

The Political Battlefield of Pro-Arab Video Games on Palestinian Screens

Helga Tawil Sourì

Like everyone else in this Internet café in Ramallah, I rely on the place to offer me a cup of strong Arabic coffee as I wait for my e-mails to download on a slow, antiquated modem. It has become part of my afternoon routine. I am alone however in bringing earplugs. It is not because of the bombs and shootings, although it helps (in early 2003, we are in the midst of the Second Intifada and the Israeli military is wreaking havoc in town at least once an hour), but because practically everyone in the center is screaming, throwing insults and threats that bounce off the barren walls: “I’m going to get you”; “You are over”; “Bastard! Just wait till I get you back.” No, the young men (most of the clients are between the ages of twelve and twenty-five, very few of them female) are not shouting at one another but at characters in video games.

While on a visit to a family in Jenin a few months later, a girl of twelve urges me to play a video game with her. “You have to play . . . you have to try this. This is the best game ever. It’s by Hezbollah . . . it’s the first game where you can shoot Israelis,” she explains, trying to tempt me. *Special Force* had just been released by Hezbollah, and she had downloaded it for free from their Web site.¹ In her excitement, the girl gives me a video game history lesson:

In all the other games you can shoot Saddam [Hussein], you can shoot Iran and Libya . . . Syria is also a target. My friends and I would try to turn the planes around to shoot at Israel but the game wouldn’t allow it. . . . You can’t shoot at America and Europe either. . . . I learned from [a friend] that Hezbollah changed the rules . . . so of course all of us here now only play this . . . well we also play [what we nicknamed the] Haram ash-Sharif game [*Under Siege*], where we get to shoot the soldiers who started the Intifada . . . it’s our revenge on Israel.² We get to shoot the Israelis. We get to blow up *Markava* [Israeli military] tanks!

I had not known that war games often made their targets Arab or Muslim countries and that it was not until these “pro-Arab” games were released that kids could shoot the other way.

Although privileged in having a computer and Internet access in her home, this twelve-year-old was not unique in her love of pro-Arab video games. As I discovered through spending time in for-profit Internet centers, nonprofit computer labs, and living rooms all across the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, these video games were what most teenagers and those in their early twenties were busy doing while behind a computer.

Based on fieldwork carried out in 2003 and 2004 in which I observed computer users in various locations; interviewed players, parents, and computer-center owners in the Pal-

All English translations from Arabic are my own.

1. Special Force Web site, www.specialforce.net (accessed 13 March 2006).

2. Haram ash-Sharif refers to the Dome of the Rock (or Temple Mount) in the city of Jerusalem, the third holiest site in Islam and the site from which the Second Intifada “began” in September 2000.

estinian territories; and surveyed mainstream Western press coverage, I focus in this essay on three pro-Arab video games. I begin with a description of the games and then provide the population’s response to them. Next, I look at the controversies surrounding them and emanating from the West—from charges of Islamic propaganda to the effects of media violence. Finally, I situate the games and their controversies within the context of Palestinian society.

Rather than disdain video games as low-brow, irrelevant child’s play, the concerns in this essay assume that video games are no less important than other media. I address how they function as disseminators of ideologies, how they employ racial and national meaning, and how they reinforce dominant ideas or, conversely, challenge hegemony. Moreover, given the reliance on fieldwork and interviews with players, most of whom are teenagers, this essay challenges theorists who eschew media use (and description of that use), especially with regard to children, who presumably have nothing to say—or cannot say anything—about their experiences. Like the work of David Buckingham and others, this work not only relies on letting children speak for themselves about their media use but also refutes simplistic panics and accusations about the negative influence of the media.³ Finally, in the tradition of antiorientalists, this essay challenges essentialist and reductionist explanations of the role of Islam in Arab societies, especially with respect to “fundamentalism.”⁴

What’s in a Game?

The video gaming market (software and hardware), dominated by Western and U.S. companies (such as Electronic Arts, Activision, Nintendo, and Sony), generates more than 10 billion U.S. dollars annually. In fact, one analyst suggested that “as video games acquire greater

capabilities to simulate ‘real’ life, they are likely to outstrip Hollywood even further as America’s choice source of popular entertainment” and will soon be the United States’ largest media export.⁵ Of the variety of gaming genres that exist, this essay focuses on first-person shooter—or FPS—games, which David B. Nieborg defines as “a three-dimensional navigation in virtual environments, through a first person perspective, in which the player interacts in single- or multiplayer combat sequences by means of using a range of weaponry in order to complete a mission or objective.”⁶

Many controversial issues surround video games and especially FPSs. For example, since the turn of the millennium, there is a trend for social, political, and alternative groups to use games to sell their products and ideas—what Mary Wiltenburg has dubbed “advergaming.”⁷ Among trendsetters in the United States and western Europe are gay rights groups (with games such as Italian-made *Queer Power*); the Christian Right (boasting games such as *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* and *God Speed 3D*, developed by U.S. companies); and white supremacists (with games such as American-made *Ethnic Cleansing*, *White Law*, and *Shoot the Blacks*).⁸ In other parts of the world the trend has caught on too, albeit at a slower pace and with less sophisticated technologies. *Special Force*, *Under Ash*, and *Under Siege*, the three games I discuss in this essay, are precisely the kinds of games that are emerging from the Middle East and can loosely be classified as pro-Arab.

An analysis of the rising popularity and controversies surrounding these games allows one to question the relationships among violence, terrorism, propaganda, and new media; the relationships between racial stereotypes and political power; whether games influence their users and in what way; and how games influence

3. David Buckingham, *After the Death of Childhood: Growing Up in the Age of Electronic Media* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2000); Ien Ang, *Desperately Seeking the Audience* (New York: Routledge, 1998); David Morley, *Television Audiences and Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Ellen Seiter, *Television and New Media Audiences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Lynn Schofield-Clark, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

4. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1994); Mahmoud Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terrorism* (New York: Pantheon, 2004).

5. “Life Is Just a Game,” *New Atlantis* 4 (2004): 105–8, www.thenewatlantis.com/archive/4/soa/video_games.htm.

6. David B. Nieborg, “America’s Army: More than a Game?” www.gamespace.nl/content/ISAGA_Nieborg.PDF (accessed 10 July 2007).

7. Mary Wiltenburg, “More than Playing Games,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 3 April 2003.

8. *Queer Power*, Mollindustria, 2004, online game, www.mollindustria.it; *Left Behind: Eternal Forces*, Left Behind Games, 2006, online game, www.leftbehindgames.com/pages/the_games.htm; *GodSpeed 3D*, Inspired Idea, 2002, CD-ROM; *Ethnic Cleansing*, Resistance Records, 2002, online game, www.resistance.com/ethniccleansing; *White Law*, Resistance Records, 2003; *Shoot the Blacks*, World Church of the Creator (year unknown).

users' understandings of their role in local and global society and their social and political relations with others. Before I address these issues, it is important to detail the visuals, narratives, and experiences of these games and look at players' and various groups' reactions.

