In another symbolic peculiarity, the crescent is not truly a universal symbol for Islam. Although today at least eleven nations with a Muslim majority population include a crescent moon on their national flags,[16] there are some Muslims that eschew the crescent as a symbol for their religion. Since the crescent was adopted from the flag of Byzantium to represent the Ottoman Empire, not Islam, these Muslims disregard the crescent as a pagan symbol rather than one of Islam.[17]

Similar to the crescent, the color green is found to be very prevalent when representing Muslims in the examined games. The majority of *CK2*'s Muslim nations are

14. Ibid., 50-51.

15. Ibid., 50.

16. Ibid.

17. Micah Issit, and Carlyn Main, *Hidden Religion: The Greatest Mysteries and Symbols of the World's Religious Beliefs* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2014), 96-98.

colored various hues of green, *M2:TW*'s Turkish faction is green, and the Arabian

civilization is given a green banner in both *Civ4* and *Civ5*. Like the crescent, the color

green has been adopted by many Muslims only relatively recently. Green is mentioned in

the Koran, which states that that the clothing of those in paradise "will be green garments

of fine silk."[18] As the adoption of green to be a color associated with Islam is as recent as

200 years old,[19] the usage of green to represent Islamic nations in the medieval period,

much like the usage of the crescent, is ahistorical for the sake of the modern player.

Another symbol frequently imposed on Islam is that of the curved scimitar.

Although the Arabs defending the Holy Land for the first two centuries of the Crusades

used straight edged swords, the Western world largely forgets this.[20] The scimitar has

been used in Western media to imply a sense of barbarity and otherness,[21] and that

sentiment is echoed in many of the examined games. Although never used as a symbol of

outright barbarity like in some Western media,[22]the curved blade is present in virtually

every game examined, usually as a simple replacement to a European sword, signifying

their other-ness.

In the case of *CK2* the scimitar is used to indicate a specific sect of Islam. While

Sunni Islam is represented by a simple crescent in the game, Shia Islam is represented as

18. "Color Green a Favorite of Islam." *St. Petersburg Times* [St. Petersburg, FL], August 7, 2009, 8F.

19. Ibid.

20. Helmut Nickel, "A Crusader's Sword: Concerning the Effigy of Jean d'Alluye," *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 26 (1991): 125.

21. Gottschalk and Greenberg, *Islamophobia*, 46-48.

22. Ibid, 126.

a crescent beside a scimitar. While both Shia and Sunni Islam are functionally similar in the game, there is a significant difference in that, at certain points in the game, Shia Islam does not have a strong presence in-game. To compensate for this, events will trigger throughout the game which generate large military forces of Shiites to carve pieces of territory away from one of the larger Sunni realms. The scimitar next to the crescent in the symbol for Shia Islam, as well as the mechanic for the creation of Shia kingdoms, may indicate that it is considered a more violent form of the religion.

For the most part, usage of symbols to represent Islam falls in line with typical Western depictions, using historically inaccurate but widely accepted symbols to convey the concepts of Islam or Middle-Eastern culture. In the cases of the crescent and the color green, however, some of these symbols are accepted by some Muslims, and in comparison to depictions in other Western media, the symbolism used in the examined games is tame and benign by comparison.

SECTION 2: CLOTHING AND APPEARANCE

Throughout examination of the games used for this thesis, a few trends in the way Muslim characters were presented began to crop up. For instance, with two notable exceptions, every single game that depicted Muslim characters (and not simply a faceless nation) depicted at least one Muslim man as wearing a turban. However, this representation may not cross the line of depicting a false stereotype as much as simply be attempting to convey historical accuracy. According to an entry in the *Encyclopedia of Islamic Doctrine*, the practice of wearing certain clothes, including the turban (called an *'imama* in the text), is an important part of Islam for many Muslims, as it follows the example of the Prophet. Muhammad's examples, even in mundane matters such as clothing, are called *Sunnan*, and following *Sunnan* is one way in which Muslims believe they can grow closer to God.[23] Moreover, medieval Islamic works of art, with few exceptions, depict all Muslim men with turbans on their heads.[24] While Muslim men today may choose to not wear such clothing, the apparent ubiquity of the turban in the medieval period – during which most of the examined games take place – would make depictions of Muslim men without turbans historically inaccurate. The turban may be a stereotypical shorthand for Islam in Western culture, but when looking at games set during the medieval period the stereotype is factual.

