

## Slingshots and Game Controllers: Video Games within Middle Eastern Conflicts

CALLUM McDONALD

*This essay will place a series of Middle Eastern-made video games into the political and military conflicts in which they are played. In contrast to scholarship focusing on how video games represent and narrate colonial and post-colonial reality onscreen, this paper will focus on how video games relate to their (Middle Eastern) players' lived experiences of ongoing conflicts such as the Arab-Israeli conflict and the global "War on Terror." This paper will survey a selection of six primary video games, all participating in the aforementioned conflicts: two by the Islamic State's online supporters, two by the Syrian developer Afkar Media, and another two by Lebanon's Hezbollah. This selection contains games which serve a variety of political languages, whether colonial-imperial, anti-imperial, or post-colonial. This paper intends to show how the political character of these games is tightly bound to the local context of the playership, in ways that turn games into propaganda. This essay seeks to challenge a Euro-American, middle-class ideal in video game studies that treats gameplay as escapism—giving excitement to players who are otherwise disconnected from the world of politics. Consequently, historical video games, divorced from reality, are measured by how well (or poorly) they simulate a past or present. Increasing the focus on video games' meaning within some Middle Eastern gamers' highly politicized social worlds could permit video game studies to open itself up to both global politics and specific regional histories.*

Video games are a natural home for rich representations of reality, combining sound, visuals, text, and narrative.<sup>1</sup> What is more, players can actively shape a game's storyline. As such, video games are fertile ground for affirming, changing, or challenging colonial and imperial narratives. Although these games reimagine the past, they are played in the context of the present. This essay will consider colonial and post-colonial video games made in the Middle East within the contexts in which they are played. These games do not primarily

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<sup>1</sup>. Dima Saber and Nick Webber, "'This is our *Call of Duty*': hegemony, history and resistant videogames in the Middle East," *Media, Culture & Society* 39, no.1 (2016): 83, doi 10.1177/0163443716672297.

represent colonial-imperial conflicts onscreen; they first and foremost function within live politico-military conflicts, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict and the “War on Terror.”

This essay argues that propaganda becomes the primary function of these video games when they are played in militarized contexts and that this political dynamic is especially potent for youth who are themselves trapped in weaponized colonial-imperial contexts.<sup>2</sup> This argument will be advanced through three different case studies: ISIS’s modified versions of *Grand Theft Auto V* and *ARMA 3*, which legitimate ISIS’s imperial control over subject populations in Iraq and Syria; Hezbollah’s games, *Special Force I* and *II*, which seek to empower Palestinian and Lebanese anti-imperial resistance to Israeli encroachment into Palestine and Lebanon; and the Syrian developer Afkar Media’s post-colonial games, *Under Ash* and *Under Siege*, which sensitively revisit the events of the Palestinian intifadas (in 1987 and 2000), valuing recollection over revenge.<sup>3</sup> All of these games represent the past, recent past, or future in a different way, and each game gains

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<sup>2</sup>. Zahera Harb, *Channels of Resistance in Lebanon: Liberation Propaganda, Hezbollah and the Media* (New York, NY: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2011), 4.

<sup>3</sup>. It is also important to note that as of the publication of some of this essay’s sources, namely Abdel Bari Atwan’s 2015 book *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate*, ISIS controlled a territory, an empire, the size of Great Britain in Iraq and Syria. Today in 2019, they have nearly lost their empire, except on the Internet. While this complicates this essay’s characterization of ISIS’s media as “made in the Middle East,” this paper nevertheless argues that a Middle Eastern geographical context is essential to understanding ISIS’s video games; *Special Force*, video game, developed by the Central Internet Bureau of Hezbollah (Hezbollah, 2002); *Special Force II*, video game, developed by the Central Internet Bureau of Hezbollah (Hezbollah, 2007); *Under Ash*, video game, developed by Afkar Media (Dar al-Fikr, 2003); *Under Siege*, video game, developed by Afkar Media (Dar al-Fikr, 2001); “*Salil el-Sawarem* [Clash of Swords],” video game montage, developer unknown, in “Watch: Islamic State’s Terror Video Game,” by Michelle Malka Grossman, *Jerusalem Post*, September 21, 2014. <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/IS-claims-it-created-a-terror-video-game-375935>; *ARMA 3*, video game, developed by Bohemia Interactive (Bohemia Interactive), 2013; *ARMA 3* [machinima], video game mod, developer unknown [ISIS?], publication date unknown; Abdel Bari Atwan, *Islamic State: the Digital Caliphate* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015), 9, 11, 12, 155, 156, 164; “Map of Syrian Civil War,” Live Universal Awareness Map, <https://syria.liveuamap.com/> (accessed 29 March 2018); Helga Tawil Souri, “The Political Battlefield of Pro-Arab Video Games on Palestinian Screens,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27, no.3 (2007): 538, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/224586>.