Under Siege and Under Ash

Under Siege and *Under Ash* were both created by the Syrian gaming company Dar al-Fikr in 2001 and 2003, respectively.⁹ Both games revolve around the events of the Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation and are based on historical events with which players can interact. Although both games are based on actual history, their lure for Arab gamers has been the ability to turn the tables on Israeli power over Palestinians and have the upper hand in the resistance without any real-life repercussions.

Both *Under Siege* and *Under Ash* were met with immediate success in the region and in the Palestinian territories. By July 2004, a year and a half after its initial release, *Under Ash* had sold fifty thousand units at eight U.S. dollars apiece.¹⁰ However these numbers are not true indicators of the game's popularity. It is difficult to gauge the actual number of games sold, since the majority of video games—no matter their origin—are either purchased as pirated copies or played in public venues where one copy suffices for tens, if not hundreds, of gamers. As one of the game's creative directors explains, the number sold has been considered "a hit [by the company] since 90 per cent of games are illegal copies [and because gamers] can jump to the nearest shop and grab a bundle of ten CD's full of games for [two dollars]."¹¹ *Under Ash* is also available for download from the company Web site. Similarly, while the number of downloads can be seen as relatively low at 250,000 (compared with *America's Army's* more than 7 million registered users), the creators see it as a success and "a strong emotional message . . . because

[of] how hard it is to download 50 megabytes of [a] poorly crafted game from the internet via a 14.4Kbit modem."¹²

The object of *Under Siege* is to relive and partake in the Intifada, sometimes in eerily similar circumstances to real life. The game opens in the year 1994 with a fly through over worshippers at a Hebron mosque before it is attacked by Jewish settler Baruch Goldstein. As Goldstein opens fire on the crowd, the player's objective is to dodge bullets and shoot him as quickly and accurately as possible. In another scene, the goal is to toss a canister of tear gas back at an Israeli tank. Most of the stories and objectives feature young men who fight tanks with slingshots and stones, hurling back tear gas canisters at the soldiers. Only the experienced fighters have machine guns, a status to be achieved as each level is passed. These are accurate representations of Palestinian resistance—where the majority of young boys rely on slingshots and stones as weapons, and the older more experienced ones have dilapidated Kalashnikovs and other guns.

Under Ash, an FPS game based on the Second Intifada, is the sequel to *Under Siege*. It revolves around a character named Ahmed, from whose perspective the game is played. The game begins with Ahmed trying to reach the Al-Aqsa Mosque while dodging bullets from Israeli soldiers and throwing stones back at them. Once he reaches the Dome of the Rock compound, he has to evacuate injured Palestinians, grab a rifle from an Israeli soldier, and throw the soldiers off of the site—a re-creation of the incident that marked the beginning of the Second Intifada. In other levels, Ahmed has to infiltrate an Israeli settlement, raise a Palestinian flag in a forbidden area, and sneak into an Israeli army weapons depot. In the final task Ahmed takes part in a guerrilla attack against an Israeli radar position in southern Lebanon, during which the soldiers are killed and the facility destroyed. Ahmed can attack only Israeli soldiers

9. The name Dar al-Fikr loosely translates as "House of Thought." Both games are available at "Under Siege, Under Ash, Real-Life 3D Game Shooter," www.underash.net.

10. Empyre Discussion Board, "Politics, Reality, Violence, and a Video Game," mail.cofa.unsw.edu.au/pipermail/empyre/2004-July (accessed 1 February 2006). Empyre Discussion Board is a Web-based dis-

cussion board established in Australia where gamers and game creators often share opinions together. The discussion board also includes an in-depth e-mail interview with Radwan Kasmiya, one of the creative directors of *Under Ash*.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid. *America's Army's* latest numbers of users are posted on its Web site, www.americasarmy.com.

and settlers. Points can be lost or the game can end if civilians on either side—Palestinian or Israeli—are killed.

The creators of these games posit them as quasi documentaries, as is best explained on their Web site (in nonnative English):

When you live in the Middle East you can't avoid being part of the image. As a development company we believe that we had to do our share of responsibility in telling the story behind this conflict and targeting youngsters who depend on videogames and movies (which always tell the counter side) to build their acknowledgment about the world. . . . [The game] contains graphical violence and shooting at military person[nel] models, it does not include shooting at civilians or abusing them, it does not include suicide bombing or any terrorist simulation. . . . Contents are inspired by real stories of Palestinian people, they were documented by United Nations records (1978–2004). . . . West Bank and Gaza Strip are occupied land according to UN law, and military actions performed by local fighters against occupying forces [are] considered eligible. *Under Siege* is about the modern history of Palestine and it focuses on the lives of [a] Palestinian family between 1999–2002 during the second Intifada. All levels are based on true stories.¹³

Special Force

In February 2003 the Hezbollah Central Internet Bureau released *Special Force*, followed a few months later by a multiple-player version. Based on the same militaristic representation as American-made shooters, *Special Force* is inspired by and represents actual Hezbollah missions during the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon in the early 1980s. The object of the game is best described by the text on the cover of the CD-ROM: “The designers of *Special Force* are very proud to provide you with this special product, which embodies objectively the defeat of the Israeli enemy and the heroic actions taken by he-

roes of the Islamic Resistance in Lebanon . . . be a partner in the victory. Fight, resist and destroy your enemy in the name of force and victory.”¹⁴

Players have to navigate through the same real-life conditions that Lebanese fighters did—minefields, the number of Israeli soldiers, weather conditions, and difficult terrain. One of the most well-known facts about this game occurs during the “training session,” where players can practice their shooting skills before the “real” battles by aiming at Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon and other Israeli leaders. The majority of the game is based on combat scenarios not different from most other games of this genre. The pro-Arab narrative is delivered through text-based briefings of historical accounts presented at the beginning of each level, setting up the context of what the gamer’s mission is to be. For example, a typical screen shot reads: “You must oppose, confront and destroy the machines of the Zionist enemy and [uphold and defend] the heroic actions taken by the heroes of the Islamic Resistance in Lebanon.” Except for a few instances of iconography such as Israeli and Hezbollah flags and “martyr posters” pasted on walls, the game looks and feels like most other combat scenarios with minefields, enemy tanks, and the like. As Alexander Galloway succinctly explains, “While the action in *Special Force* is quite militaristic, it feels like a simple role reversal, a transplant of its American counterparts, with Israelis as the enemies rather than dark-skinned Arabs.”¹⁵

Special Force can certainly be seen as part of Hezbollah’s larger media enterprise, what has been called a “shrewd media presence.”¹⁶ *Special Force* is described on its official Web site similarly to *Under Ash* and *Under Siege* as not just propaganda but a game of “modern history . . . based on lives of real people trying to survive ethnic cleansing.”¹⁷ As another creator explained, “We want the new generation, which doesn’t listen to the news, to learn about the Palestinian cause.”¹⁸

13. Dar al-Fikr, “*Under Siege* ‘Quick View,’” www.underash.net/en_download.htm (accessed 1 February 2006).

14. Cover label, *Special Force*, CD-ROM (Beirut: Hezbollah Central Internet Bureau, 2003).

15. Alexander Galloway, “Social Realism in Gaming,” *Game Studies* 4 (2004), www.gamestudies.org/0401/galloway (accessed 25 November 2005).