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23. Muhammad Hisham Kabbani, *Encyclopedia of Islamic Doctrine*, s.v. "Questions on Islamic Dress and Head-dress for Men," Chicago: Kazi Publications, 1998.

24. Alexandre Papadopoulo, *Islam and Muslim Art*, n.p.: New York: H. N. Abrams, 1979, 130-35; Nasser Khalili, *Islamic Art and Culture: A Visual History*, New York: Overlook Press, 2006, 64-80.

The stereotype of the bearded Muslim man is almost identical in its prevalence and nature. All but two of the games that depict male Muslim characters depict them (by and large) as bearded. The above mentioned works of medieval Islamic art also depict nearly all Muslims as bearded.[25] Much like the turban, the beard is and was kept by many Muslims because the Prophet is said to have had a beard, and therefore to maintain the practice is to follow the Prophet's *Sunnah* (singular form of *Sunnan*) regarding grooming.[26] Thus the stereotypical bearded Muslim man can be considered an accurate depiction in many of the games examined.

While perhaps accurate, these stereotypes can still be damaging if not handled carefully. One need not look any farther than the wave of discrimination against Muslim and Sikh Americans in the wake of the September 11th attacks in New York. American media had pushed the stereotype of what a Muslim looked like: dark skinned with a beard, mustache, and turban. Once the perpetrators of the attacks were revealed to have been Muslim, all Muslims (and everyone who looked like a Muslim) became terrorists in the eyes of many Americans because Islam had been portrayed as a homogenous group of people in which all of its members looked and thought similarly. Such thinking led to discrimination of innocent people simply because they fit the stereotype imposed on Muslims.[27]

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25. Ibid.

26. Gibril Haddad, "The Noble Beard and Hair of the Holy Prophet," *sunnah.org*, accessed 18th September, 2016. http://sunnah.org/fiqh/Prophets_Beard_and_Hair_saws.htm.

27. Gottschalk and Greenberg, *Islamophobia*, 67-68.

There is one examined game in particular that shamelessly depicts Muslims in this way. *Stronghold Crusader* is an RTS game focused around castle-building and resource chain development. The usual goal of the game is to destroy the enemy fortress, which is being built at around the same rate as your own. When playing against an AI opponent, the player has several options to pick from regarding the AI's playstyle, be it aggressive, cunning, defensive, etc. Each of these AI playstyles are represented by characters, many of which are depicted as Muslim, and they are all virtually identical in appearance. They all have turbans, and all those whose faces are not obscured by a veil or wrap are bearded, save for one who has a ridiculously exaggerated nose. The game makes it very clear what a Muslim looks like in its world, and what little it gives in the way of characterization of these AI playstyles manifests in the character descriptors like cruel, underhanded, or tyrannical. In this way, with no outside reference, the player may infer that all Muslims look and behave like the ones depicted in-game, which may end up being a contributing factor towards Islamophobic attitudes.

Fortunately, *Stronghold Crusader* is truly the only exception in the sample used for this thesis. When other games such as *CK1* and *CK2*, *M2:TW*, and the *Civilization* series depict Muslims, they succeed in portraying them in a broader scope. Muslim characters in these game are visually distinct from one another, either with immediately distinguishable unit types, characters, modes of dress, or unique gameplay mechanics. An example would be how *CK2* gives each character portrait different clothing and background scenery depending on the personality, status, and culture of the character in question. A pious character may be seen in a mosque, while a lustful character may be seen at a brothel or bar; a militarily minded character may wear armor, while a religious

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character may wear the white robes of an imam. By and large, the games examined do a decent job of keeping their depictions of Muslims from falling into harmful stereotypes like those in *Stronghold Crusader*.