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additional meaning when played within a given context. Ultimately, situating these games in their respective conflicts can liberate video game studies from a decidedly Euro-American vision of video games as an escapist middle-class pastime. To stay mindful of context, playership, and authorship, this essay will start by providing an introduction to the nature of the political context that these video games inhabit, before moving on to draw some general conclusions from each specific case study.

First, the use of the words “imperial” and “colonial” will be clarified. While the former denotes the foreign control of a territory and population, the latter expands the definition to include settlement projects.<sup>4</sup> Since such a large part of this essay is devoted to games in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict, it is important to disclose that this essay takes the stance that Israel represents both an imperial power and a colonial power. Israel is imperial in the sense that the state has maintained military control over an unwilling subject people, both in southern Lebanon historically and in Palestine (the West Bank/Gaza) today.<sup>5</sup> It is colonial because Israeli citizens, having settled the land of the modern Israeli state since the nineteenth century, are now settling on the internationally-recognized territory of another group, the West Bank Palestinians.<sup>6</sup> As Ilan Pappé puts it, “Possessing the land was a national or religious mission, but the means were colonialist.”<sup>7</sup> A colleague of Israel’s second president, Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, confirmed this comparison: “The Zionist establishment should defend the Jewish workers against the Arab one, as the French government protects the French colonialists in

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<sup>4</sup>. Contemporary definitions of imperialism and colonialism can be applied to early and current Israeli state-building, as described by Ilan Pappé. The phrases “postcolonial” and “anti-imperial” are taken to be fixed expressions. Elsewhere, the terms “colonial” and “imperial” have been used together, with a hyphen or a conjunction, when both concepts apply, or separately when a distinction is warranted; Ilan Pappé, “Zionism as Colonialism: A Comparative View of Diluted Colonialism in Asia and Africa,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107, no.4 (2008): 612, 628, doi 10.1215/00382876-2008-009.

<sup>5</sup>. Southern Lebanon was even seen as a site of potential settlement for Israel; Harb, *Channels of Resistance in Lebanon*, 80, 82; Avi Shlaim, *Israel and Palestine* (New York, NY: Verso Books, 2009), 30.

<sup>6</sup>. Before 2005, there were Israeli settlers in the Gaza Strip as well; Shlaim, *Israel and Palestine*, 31, 308, 368.

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Algeria against the natives.”<sup>8</sup> This attentiveness to the specific nature of Middle Eastern context is crucial throughout this paper, because when Hezbollah’s video games are described as being played in an ongoing anti-imperial context, the imperial power in question is Israel.

Numerous games—European, Middle Eastern, or otherwise—let players engage with a history or an alternative history of anti-imperial struggle.<sup>9</sup> Some of these games, particularly Indian-made video games, travel back a hundred years or more to explore colonial conflicts.<sup>10</sup> They permit an engagement with the colonial past and ongoing colonial legacies on behalf of their playership. This essay, however, concentrates on games played in *ongoing* violent contexts, and less on the contents of the games themselves. While this is not to downplay ongoing colonial and imperial legacies in countries such as India, an adolescent twenty-first-century Indian gamer is no longer under physical threat from the British Army that she is battling onscreen.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, for a Palestinian in the West Bank, a game like Hezbollah’s *Special Force*, which permits him to shoot at Israeli soldiers, is a vastly different experience; he is substituting the all-too-real violence of his own life for the violence onscreen.<sup>12</sup> This is true for all the games dealt with here: violent contexts turn otherwise *commemorative* games into politically *active* ones. Consequently, it is easy to see the significance that the identity and geographical location of a player has for the study of video games.

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<sup>8</sup>. Yaakov Rabinowitz, “Defending the National Labor,” trans. Ilan Pappé, *Ha-Poel Hazair*, March

10, 1908, in Ilan Pappé, “Zionism as Colonialism: A Comparative View of Diluted Colonialism in Asia and Africa,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107, no.4 (2008): 618, doi 10.1215/00382876-2008-009.

<sup>9</sup>. Mukherjee provides an extensive list of relevant colonial and post-colonial games; Souvik Mukherjee, *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG, 2017), 88.