16. Daniel J. Wakin, “Video Game Created by Militant Group Mounts Simulated Attacks against Israeli Targets,” *New York Times*, 18 May 2003.

17. *Special Force* Web site.

18. Hassan Salem, quoted in Nick Lewis, “Dangerous Games: How the Seductive Power of Videogames Is Being Harnessed to Push Deadly Agendas,” *Calgary Herald*, 9 July 2005.

Part of the point of the games is to keep the idea of resistance alive, for the “idea to live among the Arab people, the Islamic people. . . . We do not want the resistance concept to vanish.”¹⁹

Rising Popularity, Rising Concerns

Computer and Internet growth in the Palestinian territories began only after the 1993 peace accords, once the Palestinians were allowed to develop their own media and telecommunications infrastructure—although it is heavily dependent on and restricted by Israeli infrastructure. Driven by Western nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and diasporic Palestinians investing in the homeland, most of this growth has occurred through the establishment of school-based computer labs and computer or Internet centers, from urban refugee camps to rural villages. These have been funded by both private NGOs and foreign government agencies, with minimal assistance or funding from the Palestinian Authority. Despite the violence, increasing poverty, and the political standstill of the Second Intifada, computer and Internet use (along with cellular phones) became some of the most feasible means of communication, education, and entertainment for a population under curfews and closures, bounded by checkpoints, gunfire, and tanks. More and more Palestinians, particularly those under eighteen, were passing their time behind computer screens. By 2005 more than half of Palestinians below age eighteen were regular Internet users.²⁰ Arguably, the driving force behind children going in droves to computer centers was not to escape the violence on the streets but to participate in the violence on digital screens.

Children had various ways of interpreting their interactions with pro-Arab games, from those escaping reality to those exacting revenge, from recognizing the political irony of being able to reverse the winners to merely seeing game playing as a passing of time. Those who

sought revenge or retribution were most often those who had directly suffered from violence in reality. For example, one eleven-year-old boy in the southern Gaza Strip explained, “I’ve watched our homes being demolished. I’ve watched my parents being humiliated at the checkpoint. For me, in this game, I can finally have some strength that I don’t have in real life. I can fight for the dignity and honor of my parents.”

Despite claiming to be able to fight Israelis, or defend themselves and their families, gamers were well aware that they were interacting in a virtual world. As a fourteen-year-old boy in a West Bank village suggested, “I know this is not real. But it feels good to pretend. It feels good to . . . imagine that we are not victims, but we are conquerors.” Although they were conscious that their games were in the virtual realm, there was a recognition of the games’ impact on their real lives—whether on political or less serious grounds. One nine-year-old boy explained how the video games changed the structure and hierarchy of role-playing in both virtual and real games. In their real-world game equivalent of “cowboys and Indians” Palestinian kids play “Israelis and Palestinians.” In the real version, “all the boys fight to be [Israeli] soldiers, because it’s always the Palestinians that lose,” explained the young boy. But in the virtual games, he continued, “we finally have fights about who wants to be Palestinian. And we decide according to who loses [in the real-life games]. The loser has to take the role of Israelis, and let me tell you, nobody wants to be the Israeli [in the computer games]. . . . It’s good for our national pride that now we’re all wanting to be ourselves; I mean we all want to be Palestinian fighters.” Overall, children had positive things to say about the games: allowing them to be proud of their heritage, entertaining them, letting them pretend they were doing something they wished they could do in real life, and so on. For some, the games were also educational, as suggested by this nineteen-

19. Bilal Zain, quoted in Wakin, “Video Game Created by Militant Group Mounts Simulated Attacks.”

20. The growth rate of Internet use increased at around 8 percent a year during the Intifada years, from 2000 to 2004, so that by the end of 2005, 15 percent of the total population were regular Internet users. For those under the age of eighteen, who have computer and Internet access in schools as well

as through local centers, usage rates at the end of 2005 were at 52 percent. Internet World Stats, “Internet Usage in the Middle East” (30 September 2005), www.internetworldstats.com (accessed 5 October 2005); Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, *Palestinians at the End of Year 2005* (Ramallah: Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2006).

year-old: “It’s not just entertainment or fun; it’s also a way to learn history, to know what’s going on better.”

The adults familiar with the game playing (parents and computer-center managers or owners) had more ambivalent reactions. Negative remarks centered on concerns that gamers were not gaining “valuable” computer skills but instead were “wasting time playing games,” as one parent put it. A computer-center worker in Deir el-Balah refugee camp in Gaza lamented, “I wish for them to do more educational or religious things with some of the [software] we have. Maybe learn some skills so they can get a job, or improve their English. But they prefer to play these war games.” In fact, some computer centers, in the effort to steer kids away from games and toward other virtual experiences, deleted the games altogether. And as an owner in Bethlehem quickly learned, without games his center would run out of business: “The kids won’t come unless I let them play games.” He continued to explain the phenomenon: “[The kids] are a radical generation. They look for shooting. It is something inside them that they need to express and release.” As with adults the world over, concerns revolved around whether spending time playing video games is as beneficial—for social, educational, and technological skills—as other computer activities.

Other adults had more positive explanations. In Qalandia refugee camp, the owner of an Internet café suggested, “It’s very good the kids come and play here. It’s better than going to the checkpoint to throw stones.” While hardly any of the adults focused on the fact that games are also part of a computer-skills repertoire, they unanimously suggested that the kids are better off in the centers than on “the streets.” Even if they were partaking in throwing stones at Israeli soldiers in both virtual and real realms, one of them was inherently safer.

Whether a computer-center manager, owner, or parent, seldom did an adult take issue with the contents of these games. When vio-

lence did come up in conversation, responses were pragmatic, relating to the violence present in real lives as being of deeper and more serious concern. As one mother suggested, “My kid sees bullets all day. His brothers have been shot. . . . He slept under his bed for three months after [the incursions of 2002] were over. . . . He wetted his bed at least twice a night. . . . It’s not because of the games that he’s done these things or that he’s scared to go downstairs [to play]. It’s because of the occupation. Game or no game, it’s not going to make a difference.” Like this mother’s concern, other parents were more worried about the real tanks on the streets, the real bullets caught in the flesh, and the real political losses. While both the gamers and their adult counterparts held a matter-of-fact approach to the effects of gaming, and downplayed the propagandistic and violent effects of the games (for those were more serious in the real sphere anyway), the rest of the world was virulently protesting the fact that these games existed, assuming their popularity was a major factor in creating anti-Western terrorists.