SECTION 3: GENDER REPRESENTATION

The Western notion of what a Muslim woman looks and behaves like is not difficult to identify. In a study conducted by Cohen and Peery, American students were asked to examine their pre-existing notions of Muslim women. The students listed traits such as "submissive to men, not well educated, no rights,"[28] etc. Clear visual markers such as the *hijab* headscarf and the *niqab* veil set aside Muslim women as foreign and other in the western world, and many North Americans see Muslim women in their countries as oppressed with little agency to act against patriarchal figures.[29]

Within the context of the examined strategy games, these stereotypes can be found. Muslim women do not appear at all in two thirds of the games examined, and in those that they do appear their presence is largely token. In *Rise of Nations*, for example, the only women that appear are peasant workers, relegated to building and gathering resources for the player nation, while all the military, economic (merchants), and cultural (clergy) units are exclusively men. However, in *RoN*'s case, all playable nations, Muslim or not, limit women in this way, keeping female representation in the game to a bare minimum.

Some games such as *Medieval II: Total War* and the *Crusader Kings* franchise do go a step further than *RoN*, however. In *M2:TW* daughters of the king or sultan become similar to diplomatic units when they come of age, being capable of exploring the map,

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28. Cohen and Peery, "Students' Perceptions," 20.

29. Sabah Rahmath, Lori Chambers, and Pamela Wakewich. "Asserting citizenship: Muslim women's experiences with the hijab in Canada." *Women's Studies International Forum* 58, Sep.-Oct. (2016): 34-35.

forging alliances, and treating with foreign kingdoms until the point when they are wed. As with *Rise of Nations*, Muslim princesses are treated nearly identically to their non-Muslim counterparts, which is to say in a very limited capacity. The first *Crusader Kings game* offers women (Muslim or not) even less agency, effectively reducing them to pawns used to forge alliances through their marriage and as producers of heirs. This disparity in gender representation and agency may be indicative of an understanding of how medieval patriarchal society largely regulated women and their responsibilities to domestic life across cultures.

One of the better representations of Muslim women among the games examined comes from *Crusader Kings II*. Female characters generated in this game have as much depth and complexity in their design as male characters, and in many cases it is possible to play as female characters. This is technically also true for Muslim women, but there is a catch: the in-game mechanics for Islam strictly limit the usable inheritance laws to male-only. This is significant because *Crusader Kings II*'s central gameplay mechanic is the player character's dynasty; when the player character dies, the player assumes control of the now deceased character's heir. Since the in-game mechanics for Islam prohibit female inheritance, playing as a female Muslim is functionally impossible. This greatly reduces the agency of Muslim female characters in the game compared to their counterparts in other religions, in which it is possible to even change inheritance laws so that women inherit on the same grounds as men.

Crusader Kings II also implements a polygamy mechanic, whereby a Muslim ruler's public opinion is penalized if they do not have multiple wives, depending on how prestigious the ruler is. This mechanic encourages Muslim characters to marry multiple

women in order to avoid the penalty, making polygamy largely ubiquitous in the Muslim part of the in-game world. Polygamy (or rather polygyny, where one man is married to two or more women) is widely considered to be associated with Muslim practices, although the actual percentage of polygamous marriages in Muslim communities varies greatly, and that roughly 85% of recorded societies have permitted polygamy, including the USA (i.e. fundamentalist Mormons).[30] Islam is the only religion in *CK2* with this game mechanic; although most non-Christian religions have a similar concubine mechanic in-game, that mechanic is functionally distinct from Islam's polygamy system, and so will not be discussed.

The game that I examined that gave Muslim women the most agency in-game by far was *Mount & Blade: Warband.* At the beginning of the game the player creates a character, having the option to choose a woman and customize her background and upbringing. While playing as a woman does come with the minor penalty of lowered initial standing with male nobility, nothing is introduced that makes the game impossibly difficult or fundamentally different. The same is true for female characters who start in the Sarranid Sultanate, the game's analogue to a medieval Muslim sultanate. Neither gender nor background come with serious penalties or barriers that impede the player's goals, and female player-characters from the Sarranid Sultanate can be just as capable as male ones. Interestingly, *Warband* is the only game examined that was not produced in the West, having been developed in Turkey to be published primarily in Europe through a Swedish publishing company.