<sup>10</sup>. Mukherjee mentions post-colonial Indian games like *Bhagat Singh* and *Somewhere*, both recreating the British Empire in India onscreen in novel ways; Mukherjee, *Videogames and Postcolonialism*, 15, 16, 88; *Somewhere*, video game, developed by Studio Oleomingus (Studio Oleomingus), 2014; *Bhagat Singh*, video game, developed by Mitashi (Mitashi), 2002.

<sup>11</sup>. This refers to *Bhagat Singh*, which allows the player to fight and kill British redcoats; Mukherjee, *Videogames and Postcolonialism*, 15, 16.

<sup>12</sup>. Souri, “Pro-Arab Video Games,” 540-1.

Reflecting this political context, the games made by Middle Eastern developers are, in part, designed to reverse the Western gaze of games showing American troops and planes invading the Middle East.<sup>13</sup> Increasing numbers of American military video games produced since the 1990s have concentrated on terror groups and the Middle East, particularly after the events of September 11, 2001, when the World Trade Center was attacked.<sup>14</sup> This global political context is essential to understanding games depicting the Middle East in the twenty-first century. *Splinter Cell*, for instance, specifically deals with 9/11, while *Counter Strike: Global Offensive* pits two teams of players, “terrorists” and “counter-terrorists,” against each other.<sup>15</sup> As Afkar Media developer Radwan Kasmiya notes, “Arab gamers are playing [foreign] games that attack their culture.”<sup>16</sup>

This essay will study games which largely meet three criteria: they represent the Middle East onscreen; they are developed by political actors who are themselves not primarily the agents of Western states; and they are primarily (if not exclusively) played by gamers in the Middle East. The final criterion is essential for this paper: this essay will privilege the identity and context of the playership over that of the authors and over the game content, even though they overlap to some extent in the case studies explored here. Furthermore, by refocusing on the political contexts in each of the three case studies, this paper can help contribute to the decentring of video games from the Western core to the

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<sup>13</sup>. Saber and Webber, “‘This is our *Call of Duty*,’” 83; the US Army’s official video game, *America’s Army*, designed for recruitment, lets the player carpet bomb all of Beirut; *America’s Army*, video game, developed by the United States Army (United States Army, 2002).

<sup>14</sup>. Saber and Webber, “‘This is our *Call of Duty*,’” 79.

<sup>15</sup>. The “maps,” or the location of each game match, are diverse geographical locations, but are almost always devoid of people/civilians (i.e., the native populations). Two of *Counter Strike*’s maps represent an alternate present in which Tunis is overrun by French troops. These mostly American-made games are played in the Middle East, for instance at Saudi Arabia’s male-only gaming conference, Gamers’ Day; “Gamers Day [يوم اللاعبين],” supported by the General Entertainment Authority, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2017 (accessed 30 March 2018); *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*, video game, developed by Valve Corporation and Hidden Path Entertainment (Valve Corporation, 2012); *Tom Clancy’s Splinter Cell*, video game, developed by Ubi Soft Montreal (Ubi Soft Entertainment, 2002).

<sup>16</sup>. Saber and Webber, “‘This is our *Call of Duty*,’” 6; Mukherjee, *Videogames and Colonialism*, 47.



Middle Eastern periphery that developers such as Afkar Media have themselves undertaken.

### Case Study I: ISIS and Its Video Games

Islamist groups have long participated in the appropriation of the video game medium. For example, an American game *Quest for Saddam* (whose goal is to assassinate Saddam Hussein) was followed shortly by *Quest for Bush*, a release by an al-Qaeda affiliate.<sup>17</sup> ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham) also produced video games and game montages which participated in the offscreen struggle of the “War on Terror.”<sup>18</sup> A video mash-up called *Salil el-Sawarem* (“Clash of Blades”) was created from a modified version of the American title *Grand Theft Auto V*, an open-world game in which the player is allowed to wander the streets of “Los Santos,” California, committing random crimes, like shooting civilians and police officers.<sup>19</sup> The exact origins of the montage, due to the anonymous nature of both Internet content in general and ISIS’s illegal following, are unknown. Fittingly, ISIS, which modelled itself off of international crime groups, used this game montage to project a freelance, rugged look onto the organization.<sup>20</sup>

The montage from *Salil el-Sawarem* depicts bearded ISIS fighters blowing up trucks, shooting police officers, and committing

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<sup>17</sup>. *Quest for Bush*, video game, developed Global Islamic Media Front (Al-Qaeda, 2006); *Quest for Saddam*, video game, developed by Petrilla Entertainment (Petrilla Entertainment, 2003); Ahmed Al-Rawi, “Video games, terrorism, and ISIS’s Jihad 3.0,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2017): 2, doi 10.1080/09546553.2016.1207633; Adrienne Shaw, “Beyond Comparison: Reframing Analysis of Video Games Produced in the Middle East,” *Global Media Journal* 9, no.16 (2010): 2, <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/docview/325231491?accountid=14846>.