Global Controversies

In the post-9/11 context, many Western politicians and journalists have condemned these pro-Arab games. An Australian parliament member called them dehumanizing since they “encourag[e] young people to become suicide bombers and to participate in attacks on people from the West.”²¹ Noted *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman fretted that “video games do matter” in the United States’ war on terror and in the war over Muslim minds since they are responsible for turning Islam into a death cult, suggesting that certain games, such as *Ummah Defense I* (whose objective is to unite the world under the banner of Islam), are nothing short of hate speech.²² Western pundits attempt to connect the games to Islamic terrorism and al-Qaeda. For example, based on reports by British police officials combing through an Islamic bookstore in Leeds for clues about the 7 July

21. Quoted in Alfred Hackensberger, “Shooting Baruch Goldstein, Carpet Bombing Beirut,” *Qantara*, www.qantara.de/webcom/show_article.php/_c-478/_nr-310/i.html (accessed 25 November 2005).

22. Thomas L. Friedman, “Giving Hatemongers No Place to Hide,” *New York Times*, 25 July 2005.

2005 London bombings, Friedman alleges that one of the bombers' frequenting of the bookstore (which sells these video games) is enough evidence to connect the games to terrorism.²³

The rhetorical debates about the games in the mainstream Western press parallel those about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict specifically and the rebirth, post 9/11, of a belief in a "clash of civilizations" between the West and Islam generally. Thus many of the protests against the games fall within the same simplified and reductionist discourse as that propagated by Samuel P. Huntington, only this time it is fostered by journalists and politicians who have probably never played the games.²⁴ The fears and accusations assume the games lead to anti-Americanism (often equated with anti-Western, anti-Israeli, or anti-Semitic sentiments), which leads to violence (ironically, little is mentioned in the Israeli press about these games; the majority of fears emanate from the United States, the United Kingdom, and other Western nations). Especially in the case of *Special Force*, games are posited as agitprop, describing them as "a sign of Hezbollah's elaborate propaganda efforts. [The game's] popularity is also an indication of Hezbollah's success in permeating popular consciousness in Lebanon and in gaining political legitimacy."²⁵ For some, the indoctrination through video games is inseparable from the party's proselytism: "[Hezbollah] has fanned the flames of the Intifada itself by delivering weapons and know-how to Palestinian terrorist groups. And it has openly propagandized for the destruction of Israel by means of its media and Web outlets and through such wildly popular [Hezbollah-] sponsored video games such as *Special Force*."²⁶ Hezbollah for its part has not denied the connection between its video game and its larger mission. One officer from the Hezbollah Internet Bureau claims, "*Special Force* is only the first step. The movement will only become greater in time."²⁷ But it also recognizes the variety of ways

the game is used by its players—entertainment, education, history, anger release, political frustration, peer pressure, and so on.

Certainly *Special Force* and the other two video games are part of the global trend whereby media have become a means of expression, advertising, and propaganda for various groups, ranging from the U.S. Army to the pro-Islamists. But the Western response to pro-Arab games is based on a number of assumptions that need to be analyzed. An immediate connection is made between these games—especially as FPSs—and the "violent effects" they have on gamers, especially that their "realism" is more and more convincing than other media. Many of these claims are based on ethnocentric Western notions of war and bloodshed, positions that are reductionist, simplistic, and orientalist.²⁸ Below I describe these issues and touch on the limits of the effects tradition, the problems of Western superiority embedded in some media theories, and the importance of considering the larger context surrounding the games.

Back to Violence, Race, and Media Effects

"Anyone who reads the news knows that computer games cause brain damage. They are also addictive. And, of course, they promote violence in youngsters."²⁹ This statement about the violent effects of video games by a technology journalist echoes not only popular misconceptions of video games generally held in society but the fears about pro-Arab games specifically. For years, leading voices on the left and the right, inside and outside Western academia, have seemed to agree that video game use among children has deleterious consequences, ranging from aggressiveness and violence to docility and laziness, from obesity to antisocial behavior.

While the premise of "direct effects" has subsided to one of "limited effects" in discussions of the media in the West, it still rages when it comes to games outside the status quo. Much

23. Ed Johnson, "Investigators Pursue Clues to Bombings in Leeds, Pakistan," *Associated Press*, 18 July 2005; Friedman, "Giving Hatemongers No Place to Hide."

24. Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs* 72 (1993): 22–49.

25. Wakin, "Video Game Created by Militant Group Mounts Simulated Attacks."

26. Gal Luft, "Hizballahland," *Commentary Magazine*, July–August 2003, n.p.

27. Quoted in Hackensberger, "Shooting Baruch Goldstein."

28. Said, *Orientalism*.

29. Paul Hyman, "War! What Is It Good For?" *Computer User*, 1 September 2003, www.computeruser.com/articles/daily/12,80,1,0901,03.html.

of the fear about pro-Arab video games is firmly embedded in simplistic and overreactionary beliefs, and the controversy surrounding them is not different from the fear of a hypodermic needle injected into children immediately turning them into future terrorists, without any regard to the larger context in which these games are created, played, and popularized. As one journalist fretted, “What if a video game rewarded you for killing Arabs? Or Israelis? Or Somalis? . . . Or even just Americans? Those games are out there, and they’re growing as a number of organizations realize the immense marketing potential of videogames in pushing a political agenda. Some are designed to recruit young people, promote an ideology or justify policies. Others are about promoting hate.”³⁰

There are games out in the world that are purely about promoting hate. One of the most disturbing ones is *Ethnic Cleansing*, made in the United States, in which a gamer can choose to be a Ku Klux Klansman or neo-Nazi skinhead, randomly gunning down “dark-skinned people.” The game’s marketing blurb alludes to its racist nature: “Your skin is your uniform in this battle for the survival of your kind. The White Race depends on you to secure its existence. Your peoples’ enemies surround you in a sea of decay and filth that they have brought to your once clean and White nation.”³¹ There are also games that are purposeful recruitment efforts, such as *America’s Army*, arguably the most successful FPS game in history, which was developed at a cost of 8 million U.S. dollars of taxpayer money and launched for free on the U.S. Army Web site in 2002, with an average of over thirty-five thousand new users playing it every day.³² A U.S. Army colonel explained that the game allows youngsters to “try [the army] on for size and get more information about the many job opportunities,” urging that it was crucially important to attract gamers when still young because “if you don’t get in there and engage them early in life

about what they’re going to do with their lives, when it comes time for them to choose, you’re in a fallback position.”³³

There have been complaints by parental groups, journalists, and academics about the fame and glorification of violence in *America’s Army* and its impact on individuals and society. But according to an army spokesperson, “*America’s Army* is about military values. And patriotism. And those are good things.”³⁴ The same rhetoric cannot be used however when the proponent of the game is an “enemy” of the West. Nor for that matter can the rhetoric of limited effects be used, as if direct effects of media apply only to Arab children, rather than American children, simply because of their nationality.