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30. Katherine Charsley and Anika Liversage, "Transforming polygamy: migration, transnationalism and multiple marriages among Muslim minorities," *Global Networks* (2013): 62.

While the notion of an exotic and often erotic Muslim woman is often found in Western media, this stereotype is notably absent from the examined games. The closest any game comes to brushing up against this stereotype is *CK2*'s polygamy mechanic. Even then, the game does not go out of the way to sexualize the multiple wives, with the wives' appearances never changing in response to their new position, nor any special events that sexualize them.

Warband aside, however, the rest of the games that were examined either placed very narrow restrictions on female Muslims in-game or had no female Muslims represented whatsoever. While a few of the examined games such as *Age of Empires II* and *Hearts of Iron 3* had no female representation at all, most of the games that do not have any female Muslims do have non-Muslim female representation, such as the *Civilization* series and the *Europa Universalis* series. This difference in representation further perpetuates, however subtly, the notion that Muslim women are servile and lack any real agency in their lives.

SECTION 4: VIOLENCE AND BACKWARDNESS

A common stereotype found in Western media regarding Muslims is that they are antiquated, have a "medieval" mindset,[31] and are prone to barbarism.[32] Within the context of the examined strategy games, these stereotypes can be found, but they are by no means ubiquitous. For example, only three of the fifteen examined games contained depictions of Muslims as inherently violent or cruel.

Stronghold Crusader is easily identified as an offender in this case, as per the previously mentioned depictions of Muslim leaders being tyrannical and hateful, with one particular character screaming "Infidel!" whenever he is selected by the player. Game mechanics also reinforce this notion, as players playing as Muslims are limited exclusively to large attacking armies with which the player must destroy the enemy castle. Compared to the Crusader experience, where the player spends considerable time gathering resources, developing infrastructure, and building fortifications, playing as Muslims is inherently more destructive and aggressive.

In contrast, some more subtle and infrequent indicators of Muslim barbarity can be found in *Crusader Kings II* and *Civilization V* in very specific circumstances. In *CK2* interactions between characters often takes place in the form of letters, from war declarations to RSVPs for a private party. These letters begin with a greeting sentence,

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31. Gottschalk and Greenberg, *Islamophobia*, 81.

32. Ibid., 94-95.

such as "Dear Son-in-law, your grace and wisdom are legendary,"[33] with variations in the

wording depending on the relations between the two characters. A character that disliked

whomever he was writing to might write something like "To the nefarious King Edward,

tales of your misdeeds are told from Ireland to Cathay."[34] Muslim characters are less

couth than their Christian counterparts. For example, one particular Muslim greeting to

an enemy may look like "Sultan Mahmud, may you be sewn alive in the belly of a dead

camel."[35] This shift in tone, along with the aforementioned mechanics for Shia Islam are

subtle differences from the experience playing as a Christian ruler, but significant ones.

Civilization V does a very good job of portraying Muslim cultures as not

inherently violent for the most part, especially concerning the Arabian civilization, which

gets a bonus to trading statistics and generally promotes a more infrastructure-heavy,

peaceful game. One glaring exception does exist, however. When treating with other

civilizations, the player is brought to a screen where they speak with that civilization's

leader directly. For the civilization of Songhai, their leader is Askia. The scene in which

the player finds Askia is that of a warlord's conquest. Askia stands atop a ridge

overlooking a city in flames, a satisfied smirk on his face and a great-sword resting on his

shoulder. No other civilization leaders are portrayed in the middle of a battle, siege, sack,

or any other sort of military engagement.

The myth that Islam is directly opposed to scientific progress is notably scarce

within the majority of the games examined. Technology and science are frequently used

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33. *Crusader Kings II*, developed by Paradox Development Studio (Stockholm: Paradox Interactive, 2012).