<sup>18</sup>. ISIS also has a playable game, a modified version of *ARMA 3* with a similar goal to *Salil el-Sawarem* and with similar global origins; Saber and Webber, ““This is our *Call of Duty*,”” 87; *ARMA 3*, video game, developed by Bohemia Interactive (Bohemia Interactive, 2013).

<sup>19</sup>. This game is not confirmed to actually be playable; Saber and Webber, ““This is our *Call of Duty*,”” 78; “*Salil el-Sawarem* [Clash of Swords],” video game montage, developer unknown, in “Watch: Islamic State’s Terror Video Game,” by Michelle Malka Grossman, *Jerusalem Post*, September 21, 2014. <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/IS-claims-it-created-a-terror-video-game-375935>.

<sup>20</sup>. Atwan, *Islamic State*, 19.

other acts of *ad hoc* violence.<sup>21</sup> The fact that the game is not fully playable and is modified is particularly interesting. The game appropriates American content, turning violence once seen as unthreatening by an American playership into a type of religious-inspired political violence that could actually evoke fear in the United States; a symbolic reversal of the American military's real-life monopoly on violence. Another ISIS game, a modified version of *ARMA 3*, allows the player to fight battles as ISIS or the Kurdish Peshmerga.<sup>22</sup> The organization also appropriated the popular first-person shooter series *Call of Duty* to swell its international support. For instance, one ISIS-made digital image sported a direct reference to *Call of Duty*: "THIS IS OUR CALL OF DUTY AND WE RESPAWN IN JANNAH [heaven]."<sup>23</sup> In sum, ISIS's global mission within the "War on Terror" was reflected in its surface appropriation of American games, a strategic posture necessary in the context of a multi-national terrorist initiative like the Islamic State.

Technology, and by extension video games, were essential to ISIS's existence and success in recruitment.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, the games themselves can be understood as symbols for ISIS's global business model: they were built by ISIS's international supporters. While this complicates the games' Middle Eastern credentials, they are still influencing and influenced by the territorial context of imperial conquest in Iraq and Syria.<sup>25</sup> ISIS, or "the Digital Caliphate" as Abdel Bari Atwan calls it, sprang from three local events: the power vacuum in Iraq

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<sup>21</sup> "Salil el-Sawarem [Clash of Swords]," video game montage, developer unknown, in "Watch: Islamic State's Terror Video Game," by Michelle Malka Grossman, *Jerusalem Post*, September 21, 2014. <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/IS-claims-it-created-a-terror-video-game-375935>.

<sup>22</sup> Saber and Webber, "'This is our *Call of Duty*,'" 83, 85; *ARMA 3*, video game, developed by Bohemia Interactive (Bohemia Interactive, 2013).

<sup>23</sup> "Respawn" is gaming jargon for reincarnate or rebirth, from "to spawn again." This is an interesting blend of English gamer language and an Islamic theological term (*jannah*, meaning heaven); Saber and Webber, "'This is our *Call of Duty*,'" 87, 88; Qur'an, 18:107, Arabic Word Study Tool, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=jan~aAtu&la=ar&can=jan~aatu0&prior=lahumo&d=Perseus:text:2002.02.0006:sura=18:verse=107&i=1> (accessed 1 April 2018).

<sup>24</sup> Atwan, *Islamic State*, 9.