If anything is clear from these examples, and if any trends should be alarming, it is the troubling post-9/11 collaboration between popular culture and militarization, symbolized in the expanding cooperation between the military and video game industries. Media theorists such as Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio, James Der Derian, and Slavoj Žižek have interrogated the ideological, cultural, and material links between war and popular culture and especially the seemingly shrinking distinction between the real and the imagined in the virtual realm of war and terror.³⁵ There is also concern about the implications on American society and its indirect participation with war and violence and whether its media culture is preparing young Americans for armed conflict. David Leonard puts it best in the following statement:

War video games are no longer purely about training soldiers already enlisted; rather, they are about recruitment and developing future soldiers, while simultaneously generating support among civilian populations for increasing use of American military power. Americans of all ages are thus able to participate collectively in the War on Terror and in Operation Iraqi Freedom, just as if they were members of the

30. Lewis, “Dangerous Games.”

31. Social Impact Games, “Political and Social Games,” www.socialimpactgames.com (accessed 1 February 2006).

32. *America’s Army: Special Forces*, version 2.0, U.S. Army, 2003, online game, www.americasarmy.com.

33. Casey Wardynski, quoted in Joan Ryan, “Army’s War Game Recruits Kids,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 23 September 2004, sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2004/09/23/BAGLG8T3MR1.DTL.

34. Quoted in Hyman, “War.”

35. Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Paul Virilio, *Strategy of Deception* (New York: Verso, 2000); Virilio, *Ground Zero* (New York: Verso, 2002); James Der Derian, *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2001); and Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (New York: Verso, 2002).

military. . . . With a little money and the switch of a button, the divide between real and virtual—between civilian and military, between domestic and foreign—is erased as we wage war through gaming. Yet most Americans remain on their couches, in their classrooms, and in their offices, providing consent and support through video games—through play.³⁶

But there is further fear that FPS games in particular “reinforce the idea that international conflict is not solved through diplomacy, it is solved through insurgency.”³⁷

America’s Army and *Special Force* are often classified together, their effects equated in statements such as the following:

Terrorists and soldiers, spies and businessmen, students and parents—we live in age of video game enthusiasts, and what is best and worst about our world will sooner or later be packaged into a game. As the games grow more realistic, and the players grow older, the distinctions between life and game grow grayer and more vague. We increasingly grow desensitized to the difference between simulation and reality—living in make-believe worlds in which actions have no consequences and deadly mistakes can be fixed by pressing reset.³⁸

For other journalists, the differences between games like *Special Force* and *Ethnic Cleansing* are minimal, classifying both as “public relations tools” for terrorists and racists.³⁹

However, there is a fundamental difference between these three pro-Arab games and *Ethnic Cleansing* in that the former do not promote random racist killing and are based on real conflicts. Moreover, in terms of their inhumanity, terror, racism, and bloodthirstiness, *Under Siege* and *Special Force* pale in comparison to the games coming out of the United States and Israel, such as *America’s Army* and *Israeli Air Force*, the latter an American-made game based on the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in which players can choose to “carpet bomb all of Beirut.”⁴⁰ Collateral damage, in the euphemism of the

military, is possible in American games, whose goals are to destroy Afghanistan and Iraq and Arab or Muslim nations and peoples. The killing is indiscriminate. The pro-Arab games may not be any less propagandistic than the U.S. ones, but they do not mercilessly sacrifice civilians. *Special Force* does not include civilians, and in *Under Ash* killing civilians incurs lost points or a “game over.” Unlike in Western counterparts, while combat is central to the narrative in the pro-Arab games, the slaying of civilians is not.

A comparison of pro-Arab video games to *Ethnic Cleansing* or *America’s Army* denies them their political context and uniqueness—especially when played in the Gaza Strip or the West Bank, where the gamers are victims, not perpetrators, of war. There is a deep difference between killing for the sake of killing (*Ethnic Cleansing*, or more popular FPS games such as *Doom* or *Quake*) or for waging a war (*America’s Army*) and killing in order to go back in history and redress your nation’s losses (*Under Siege*).⁴¹ Or as the pundits in Hezbollah have expressed in not quite the same terms: “It seems that the [Western] media is silent when they, the Zionists, use their tanks to slaughter our children. But when our children play a shoot-em up game where they shoot Zionist tanks in return for correct answers we are accused of training terrorists and instilling hatred towards Jews!”⁴²

There is an entrenched contradiction at the heart of the effects tradition: if video games do directly influence children, why is there no concern about the Arab child who will see his or her kin as villain, evildoer, terrorist, or the one to be chased and killed indiscriminately, as has been the case in games until the pro-Arab ones came along? This inconsistency addresses the problems of the ethnocentrism embedded in video games and the ongoing stereotypes of Arabs, Muslims, and terrorists (never mind the conflation of the three). American-made games such *Desert Storm* and *America’s Army* “portray Arab-Americans [and Arabs] as savages, uncivi-

36. Leonard, “Unsettling the Military Entertainment Complex.”

37. Ibid.

38. “Life is Just a Game.”

39. Hyman, “War”; Lewis, “Dangerous Games.”

40. *Israeli Air Force*, Electronic Arts, 1998, CD-ROM.

41. *Doom*, IdSoftware and Activision, 1993, CD-ROM, www.idsoftware.com/games/doom/doom3/; *Quake*, IdSoftware, 1996, CD-ROM, www.idsoftware.com/games/quake/quake.

42. *Special Force* Web site.

lized warriors, and terrorists. In a very real way, war games construct racialized meaning. . . . White people are presented as praiseworthy fighters and heroes.”⁴³ Are these games not providing ideological sanction for America’s war on terror and its aggression in the Middle East?

As the twelve-year-old girl from Jenin made clear, none of the games with Arabs in them that she had ever played before these three had allowed her *not* to shoot at Arabs; in her words, “I always had to shoot at my own people.” Before *Under Ash*, *Under Siege*, and *Special Force*, the Arab (and/or Muslim) was by default the enemy. For example, the goal of *Command and Conquer: Generals* is to defeat an Arab guerrilla force that uses sneaky and underhand tactics, as opposed to the U.S. forces’ high-tech weapons, skills, and strategic abilities.⁴⁴ Thus it incorporates in its narrative an orientalist discourse where the Arab is the uncivilized, unmodernized, and violent “other.”

There are also larger problems with focusing only on the violent effects of games. One is the denial of the context in which the games are played and the historical conditions that have led to anti-Western sentiment. Given the history of Arab-Western relations, why would children think anything positive of the West, when all they have known is colonization, cultural imperialism, economic exploitation of their nation’s natural reserves, the maintenance of corrupt dictatorships, the waging of wars and crusades, the false promises of democracy, the printing of profane cartoons, and so on.