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

in strategy games as a mechanic for player progression. The more time and resources a player spends on developing technology for their faction or kingdom the greater the potential advantage against opponents. For this reason, technology levels are usually kept even between opponents to preserve fairness. Once the game starts, it is up to the players/AI opponents to decide how to develop technology.

The only time there is any depiction of a Muslim nation being less technologically savvy or capable is in games that concern themselves less with balance and more with accurate depictions of history, namely the *Europa Universalis*, *Victoria*, and *Hearts of Iron* franchises. In each of these games Muslim nations begin with a handicap to their technological endeavors unless they manage to "Westernize." The mechanics for Westernization vary from game to game, but in all cases it is a difficult task that destabilizes the country in the short run with the promise of removing the technological handicap. It is worth noting in *Europa Universalis* that Muslims are relatively easier to Westernize than many other nations, and their handicap is significantly less severe than other "technology groups" like East Asian or Native American groups. Nonetheless, this handicap is hugely detrimental to Muslim nations and often relegates them to the periphery of global politics, as it is difficult to compete with non-handicapped Western nations. Due to this, survival is more likely to be the player's main focus while playing as a Muslim rather than the typical strategy-game goals of conquest and power.

Despite these few exceptions, the majority of the games in the sample gave a fair portrayal of Muslim nature. Some even go beyond a level playing field. Both of the examined games in the *Civilization* franchise have an in-game codex of all the different buildings, units, technologies, nations, leaders, government types, and religions,

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explaining both their mechanics in-game and acting as a miniature encyclopedia to inform the player just what it is they are building, researching, utilizing, etc. In all the entries regarding Islam and Muslims the importance of the various nations, leaders, and their accomplishments are highlighted. By informing the player of Muslim scientific advancements like algebra and our numeral system, the *Civilization* series largely does a very good job in dispelling the myth of the barbaric, traditionalist Muslim.

SECTION 5: PLAYER EXPERIENCE

One special way that video games differ from other media is that – usually – no
two people have the exact same experience within the game. This is separate than the
differing experiences readers of books or viewers of television and movies have because,
in games, actual content may change. The disparity from one player's experience to
another can be as mundane as the route a player takes to reach a destination, and as
impactful as a decision that alters the entire story being told. One of the main features of
strategy games is constant meaningful choice. Since every decision (or indecision) can
alter the game down the road, each player's experience can vary wildly from game to
game, which proves doubly so in games like those in the Civilization series that generate
a new map for every game. As Islam is present in all of the examined games in some way
or another, it is prudent to examine how Islam has an effect on the game world, especially
in relation to the player.

In all but two of the games examined are Muslims playable in some way. Of those
two games – *Crusader Kings* and *Colonial Conquest* – *Crusader Kings* still features
Muslims prominently. The mechanics and diversity among the cast of Muslim characters
are nearly as fleshed out as for the Christian characters, they are simply rendered
unplayable.

By comparison, *Colonial Conquest* takes a much more barebones approach to
Muslim representation. The game is set in the late 19th/early 20th century, and the player
only has a handful of nations to choose from: the USA, Great Britain, France, Germany,
Russia, or Japan. All the Islamic nations that existed at this time are relegated as land to

be conquered by these "global power" nations, including the Ottoman Empire, which is depicted as a singular province encompassing modern-day Turkey, Persia, and the Levant. The powerful Ottoman Empire is reduced to little more than a stepping stone to be used by the playable nations to attain global conquest against the others.