<sup>25</sup> Saber and Webber, "'This is our *Call of Duty*,'" 85.

following Saddam Hussein's expulsion from power following the 2003 American invasion under George W. Bush; the resurgence of al-Qaeda's Iraq branch, led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and his successors; and the Syrian Civil War of 2011, into whose chaos the Islamic State in Iraq's "Caliph Ibrahim" could concentrate his ground forces.<sup>26</sup>

Internationally, ISIS sought the broadest audience possible, hence the use of English in its game montage and the foreign fighters in its ranks.<sup>27</sup> The global net was very much part of ISIS's media strategy. ISIS would hijack the Internet by employing what are called "flaming" tactics: drowning out their opponents with obscene, violent language and stopping debate, while pulling in spectators and widening their viewership.<sup>28</sup> This unwitting media coverage helped increase the audience of the group, which in turn swelled the number of international recruits (thirty-thousand-odd people, mostly from Middle Eastern and North African countries as of 2015) who contributed to ISIS's army in Iraq and Syria.<sup>29</sup> ISIS's video games emphasize visuals over playership. In contrast to Hezbollah's "home-grown" and fully playable games, which had a more specific audience, ISIS's modified games were part of a broader recruitment strategy that relied on aggressive violence to gain airtime around the world.<sup>30</sup>

## Case Study II: Syria's Afkar Media and Palestinian Games

*Under Siege* and *Under Ash* are two games created by the Damascus-based developer Afkar Media and released by the company Dar al-Fikr in 2001 and 2003, respectively.<sup>31</sup> The games have been played widely, especially in Palestine.<sup>32</sup> Both games are first-person shooters, but the killing of civilians, unlike American games and ISIS's

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<sup>26</sup>. Atwan, *Islamic State*, 37, 39, 40, 79, 91, 98.

<sup>27</sup>. Saber and Webber, "'This is our *Call of Duty*,'" 85.

<sup>28</sup>. Al-Rawi, "Video games, terrorism, and ISIS's Jihad 3.0," 4; Atwan, *Islamic State*, 18.

<sup>29</sup>. Atwan, *Islamic State*, 168.

<sup>30</sup>. Saber and Webber, "'This is our *Call of Duty*,'" 85.

<sup>31</sup>. Souri, "Pro-Arab Games," 538; Mukherjee, *Videogames and Postcolonialism*, 117; Rhonda Roumani, "Muslims craft their own video games," *Christian Science Monitor*, [http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/tech/gaming/2006-06-04-syrian-firm-games\\_x.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/tech/gaming/2006-06-04-syrian-firm-games_x.htm).

<sup>32</sup>. Souri, "Pro-Arab Games," 538.

games, is not encouraged.<sup>33</sup> *Under Siege* takes place in a fictitious continuation of the First Intifada (1987-1993) and is set in 1994.<sup>34</sup> The First Intifada broke out in 1987 after a road accident involving an IDF (Israel Defense Forces) vehicle in Gaza killed four Palestinians.<sup>35</sup> The game relocates the Intifada by depicting it as a reaction to the real-life massacre of twenty-nine Palestinians by extremist Israeli settler Baruch Goldstein in 1994, who appears in the first level's cut scene.<sup>36</sup> The Palestinian youth who fought against well-armed IDF soldiers are, in the game as in real life, armed with slingshots.<sup>37</sup> The games themselves were released during the Second Intifada (2000-2005), when Palestinians, for the second time since 1993, rose against the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory.<sup>38</sup> The sequel, *Under Ash*, is based on that Second Intifada.<sup>39</sup> The game's character, Ahmed, must reach the Al-Aqsa Mosque in old Jerusalem by dodging Israeli bullets.<sup>40</sup> The initial goal is to rescue wounded people from Al-Aqsa, where the player takes a rifle from an IDF soldier, only to push the soldier off of the Dome of the Rock compound, a recreation of the actual beginning of the Intifada.<sup>41</sup> Like many video games, both of these games recreate a history—or in the case of *Under Ash*, current events. What is extraordinary is not the content of the games, but the rapport that Palestinian kids who lived through these events have with these video games.

Syrian Afkar Media's Palestinian titles, *Under Ash* and *Under Siege*, are popular in the country they depict. They become a political

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<sup>33</sup>. Players lose points for attacking civilians. The game does allow the player to shoot Israeli settlers, however; Souri, "Pro-Arab Video Games," 539, 544; "Salil el-Sawarem," video game montage, in "Watch: Islamic State's Terror Video Game," by Grossman, *Jerusalem Post*, September 21, 2014.

<sup>34</sup>. Souri, "Pro-Arab Games," 538.

<sup>35</sup>. William L. Cleveland and Martin Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 5th ed. (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2013), 442.

<sup>36</sup>. A cut-scene is the part of a game which most resembles a movie. The player is made to watch a short clip which fills in the narrative background for the playable content about to come. In this case, animated scenes of the Palestinian Intifada greet the player before each round of the game; Souri, "Pro-Arab Games," 538.

<sup>37</sup>. Cleveland and Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 444.

<sup>38</sup>. *Ibid.*, 478, 479.