Anti-Western or anti-American sentiment cannot be blamed on games alone. They are not influencing kids toward a particular political perspective, since it is the conditions around them that have already situated them as “pro-Arab” (and sometimes “anti-Western” and/or “anti-Israeli”) subjects of larger political conditions. So while these games illustrate the conditions of contemporary culture in the Middle East, they also serve to debunk the claims of vio-

lent effects and brainwashing through media. It is the larger political, economic, social, religious landscape around these gamers that is the stronger force in the children’s lives, not the fact that they can escape into a virtual world, which either recreates their life in war-torn Palestine or allows them to re-create history so that they can for once be heroes. As one of the directors of *Dar al-Fikr* said, “Children that play these videogames live in a huge irony. On one hand they sense the anger of adults about being victims of politics, victims of mental and physical violence. And on the other side, he can sit alone on his PC and transform himself into someone with strength and able to resist US forces.”⁴⁵

Additionally, there is a myopic view of whose “patriotism” expressed through media is justified or simply better. Why is it that Americans can excuse their promilitary propaganda and defend their political views as the correct ones and consider everyone else’s as “terrorist”? Given the similarities between *America’s Army* and *Special Force*, this seems to be the case made. For example, one scholar complains of Hezbollah’s Web site that it “provide[s] links to downloadable children’s videogames that train children to play the role of terrorists, to be suicide bombers, and to shoot actual political leaders,” but he fails to mention that, following the same logic, American children are doing the same by accessing the U.S. Army Web site, downloading war games, training to be state-sponsored “terrorists” (depending on one’s perspective), and shooting Arab leaders.⁴⁶ This mimics the rhetoric surrounding current global relations, where the United States and Europe are entitled to protect, rationalize, and propagate their perspectives at the expense of others. Debates about whose war is more just (America’s war for freedom or Iraqi insurgents’), whose democracy more acceptable (Israel’s denial of equal rights to 20 percent of its Arab population because they are not Jewish or Hamas’s legitimately coming to power through elections), or whose freedom

43. *Desert Storm*, Sci Entertainment Group, 2002, CD-ROM; Leonard, “Unsettling the Military Entertainment Complex.”

44. *Command and Conquer: Generals*, Electronic Arts, 2003, CD-ROM.

45. Empyre Discussion Board, “Politics, Reality, Violence.”

46. Bruce Klopfenstein, “Terrorism and the Exploitation of New Media,” in *Media, Terrorism, and Theory*, ed. Anandam Kavoori and Todd Fraley (Boulder, CO: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 112.

of speech more justified (European newspapers' printing malicious cartoons of Prophet Muhammad or Muslims' burning flags and demonstrating in protest) continue to be one-sided.

While the "effects" tradition is certainly limited in its scope of analysis, there is a still deeper fear that video games in particular are more potent than other forms of media: "Films and television programs can only dramatize their politics, but we now have a medium where you can interact with them, as an engaged participant."⁴⁷ This concern has to do with gamers being consumed in a virtual world at more intense levels than they would in other media, and even more so in FPS games. This issue leads me into the subsequent concerns about the "action" aspect of video games and its twin, "realism."

Realism on the Screens

Compared to *America's Army* and other Western games, these pro-Arab games are expressions of political realities and struggles that are lived on an everyday basis by their players, especially in the Palestinian territories. These games bring up new issues of realism—a central theoretical issue in media studies in terms of how to make connections between the virtual and real worlds.

First, there must be a distinction made between games that are modeled around real events and those that claim to be an extension of real-life struggle. In this view, what is exceptional about *America's Army* is its "mimetic" realism: as a model of the experience of the American army, the game claims a real material referent that other games cannot. Games like *Special Force* are similar in representation to *America's Army*, although their narratives are different in that they train fighters in a virtual setting as real as possible. In the words of a Hezbollah official, "*Special Force* offers a mental and personal training for those who play it, allowing them to feel that they are in the shoes of the resistance fighters."⁴⁸

These games challenge accepted notions of media realism and require deeper consideration than just their visual or textual repre-

sentations. Because these games are not just watched, listened to, or read, but are played and interacted with, they supplement the debate about realism and representation with the phenomenon of action. Galloway proposes that game studies ought to define realist games "as those games that reflect critically on the minutia of everyday life, replete as it is with struggle, personal drama and injustice."⁴⁹ As such, *Under Ash* and *Under Siege* embody new gaming phenomena that address players' real-life concerns. If one is to agree with Galloway's definition of realism as the documentary-like attention to everyday struggles of life, then these games are truly realist. As he explains it, "*Under Ash* takes a more sober, almost educational tone . . . [since] players . . . have a personal investment in the struggle depicted in the game, just as they have a personal investment in the struggle happening each day around them. This is something rarely seen in the consumer gaming market . . . [even if the game is] a cookie-cutter repurposing of an American-style shooter for the ideological needs of the Palestinian situation."⁵⁰

One thirteen-year-old in East Jerusalem explained, "I love that I am able to shoot Israelis. Of course it's because I'm not able to shoot them in real life. . . . But it feels almost like the real thing, especially levels one and two, where the sceneries are from around here." Or as another seventeen-year-old in Gaza expressed about *Under Ash*: "I have to tell you that there are times when I play this game and I imagine that I really am able to shoot the [Israeli soldiers]. . . . I just have to think of all those times when I was angry but unable to do anything about the occupation. When I sit at the [computer] screen, I think of the real anger I feel and I play much better."

Under Ash and *Under Siege* are important for two reasons: first, their realism is not only in the narrative or the visual but in their action; second, because of their documentary-like quality of life on the Palestinian ground—demolished houses, checkpoints, separated families, and other scenarios familiar in the territories—and

47. Lewis, "Dangerous Games."

48. Special Force Web site.

49. Galloway, "Social Realism in Gaming."

50. Ibid.

partly because the games are “distinctly difficult to play, a sardonic instance of socio-political realism,” they are not fantasy escapism alone.⁵¹ They are as close to a realist representation as any video game has ever come. And with the latest war between Hezbollah and Israel renewed in the summer of 2006, *Special Force* now too takes on a more realist (contemporary) narrative.

Both pro-Arab and Western-made war games point to the burgeoning relationship between virtual reality and the bloodshed of the real. To return to one of the effects tradition’s concerns: is there a larger militarization and violence of everyday life occurring in television and video games? Here, a number of scholars have already made important contributions. Baudrillard, Virilio, and Der Derian have critically engaged the ideological, cultural, and material links between popular culture and war and the blur between the real and fantastically imagined.⁵² They analyze how the hyperpresence of war on television and in video games constructs a war without bloodshed. Without carnage or destruction, a strategy of deception fools one into believing that a real war never happened. As Leonard argues, “Against a background where war takes place within the hyper-real (virtual) and where war-making itself is increasingly virtual and hyperreal, [these theorists] demonstrate the importance of challenging and deconstructing video games as part of a pedagogy of peace.”⁵³

But these concerns are ethnocentric. For many of the victims of war, such as Palestinians (or Lebanese, Israelis, or Iraqis for that matter), there is nothing hyper-real about being bombed, forbidden to go to school because a tank is outside your house, living with curfews and closures, or losing your parents. Nor is there anything hyper-real about resisting with stones, slingshots, and homemade bombs. As such, these theorists forget that in contemporary hyper-real wars “traditional” elements of war are experienced—by the underdogs of course. The connection between the virtual field of war available to these Palestinian children and the

real war outside their living rooms and schoolyards is more than just “technical illusion” or “hyperrealist logic.”⁵⁴ Many of the Palestinian kids who play these games are very much aware of the (dis)connection between these two worlds. The same seventeen-year-old from Gaza who plays better when he thinks of his real anger, explained the discrepancy between his real and virtual anger release:

Of course there are times when [*Under Siege*] gets me even more frustrated, because in the game I am this strong fighter, I am able to resist, to avoid bullets, to have weapons, to do all these things I am unable to do in real life. . . . It is worse with [*Special Force*] because there I have this feeling that I am really beating the Israelis and winning the cause. But I know it cannot happen here. I know it is not so easy to blow up their tanks or shoot down their airplanes.