The rest of the examined games do allow for play as Muslim characters or nations, but a few come with additional caveats, such as the vastly shallower gameplay in Stronghold Crusader discussed in the previous chapter. In *Crusader Kings II*, for example, Muslims are only playable if the player purchases the additional content pack, and in *M2:TW* the player is initially limited to six European kingdoms to play as, unlocking other kingdoms after they have been defeated in the game. All the Muslim nations fall under this category, limiting their availability to the player at the outset of the game. In none of these games are all Christian nations or kingdoms limited in such a way, further enforcing the notion that Western Christianity is the "default" to other alternatives like Islam. Interestingly, *CK2*'s "paywall" system extends to every other religion in the game excluding Christianity, step by step including Pagan religions, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Dharmic religions, each behind their own separate paywalls. While *Civ5* also Islam behind a paywall, it also keeps *all* religion behind a paywall, introducing religious mechanics with one major expansion, *Gods and Kings,* along with several other features. Historically Islamic nations are still present in the game, but the actual mechanics for religions are absent without the expansion pack.

All the rest of the games used for this study do not hamper the playability of Muslims. The games previously mentioned in this chapter are the only ones that fall short in allowing the player to play as a Muslim character or nation without any restrictions or

hurdles to clear. However, simply being playable does not mean that the experience is the same as that of the Christian nations or characters. For instance, *M2:TW* has a papal approval mechanic in place for Christian nations, which gives the different nations in question different boons or penalties depending on their relationship with the Pope. This mechanic is rightfully not implemented for Muslim characters, but nothing replaces it, and the Muslim in-game experience is slightly less deep for it. In-game limitations and restrictions would also include the technology maluses mentioned in the last chapter. Simply because an Islamic nation is playable does not mean that the game developers designed an experience for it equitable to a Christian nation in the same game.

Finally, there are a few noteworthy games that introduce Islam as a game mechanic in its own right, meaning that Islam itself is a force within the game that affects players and AI opponents alike. The *Crusader Kings*, *Europa Universalis*, and *Civilization* series, as well as *Victoria 2* and *M2:TW* all have a distinct mechanic (or mechanics) for how Islam interacts with the in-game world. *M2:TW*'s mechanics have already been discussed previously (religious demographics), and *V2*'s works similarly. Religion and religious conflict is not a primary focus for *V2*, but it still has a notable effect on the experience within the game. Populations within a specific territory are divided into separate categories called "pops." Each pop is divided by their socio-economic status, religion, and ethnicity. Sunni and Shia Islam exist as just more religious demographics within the game, members of which will be more content if ruled over by a country with their sect of Islam as their state religion and more rebellious against countries that do not support (or at least tolerate) their sect.

Briefly mentioned in a previous chapter, the *Civilization* series also treats all religions equally, but in a distinct way from *V2*. Any major world religion can be "discovered" or "founded" by any civilization in the game. In *Civilization* games an Islamic Arabia or Songhai is just as likely to exist as an Islamic France, Denmark, or China. In *Civ4* all religions give the same bonuses, differing only in which technology is needed to research to "discover" the religion. *Civ5*, by comparison, have all religions evolve organically over time depending on their founding nation's rate of gathering "faith" points. Each religion begins with a "pantheon" belief, such as Ancestor Worship or Goddess of the Hunt, which gives a basic bonus to cities depending on the belief. Over time more and more beliefs are added, which makes every instance of a specific religion like Islam vary wildly from game to game. Functionally, any religion can be anything that the founding civilization shapes it to be. Islam could be a religion that flourishes and gives huge bonuses while at peace, or a driving force behind a fanatical army. It all depends on what the player (or AI opponent) decides to make out of it.

Games in the *Crusader Kings* and *Europa Universalis* series use Islam as a mechanic similarly to each other. They use the mechanics of religion – like in other games – to create contention within a territory inhabited by practitioners of one religion but ruled over by those of another, but also as a driving mechanic for conquest. All religions, including Sunni, Shia, and Ibadi Islam, have the "Holy War" *casus belli* (or "cause for war") against nations of other religion groups, granting them the ability to go to religious wars against their infidel neighbors. A few differences do exist, however. In *CK2* Muslim rulers are limited to the Iqta government style, which enforces the inheritance laws mentioned previously where only sons may inherit and the polygamy

system. Muslim rulers also have the option to go on Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca that all