<sup>39</sup>. Souri, "Pro-Arab Games," 538.

<sup>40</sup>. *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup>. *Ibid.*

alternative to violence for children and adolescents, who represent a large, increasingly educated, urban, but under-employed demographic in the Middle East.<sup>42</sup> “I can be a resistance fighter even though in real life I don’t want to do that,” said an eight-year-old Arab interviewee commenting on the role of anti-imperial video games.<sup>43</sup> Far from provoking violence in youth, as many commentators in the United States worry, many Palestinian youth are told by their parents to stay inside and thus to choose video games *over* political violence.<sup>44</sup> Many present-day Palestinian parents are not concerned with the violence portrayed onscreen; their children are very familiar with real violence, from Israeli soldiers to bombs, and some parents are just happy that the current adolescent and pre-adolescent generation have an alternative to endangering themselves by attacking occupation forces, as their older siblings did during the Intifadas.<sup>45</sup> Since the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Palestine’s West Bank has been under Israeli military occupation and colonization, while the Gaza Strip has been under military blockade, entailing mutual cross-border attacks.<sup>46</sup> The youth of Palestine today, much like their seniors, have not known a world outside this occupation/blockade. Too young to have participated in the Second Intifada against Israeli occupation in 2000-2005, many young Palestinians feel powerless, with the diplomatic solution also often seen as a failure.<sup>47</sup> In addition to the age factor, public spaces like parks and playgrounds have been destroyed post-Second Intifada.<sup>48</sup> As Helga Tawil Souri puts it, playgrounds became battlegrounds.<sup>49</sup> Within this

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<sup>42</sup>. This describes young adults, too, including those who fought in the Palestinian Intifadas, but they are not dealt with here; Juan Cole, *The New Arabs* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 1, 3, 5, 13.

<sup>43</sup>. Ed Halter, “Islamogaming; the state of gaming in the Muslim world,” *PC Magazine* 25, no.23 (2006): 4, in Shaw, “Beyond Comparison: Reframing Analysis of Video Games Produced in the Middle East,” 4.

<sup>44</sup>. Souri, ‘Pro-Arab Video Games,’ 538, 546.

<sup>45</sup>. *Ibid.*, 542.

<sup>46</sup>. The Gaza Strip was also under occupation and settled until the 2005 withdrawal of the Israel Defense Force and the settlers; Shlaim, *Israel and Palestine*, 30, 32; Cleveland and Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 481.

<sup>47</sup>. Cleveland and Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 485.

<sup>48</sup>. Souri, “Pro-Arab Video Games,” 550.

<sup>49</sup>. *Ibid.*

environment, video games, too, make this transition from toys to weapons.

Both *Under Siege* and *Under Ash* appeal to the lived experience of Palestinian youth; both games deal explicitly with the recent history of Palestinian resistance.<sup>50</sup> In the Middle East, approximately 50,000 units of *Under Ash* were sold, plus 250,000 downloads (not counting numerous pirated copies).<sup>51</sup> While small by American standards, the immense difficulty of downloading fifty megabytes from the Internet via characteristically poor Palestinian digital infrastructure has led the games' developers to call it a "strong emotional message."<sup>52</sup> In brief, the impact that games depicting the Israel-Palestine conflict have when the player is reliving their own reality is testament to the importance of political, emotional, and geographical context in video game studies.

### Case Study III: Lebanon's Hezbollah and Its Games

Before directly discussing Hezbollah's video games *Special Force I* and *II*, it is important to frame the games' strategic and military context: Hezbollah's propaganda response to the major Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982.<sup>53</sup> Hezbollah, the only group to retain its weapons after the 1975-1989 Lebanese Civil War, was the primary resistance group to Israel's continued stay in Lebanon from 1982 to 2000.<sup>54</sup> The goal of Hezbollah's resistance was complete liberation of Lebanese territory, including southern Lebanon, which Israel had held since June

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<sup>50</sup>. Interestingly, it has been noted that games like *Special Force* have difficulty selling in countries like Egypt and Jordan, which are quite literally removed from the worst of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Clearly, the attractiveness of these games comes not from some collective Arab spirit or hatred of Israel, but from the hard reality of the conflict and its similarity to onscreen histories for Arabs youth directly experiencing violence; Shaw, "Beyond Comparison," 4.

<sup>51</sup>. Souri, "Pro-Arab Video Games," 538.