Another sixteen-year-old girl in Gaza got to the heart of the matter by situating her game playing within a larger political context: “The American games give me a strange feeling. I wonder if these scenes from inside their tanks and airplanes are what the soldiers see when they’re dropping bombs on Iraq. . . . Or that Israeli game where they are shooting Arabs. Is that a true representation of how they see things? . . . It’s probably close, since *Under Siege* is close to our reality.” Such examples speak to both the media and political savvy of these gamers, who negotiate the conflicts on their screens as much more than virtual killing fields.

American scholar Nina Huntemann suggests that “what [is] . . . frightening is that in our playtime, in our leisure time, we’re engaging in fictional conflicts that are based on a terrorist threat and never asking questions.”⁵⁵ Again, these concerns do not adequately apply in the Palestinian context. First, there is no leisure time. There are hardly any parks, playgrounds, or soccer fields in Gaza, for example. Kids are also often locked up inside their homes because of curfews and closures or because of their parents’ fear. Second, the militarization of everyday life is occurring in the real realm—under

51. Ibid.

52. Baudrillard, *Gulf War*; Virilio, *Strategy of Deception*; and Der Derian, *Virtuous War*.

53. Leonard, “Unsettling the Military Entertainment Complex.”

54. On “technical illusion,” see Virilio, *Strategy of Deception*; on “hyperrealist logic,” see Baudrillard, *Gulf War*.

55. Nina Huntemann, “Militarism and Video Games: An Interview with Nina Huntemann,” by Michelle Barron of Media Education Foundation, Boston, 2004, www.mediaed.org/news/articles/militarism (accessed 10 July 2007).

oppressive and deadly conditions. Third, there are many questions asked by Palestinian kids. But they are not answered. As a thirteen-year-old posed, “How come no one cares that we are being killed? [The United States] complains about our stone-throwing, they call us terrorists, they are angry that we play these games, but they never recognize that their weapons are the ones that kill our people. . . . Where is the peace that Clinton promised? Where is the state that Bush promised? Why do they keep selling us lies and then expect us to believe them and love them?”

I raise these concerns not for disagreement’s sake, but to suggest that although these postmodern theorists offer critical insight into the hyper-real violence of today’s world, they suffer altogether from an ethnocentrism that assumes that what the West experiences on its television and computer screens is the only (hyper-)reality out there. Deep-seated in their arguments is the omission that real beings are on the other side of those digital images of war, of the pixilated images emanating out of Western and Israeli tanks, of the little red dots moving on the ground and taken through heat-sensitive satellites. While these theorists can contribute to an understanding of media representations, they are guilty of denying the other (in this case, the proverbial Arab) his or her own very real experience and very violent reality—which is affected by a push of a button thousands of miles away.

Responses to Western Hegemony

One of the strengths of the virtual world is that it offers a space to challenge convention and tilt the dominant worldview. In great part this is what these pro-Arab games are succeeding at (while recognizing that within the actual political sphere many Arabs already hold “anti-Western” views). For some Western political and media analysts, the video games can be posited as part of a larger media campaign occurring in the Middle East, claiming that *Special Force* “hopes to become the computer entertainment

equivalent of what Al-Jazeera and Al Arabiya are in the news broadcasting sector—a public Arab opposition voice against pro-Western dominance.”⁵⁶ That is partially true. And some Arabs will agree, as this journalist’s remark on the games’ importance illustrates: “It is easy to sneer at computer games as the silly embodiment of someone’s teenage fantasies. Which they are. But at least in *Under Ash* the silly fantasy is not the product of someone else’s teenage morality; this one’s all our own.”⁵⁷

The fact that these games are Arab made is a major reason for their popularity. Of course allowing kids to shoot their real-life enemies, redress their losses, and engage in familiar battles and do so in their own language helps too. But there is more to these games than just redressing the “balance to a genre dominated by victorious US soldiers defeating Arab enemies.”⁵⁸ Their popularity stems from more than just portraying Arabs as triumphant heroes instead of enemies and terrorists, and it is something none of the Western pundits focuses on. It is dignity.

Radwan Kasmiya, one of the creative directors of *Under Ash* and *Under Siege*, explains this position: “All I want is . . . equality in the minds of Arabic children so they would feel digital dignity.”⁵⁹ And the kids echo this sentiment. Here is how one sixteen-year-old in a Ramallah Internet café describes it:

It’s great that there is a creation now that shows our horrible conditions: the occupation, people imprisoned in jails, demolished houses, a husband and wife separated by a checkpoint . . . but [these games] also give us a sense of dignity, that we are not portrayed simply as victims, but as resisters. We’re not just doing nothing with our hands tied behind our backs, but we’re fighting back. . . . You know how all other games have us there like shooting targets. This time the targets aren’t us. It sounds silly, but it’s a wonderful feeling.

While this young man makes clear that being on the winning side is a wonderful feeling for gamers, his comments also suggest that the games serve an educational purpose in their depiction

56. Hackensberger, “Shooting Baruch Goldstein.”

57. Habib Battah, “Syrian-Developed PC Game Portrays Palestinian Anguish,” *Daily Star*, 21 October 2004, www.dailystar.com.lb.

58. Rebecca Armstrong, “Jihad: Play the Game,” *Independent*, 17 August 2005, news.independent.co.uk/sci_tech/article306475.ece.

59. Empyre Discussion Board, “Politics, Reality, Violence.”

of real circumstances. As the *Special Force* design team admits, the game is intended to disseminate the group's values, concepts, and ideas, but it is also about giving players a chance to feel as if they were taking part in the attacks they (if old enough to remember the actual attack), or at least their parents, were cheering from afar. Mahmoud Rayya, an official from Hezbollah, explains succinctly: "This game is resisting the Israeli occupation through the media."⁶⁰

Under Siege and *Under Ash* are arguably more educational than *Special Force*. Their opening scenes are made up of mini documentary films of Palestinian history. Their visuals may well be from a historical film or photographic archive. The games are filled with documentary-style oral narratives, interviews, and confessions from various Palestinians. These games, it becomes clear, are not just about entertainment but about education as well. One only has to reconsider one of the central objectives according to the games' creators, that of building gamers' historical and world knowledge.