Muslims must make if possible, which can give many boons or penalties depending on

how the journey goes. Finally, there is a mechanic in place that causes unlanded male

members of a Muslim dynasty to become "decadent," hurting the dynasty's standing with

the common people and other Muslim nobles. If left unchecked, high levels of decadence

can trigger a revolt to depose the decadent family, much like how the Ummayads were

ousted from power by the Abbasids in the 8th century CE.[36]

Special attention should be paid to *CK2*'s mechanic for Muslim rulers going on

Hajj, the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. While playing as a Muslim dynasty, the player

gets the opportunity once every generation of rulers to go on Hajj, the results of which

can vary but generally are positive. *CK2* takes great care with this religious staple of

Islam, treating both the pilgrimage itself and the prayers said in Mecca with utmost

respect. In a game with "Crusader" right in the title, the mechanics and writing for the

Hajj are strikingly reverent.

EU3 and *EU4* do not make so much of a point to give Muslim nations drastically

different mechanics, with the exception of the "piety" system in *EU4*. The actions of a

Muslim ruler can either increase or decrease his piety, with different bonuses on either

end of the spectrum. For instance, while a pious Muslim ruler may get a bonus to

missionary effectiveness, an impious one will get a bonus to technology research. Neither

pious or impious Muslims incur penalties, and there is no bonus at all for staying in the

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36. Elizabeth Isichei, *The Religious Traditions of Africa: A History* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), 36.

middle of the spectrum, so it behooves players of Muslim nations to be as pious or impious as possible to get the best bonus for their situation.

Islam-specific mechanics like these are often introduced to make playing as a Muslim feel distinct from playing as any other religion. None of these mechanics are meant to deter players from playing as Islamic nations, but rather to create a distinct experience and encourage new strategies and styles of play. If anything, the promise of new gameplay experiences intrigues players into trying out new runs of the game with Muslim rulers that they might not have considered previously.

CONCLUSION

Every stereotype identified in the literature review before the commencement of

the content analyses of these games did crop up in at least one game, as anticipated.

Erroneous or ahistorical usages of Islamic symbols, stereotypical clothing and

appearance, the presence of the veil and limitations on Muslim women, and examples of

the "barbarous Muslim" all appeared throughout multiple games. Even the "exotic

harems of the East" stereotype sexualizing Muslim women does not fully get a pass, due

to the presence of a Muslim polygamy mechanic in *CK2*. From the analysis of this

sample of games, it is clear that there is a significant Western bias to be found in Western

strategy games.

It is of note that, compared to other genres like the popular "military shooter"

games, strategy games are generally much less prone to stereotyping Muslims.[37] Some of

the games in the sample take the "all is equal and the same" approach with only a few

cosmetic differences between Muslims and non-Muslims, such as slightly different units

or bonuses in *AoE2* and *RoN*. Others go a step beyond, like *CK2*'s surprisingly respectful

experience of going on Hajj as a Muslim ruler, or the *Civilization* series' "Civilopedia,"

giving a relatively deep and even-handed representation of Islam.

It is still important, though, to recognize those instances in which Islamophobic

depictions crop up in strategy games, such as the scene of an assault on an enemy castle

behind a smiling Muhammad Askia in *Civ5*, or threats to be sewn into a dead camel's

belly from a Muslim enemy in *CK2*. Of particular danger are the representations that

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37. Šisler, "Kuma/War to Quraish," 109-33.

equate Islam with evil, backwardness, or cruelty, like those in Stronghold Crusader. Such stereotypes in media can breed prejudice and discrimination against Muslims in the West.

Some form of stereotyping or Islamophobia can be found in every examined game, no matter how small, subtle, or infrequent. While it is important to recognize that depictions of Muslims in Western strategy games are often less harsh than their popular shooter counterparts, it is also important to pay attention to how these games fall short in fair representation of Islam when they do. In doing so, designers of strategy games may hope to give Western media an example of what to strive towards in regards to eradicating Islamophobic attitudes within their own ranks.

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APPENDIX A

GAMEOGRAPHY

Age of Empires II. Developed by Ensemble Studios. Redmond, WA: Microsoft, 1996. An
      RTS game centered around resource gathering and fast-paced battles, set during
      the Medieval period.