<sup>52</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>. The leader of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, is on record affirming this view. The group announced its official existence in 1985; Harb, *Channels of Resistance*, 80, 81; *Special Force*, video game, developed by the Central Internet Bureau of Hezbollah (Hezbollah, 2002); *Special Force II*, video game, developed by the Central Internet Bureau of Hezbollah (Hezbollah, 2007).

<sup>54</sup>. Cleveland and Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 383, 500; Harb, *Channels of Resistance*, 1, 219.

of 1982.<sup>55</sup> Hezbollah, despite being a Shi'i sectarian organization in a religiously diverse polity, enjoyed a measure of support from the Lebanese government and general public during the war against occupation.<sup>56</sup> Hezbollah pioneered the political use of modern technology during the wars with Israel from 1982 to 2000. For instance, journalists from Al Manar, Hezbollah's television agency, followed troops into battle against the IDF.<sup>57</sup> They used their footage, sometimes including Hebrew narration, to break myths of invincibility surrounding the IDF.<sup>58</sup> Israeli media was manipulated into broadcasting Hezbollah's clips. Al Manar directly targeted Israeli mothers, asking them, "Why let your son die in south Lebanon?"<sup>59</sup> The Israeli mothers of deployed soldiers were affected by these videos and the accompanying violent scenes that had until then been hidden from the Israeli public.<sup>60</sup> Hezbollah eventually forced Israel's withdrawal on May 25th, 2000, in large part due to its propaganda campaign, although this would not be the end of the conflict.<sup>61</sup>

Hezbollah's video games fit within this political and military strategy. Hezbollah's Central Internet Bureau released the first-person shooter game *Special Force* in 2003, years after the withdrawal of the IDF from southern Lebanon.<sup>62</sup> *Special Force* interprets Israeli-Hezbollah battles for control of southern Lebanon in the early 1980s.<sup>63</sup> The player has to navigate the same dangers as a Hezbollah fighter: IDF soldiers, local terrain, and explosives. The game also provides target practice by letting the player shoot at Ariel Sharon and other Israeli leaders.<sup>64</sup> The video game provides what are both gameplay instructions

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<sup>55</sup>. Harb, *Channels of Resistance*, 81, 114; Cleveland and Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 383.

<sup>56</sup>. Harb, *Channels of Resistance*, 90.

<sup>57</sup>. *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>58</sup>. *Ibid.*, 183, 186.

<sup>59</sup>. *Ibid.*, 218, 219.

<sup>60</sup>. The pro-withdrawal Israeli Four Mothers lobby group is a direct result of Hezbollah's terror tactics; Harb, *Channels of Resistance*, 218, 219.

<sup>61</sup>. Harb, *Channels of Resistance*, 219.

<sup>62</sup>. Other sources say the game was produced in 2002; *Special Force*, video game, developed by the Central Internet Bureau of Hezbollah (Hezbollah, 2002); Tawil Souri, "Pro-Arab Video Games," 539; Saber and Webber, "'This is our *Call of Duty*,'" 78.

<sup>63</sup>. Tawil Souri, "Pro-Arab Video Games," 539.

<sup>64</sup>. *Ibid.*

and guidance for real-life political activism: “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.”<sup>65</sup> *Special Force II* builds on similar themes, except it was released in 2007 following the destructive July 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel that it chronicles.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, the games are played not just in Lebanon, but wherever local conflict gives them meaning. Helga Tawil Sourì recounts being excitedly invited by a twelve-year-old Palestinian girl in the West Bank to play *Special Force*: “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 said.<sup>67</sup>

## Conclusions

Clearly, these games exist in (and help narrate) violent modern-day contexts as much as they represent a historical past. The use of video games in partisan conflicts raises questions about their purpose and authorial intent. Are these games primarily narratives, telling the player and the historian a story through onscreen events? Or are they tools of propaganda, meant to rouse action in the here-and-now? Despite Hezbollah’s denial that its games are propaganda, the group’s video games are as implicated in the politics of resistance as the Al Manar TV broadcasters. And although propaganda is at its most obvious with *Special Force I* and *II* (the products of a specific political party), all the games in this paper become propaganda in the right context. This is true despite each game reflecting different commitments to politics, morality, and truthfulness. In other words, to call all these games propaganda is not to paint ISIS, Hezbollah, and Afkar Media with the same moral brush, nor is this to assume each developer’s complicity in their games’ propagandistic nature. A political context (perhaps shared by the developer, but perhaps not) creates propaganda out of games. This is how Afkar Media, a Syrian company not interested in propagandizing, can make vivid propaganda tools for Palestinian political actors. Indeed,

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<sup>65</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>. *Special Force II*, video game, developed by the Central Internet Bureau of Hezbollah (Hezbollah, 2007); Saber and Webber, “This is our *Call of Duty*,” 86.