These games are part of the larger contemporary practice of Arabs' (and what is often seen in the mainstream Western press as their fundamentalist Islamic threads') response to Western influence and hegemony. In a sense the creation of video games symbolizes the cooption of Western technologies for "antimodern" means. Some see the fact of "anti-Western Muslim extremists using the West's own technologies against it . . . [as an] irony."⁶¹ They hold simplistic views, explaining it as a "paradox . . . that many extremists wish to purge their territories of Western influence, media, and related technology" and yet play video games—or worse yet, use jets to fly into buildings.⁶² But reality is much more complicated than that. Palestinian gamers have learned that they can be "modern" and "fundamental" simultaneously. They can on the Internet partake in virtual wars much like their Western counterparts *and* support fundamentalist groups. Thus an individual's

fundamentalist orientation does not prevent him or her from adopting certain modernistic approaches. Through these video games, Arab kids and groups such as Hezbollah exploit the very tools of modern society to strengthen and reinstitutionalize the fundamental core of their Islamic faith and political objectives. Religion can no longer be seen simply as a set of traditional beliefs, impervious to change and irrelevant to modernization. The task therefore becomes one of reconciling anachronistic values with time-honored assumptions about the content, nature, and direction of modernizing change and the role of technology therein. As such, these games and the trends behind them fly in the face of modernization theorists.

Since Daniel Lerner, the West has assumed that its model of modernization exhibits certain elements and consequences whose relevance is universal, much of which happens through the "great multiplier" of the media.⁶³ All one needs is to supply Arabs with access to digital media technologies, and they will be on the road to modernity. From there it is just a short step to the excessive importance that postmodernists and proponents of globalization assign to mass consumerism and popular culture in the framing of everyday life and in redefining basic values. The works of Francis Fukuyama, Samuel P. Huntington, and Benjamin Barber and even recent work by Bernard Lewis remain in that tradition.⁶⁴ They continue to distinguish conflict in the region as a by-product of monolithic and overarching thoughts—"the triumph of liberalism" or "the clash of civilizations." Rather than think of a possibility of reconciliation between the two forces, these orientalists see the homogenized McWorld of Barber rapidly eroding local identities. And it is to their surprise when they do not see this happening with increasing Internet usage or video games.

There is little of such sharp dichotomies in the Palestinian territories. Global expectations are being reshaped to accommodate local

60. Quoted in Armstrong, "Jihad."

61. Klopfenstein, "Terrorism," 113.

62. Ibid.

63. Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (New York: Free Press, 1958).

64. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon, 1992); Huntington, "Clash of Civilizations"; Benjamin Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism Are Reshaping the World* (New York: Ballantine, 1996); and Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? The Clash between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

needs and preferences, just as the local is not averse to experimenting with more global and ephemeral encounters and cultural by-products. These games are symbolic of the variety and difference possible as technologies are spread “eastward” and of the impossibility of a lasting homogenization of Western media globally. This observation is not just text-centric (because of the messages inside these games) but industry-wide: those voices so long oppressed, stereotyped, vilified, negated, or shut up are learning that their master’s tools can be put to very different uses than the master intended. This is not to suggest that power in the digital realm will immediately result in power in the real political one. If anything, the reality of Palestinians shows otherwise.

Conclusion

These pro-Arab games are entering into a landscape and identity already gripped by political unrest, displacement, and collective violence. The spaces of war have manifestly asserted their ferocious logic on virtually every part of public and private space—and now virtual space. Instead of the Western concern about how virtual violence may seep into the realms of social and political life, for Palestinian kids the issue is the other way around. Of concern should be the fact that with the rise of these video games, the few spaces of nonviolence available to Palestinian youth are all but disappearing. The Second Intifada, following years of formal occupation and Palestinian Authority corruption, destroyed common and porous spaces such as parks and playgrounds. Combined with Israeli policies of fragmenting the physical geography, it also encouraged the formation of separate, isolated, and exclusive spaces, transforming the perception and use of space in a more compelling sense: real playgrounds into battlegrounds, and now battlegrounds into virtual playgrounds.

Throughout the Intifada, and arguably since 1948, the majority of Palestinians (including the youth) have been trapped in the task of negotiating, constructing, and reconfirming an unsettled pattern of identity—much of it spatial. They are homeless in their own homes,

furtive outcasts in their own communities. Like other displaced groups, they become disoriented and distressed because there is no longer a neighborhood for them to live in, play in, and rely on. They become homeless in at least three existential senses, as Samir Khalaf describes of the Lebanese: they suffer the angst of being dislodged from their most enduring attachments and familiar places; they suffer banishment; and they are impelled by an urge to reassemble a damaged identity and broken history.⁶⁵ Imagining old places and re-creating history to preserve the places and politics as they would prefer them come to serve as a reprieve from the uncertainties and anxieties of today. The components of these video games that serve as “digital memorials” do precisely that: reconstruct Palestinian spaces and history, preserving them for younger generations to keep remembering.

The fears emanating from the West posit Arab children without social, religious, political, and spatial identities. This myopia is an extension of the media effects tradition, combined with the added component of racist stereotypes, and a negation of the reality of war in these children’s everyday lives. The perspective is also reductionist in the assumption that Arab children are somehow more gullible to propaganda than Western children. These approaches fail to acknowledge the realities behind these games, that identities are much more complex than simply a reaction or negotiation with what is happening on computer (or television) screens, and must instead take into account the array of factors in the realm of social life and, in this context specifically, the impact of constant violence, oppression, and war. They also fail to recognize that identities are dynamic and subject to change, not fixed qualities but narratives that evolve and form over time and in time.

Special Force, *Under Siege*, and *Under Ash* are no longer alone as pro-Arab video games. Partly because of their success, and partly because of the diffusion of technology, new games have arrived on the scene that will undoubtedly continue to raise the issues discussed above. *Ummah Defense*’s objective is to unite the world under Islam, *Islamic Fun* introduces young children

65. Samir Khalaf, *Cultural Resistance: Global and Local Encounters in the Middle East* (London: Saqi, 2001).

to Islam, and *Maze of Destiny* has players rescue chapters of the Koran from thieves.⁶⁶ It will not be long before a game is created to reflect the latest war between Hezbollah and Israel, but also the latest disputes “between East and West,” with Danes drawing enflaming cartoons and Pakistanis burning down embassies. Pundits will myopically focus on which side will create that video game first and what its ideological underpinnings will be, forgetting the intricacies inside and beyond the screens. As a tagline at the end of level four of *Under Ash* suggests, “A real life story or a political propaganda? You have the right to decide.” §

66. *Ummah Defense*, IslamGames, 2001, CD-ROM; *Islamic Fun*, Innovative Minds, 2002, CD-ROM, www.inminds.co.uk; and *Maze of Destiny*, IslamGames, 2002, CD-ROM.