Civilization IV. Developed by Firaxis Games. Novato, CA: 2K Games, 2005. Turn-based
      strategy game with the goal of building the world's greatest civilization, through
      either peaceful or militaristic means.

Civilization V. Developed by Firaxis Games. Novato, CA: 2K Games, 2010. Sequel to
      Civilization IV.

Colonial Conquest. Developed by Argonauts Interactive and Collectif Nemoïd. Montreal:
      2015. A global-conquest game reminiscent of the popular *Risk* board game.

Crusader Kings. Developed by Paradox Development Studio. Stockholm: Paradox
      Interactive, 2012. A grand-strategy game focused around the succession of
      player's dynasty and holy wars in medieval Europe and the Middle-East.

Crusader Kings II. Developed by Paradox Development Studio. Stockholm: Paradox
      Interactive, 2012. Sequel to *Crusader Kings*.

Europa Universalis III. Developed by Paradox Development Studio. Stockholm: Paradox
      Interactive, 2007. Historical global grand-strategy game spanning from the
      Renaissance to the Victorian era.

Europa Universalis IV. Developed by Paradox Development Studio. Stockholm: Paradox
      Interactive, 2013. Sequel to *Europa Universalis III*.

Hearts of Iron III. Developed by Paradox Development Studio. Stockholm: Paradox
      Interactive, 2009. World War II grand-strategy game.

Medieval II: Total War. Developed by The Creative Assembly. Tokyo: Sega Games Co.,
      2006. Hybrid strategy game with elements of real-time-strategy and turn-based-
      strategy games, set during the Medieval period.

Mount & Blade: Warband. Developed by TaleWorlds Entertainment. Stockholm:
      Paradox Interactive, 2010. A roleplaying/strategy hybrid, with the player only
      directly controlling one character that leads an army in a reimagining of medieval
      Europe.

Rise of Nations. Developed by Skybox Labs and Big Huge Games. Redmond, WA: Microsoft, 2014. RTS game spanning the entirety of history. Very similar to *Age of Empires*.

Stronghold Crusader. Developed by FireFly Studios. London: FireFly Studios, 2002. RTS game focused on building and defending a fortress in the Holy Land during the Crusades.

Victoria II. Developed by Paradox Development Studio. Stockholm: Paradox Interactive, 2010. A grand-strategy game set during the colonial era.

TABLES

Table 1: Muslim Representation in Examined Games

	Male Representation	Female Representation	Sexualized Women	Curved Blade	Crescent	Veil	Beard	Turban
Age of Empires II	y	n	n	y	n	n	y	y
Civilization IV	y	n	n	n	y	n	y	y
Civilization V	y	n	n	y	y	n	y	y
Colonial Conquest	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n
Crusader Kings I	y	y	n	n	y	y	y	n
Crusader Kings II	y	y	y (polygamy)	y	y	y	y	y
Europa Universalis III	y	n	n	n	y	n	n	y
Europa Universalis IV	y	n	n	y	y	n	y	y
Hearts of Iron III	y	n	n	n	y	n	y	y
Medieval II: Total War	y	y	n	y	y	y	y	y
Mount & Blade	y	y	n	y	n	n	y	n
Rise of Nations	y	y	n	y	n	n	n	y
Stronghold Crusader	y	n	n	y	y	y	y	y
Victoria II	n	n	n	y	y	n	n	n

	Cruelty	Playable Y/N	Green					
Age of Empires II	n	y	n					
Civilization IV	n	y	y					
Civilization V	y	y	y					
Colonial Conquest	n	n	n					
Crusader Kings I	n	n	y					
Crusader Kings II	y	y (paywall)	y					
Europa Universalis III	n	y	y					
Europa Universalis IV	n	y	y					
Hearts of Iron III	n	y	y					
Medieval II: Total War	n	y (unlockable)	y					
Mount & Blade	n	y	n					
Rise of Nations	n	y	n					
Stronghold Crusader	y	y	n					
Victoria II	n	y	y					