<sup>67</sup>. Sourì, “Pro-Arab Video Games,” 537.



a line from Afkar Media's *Under Ash* invites players to meditate on the ambiguity of cultural forms in political conflicts: "[Is this game] a real life story or a political propaganda [sic]? You have the right to decide."<sup>68</sup> This essay argues that one can choose both. Games can become propaganda when the imperatives of lived experience compel them, often leaving their authors and their original purposes behind. By placing video games into the political contexts of their players and their developers, this paper avoids analysing video games as forms of coded text exclusively based on their onscreen content. Instead, this essay follows Adrienne Shaw who focuses "on looking at games as forms of play and not as texts."<sup>69</sup> One must ask *who* plays a game, *where*, and *with what motivation*. Shaw puts it well: "Playing as a young Palestinian in the First Intifada in *Under Ash* may only relate to an actual story of rebellion via cut scenes and onscreen text, but that information is part of the game logic, part of the motivation for playing."<sup>70</sup> Even scholars who do contextualize onscreen historical references often adopt a very middle-class, Eurocentric view of modern players' contexts. For example, video game scholar Sun-ha Hong talks of "hyperreality" and players' desire for an escape back to a time when "life mattered" as motivators for gamers.<sup>71</sup> This ignores that for many people, Palestinian and Lebanese gamers included, life matters very much. Indeed, Helga Tawil Sourì argues that *Under Ash* and *Ander Siege*, the Palestinian games, are the most realistic ever invented due to their reimagining of the actual political lives of young Palestinians.<sup>72</sup> Scholars should problematize the North American archetypical suburbanite gamer, safely seated in front of their screen. Life under a military occupation is itself "hyperreal"—it requires no augmenting, no added excitement from video games. As an eleven-year-old boy from Gaza put it:

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<sup>68</sup>. Sourì, "Pro-Arab Video Games," 551.

<sup>69</sup>. Shaw, "Beyond Comparison," 7.

<sup>70</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>71</sup>. Sun-ha Hong, "When Life Mattered: The Politics of the Real in Video Games' Reappropriation of History, Myth, and Ritual," *Games and Culture* 10, no.1 (2015): 37, doi 10.1177/1555412014557542.

<sup>72</sup>. Sourì, "Pro-Arab Video Games," 546; A. Galloway also argues this; A. Galloway, "Social Realism in Gaming," *Game Studies* 4, no.1 (2004): <http://www.gamestudies.org/0401/galloway>, in "Digital Arabs: Representation in video games," by Vít Šisler, *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 11, no.2 (2008): 212, doi 10.1177/1367549407088333.

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.<sup>73</sup>

This Palestinian child is not looking to divert himself from reality, but to further engage with it.

In summary, video games are dependent on how their contents interact with the hopes, dreams, and political aspirations of those who play them. ISIS's *Call of Duty V* and *ARMA 3*, Afkar Media's *Under Ash* and *Under Siege*, and Hezbollah's *Special Force I* and *II* actively participate in the immediate histories of the conflicts they depict. Video games like these, far from being repositories of events, are animated by real-life military conflicts and, as such, are more realistic than they are escapist or "hyperreal." Whether a game attacks empire, seeks to establish one, or solemnly critiques imperialism, a video game becomes bogged down in the trenches, as it were, of whatever conflict its players find themselves in. ISIS's, Hezbollah's, and Afkar Media's games all act as propaganda in the sense that they participate in their players' politics, for better or for worse. This essay has concentrated on a small area of the Middle East (and with regards to ISIS, the Middle East-orientated cyberspace). The Arab-Israeli conflict and the "War of Terror" provide the context for a handful of Middle Eastern historical video games. Viewed in context, video games become more than their content and onscreen narratives written into lines of code. Reinterpreted, video games easily pass from the realm of representations and entertainment into the world of political technology, taking their rightful place next to the symbolism of the bomb-jacket, the Kalashnikov, and the slingshot. Video games create new meanings in these conflicts, trading Eurocentric, middle-class divertissement for political engagement.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup>. Sourì, "Pro-Arab Video Games," 540.

<sup>74</sup>. Many thanks go to Dr. Andrew Wender and to his teaching assistant for their encouragement with regard to publishing this essay and for their comments.

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