

Terror-panic made in Poland: Polish shooter games and the reproduction of American hegemonic patterns

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Abstract: This article investigates whether, and to what extent, contemporary Polish war-themed digital games reproduce and disseminate the image of the “Middle Eastern terrorist”. It examines the hitherto unexplored phenomenon of the ideologization of Polish video games and contributes to broader reflections on how the medium of digital games produces and replicates Orientalist patterns. The theoretical framework is grounded in the theory of political and cultural hegemony, which explores the (hidden) ideological and political dimensions of culture. Five guiding research questions structure the discussion, concerning: the framing of enemy characters; the spatial contexts of their origins; their motivations and allies; the representation of U.S. military actions and those of its allies; and the ways in which the ludic properties of the games relate to the research problem. The findings indicate that war-themed Polish military digital games set in contemporary history replicate and reinforce the political-cultural, colonial archetype of the “Middle Eastern terrorist”. In doing so, they function as effective tools for reproducing and intensifying Orientalist patterns that sustain the construction of a strongly ideological status quo, one perceived as “neutral” and “default”.

Keywords: game studies; digital games; war on terror; Polish shooter games; American hegemony.



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Introduction

The analysis focuses on shooter-type games set in the present day and produced by Polish game development studios, centred on contemporary military operations. A substantial proportion of these titles directly implement the theme of so-called Middle Eastern terrorism, which in many cases constitutes the central narrative core. Out of a corpus of 32 contemporary war-themed shooters developed by Polish studios, as many as 15 address this subject matter¹.

The events of 11 September 2001 influenced global geopolitics led by world empires and left a lasting impact on the everyday lives of ordinary people. This impact was particularly felt by individuals of Arabic and Persian ancestry living in the United States², as well as by civilian populations in South-West Asia (commonly referred to as the “Middle East”) after the invasion by a Western coalition led by America.

As a result of the US and its allies’ invasion and military interventions after 11 September 2001, more than 900,000 people were killed in the so-called Middle East region. The actual number of victims caused by the destruction of infrastructure exceeds 4.5 million people. These actions led to the displacement of over 37 million people. A detailed up-to-date report is published by the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University as part of the Costs of War project, which has been running since 2010. The project involves a panel of over 60 academics, legal experts, human rights activists, and doctors (Manzoor-Khan 42).

Western military actions did not arise in a cultural vacuum and were neither ignored nor discouraged by media coverage. On the contrary, they were strongly encouraged by both the mainstream media and popular cultural thinking. When leading a successful war, powerful military resources and an effective army are only part of the

¹ The list of Polish shooter games with depictions of “Middle Eastern terrorism” present (based on the game studios): City Interactive/CI Games: *Terrorist Takedown* (2004), *Terrorist Takedown: Payback* (2005), *Terrorist Takedown 2* (2007), *Terrorist Takedown 3* (2010), *Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2* (2013), *Sniper: Ghost Warrior Contracts 2* (2021); Silden: *Manhunter* (2012); Teyon: *Heavy Fire: Special Operations* (2010), *Heavy Fire: Afghanistan* (2011), *Heavy Fire: Shattered Spear* (2013); T7 Games: *The Mark* (2006); Detalion Games: *Codename: Nina - Global Terrorism Strike Force* (2002), *Nina Trilogy* (2002); Spectral Games: *Global Ops: Commando Libya* (2011); Destructive Creations: *IS Defense* (2016).

² The social groups that suffered the most were people of Arab and Persian descent, as well as Muslim men and women. According to data provided by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, hate crimes against Muslim men and women increased by 1,600% after the 11 September attacks. As Dr. Zogby recounted, the first threats of violence and acts of violence against people perceived to be Arab, Muslim, Sikh, and South Asian occurred within hours of the 9/11 attacks. The violence intensified for the next three weeks, eventually tapering off but never falling below the levels documented before 9/11. The Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) reported a 1,600% increase in anti-Muslim hate crime incidents in 2001 (U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division. *Confronting Discrimination in the Post-9/11 Era: Challenges and Opportunities Ten Years Later. A Report on the Civil Rights Division’s Post-9/11 Civil Rights Summit*. Apr. 2012, https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/crt/legacy/2012/04/16/post911summit_report_2012-04.pdf, 7). Accessed 20 Aug. 2025.

necessary toolkit. Ideological-political support was the key which guaranteed positive resonance in society during the military activities themselves. The emergence of the desired political circumstances facilitated a level of moral acceptance for politicians and even enabled the government to achieve strong approval for the invasion bordering on unquestionable support. Hence, at the beginning of the 21st century, specific patterns, archetypes and figures became firmly established in video games (and not only there). The most common of these tropes – Orientalism, racism, and xenophobia, fuelled by both media and culture (Manzoor-Khan 216–217, 239–242)—found expression in the stereotypical figure of the “Middle Eastern terrorist”. This trope was replicated by Polish video games despite Poland having no historical contact with the phenomenon of “Middle Eastern terrorism”.

In the discourse of Game Studies, there are numerous examples of research into the role of video game participation in the “war on terror”, and their reproduction of content targeting populations native to regions attacked by the USA and its allies, as well as people of Arab descent worldwide (see Ouellette and Thompson 5-22; Payne 95-115; Riegler 1-5). However, researchers have primarily focussed on well-known Western franchises such as *Call of Duty*, *Battlefield* or *Medal of Honor*. No studies have yet examined Polish video games through the lens of political-cultural hegemony. This perspective introduces a novel contribution to Game Studies, as it embraces previously overlooked Polish titles. Although the ideological critique of military video games has been developed in recent years (see Filiciak 17-22; Olszewski 167-180; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 197-232), neither international nor Polish research has thoroughly engaged with the ideological deconstruction of Polish productions. This approach, emphasizing the sociological, political, and ideological constructs embedded in Polish shooter games set in the present day, thus represents a distinctive and innovative direction in the global discourse.

The concept of political-cultural hegemony

Works of culture, video games included, function as carriers of ideology and content which can influence perceptions of reality and formulation of judgments – they are a means of shaping beliefs and opinions.

In other words, cultural works exert a disproportionate influence over what people think and what ideas are acceptable in capitalist societies, and it can do this for a fairly straightforward reason. Because, just as it controls the means of (commodity) production, it also controls the ‘means of mental production’: entertainment and cultural industries, the news media and so on. (Umney 155)

In her book *Tangled in Terror: Uprooting Islamophobia*, Suhaimah Manzoor-Khan notes the enormous role of media and culture in the “war on terror”. It is no secret that the US Department of Defense has an Entertainment Media Office that openly declares its support for movie production. Studios can use resources, infrastructure and expert consultations, saving Hollywood millions of dollars. There is only one catch – producers must allow the Department of Defense to interfere with the script. This is how thousands of movies are produced. The image of the American military as the heroic

guardians of democracy and Muslims as primitive extremists is not accidental – these are carefully directed narratives overseen by American governmental agencies. We are neither surprised by these depictions nor do we question them. They confirm what we have seen many times before: in the news, in newspapers or on social media (Manzoorkhan 239-40).

With few exceptions, such as the *America's Army* series, American government institutions are not directly involved in the production of video games. This is probably because, according to politicians, video games are neither as efficient nor effective as cinema as a means of propaganda. Films have been used to influence public opinion since World War II, through the Cold War, and up to present times. This does not change the fact that video games as a medium are not only no less ideological than their older sister, cinema, but also able to achieve higher levels of effectiveness in promoting specific political-ideologies thanks to their immersive properties, (which are not found in films). Direct interference by political entities in the creation of cultural texts (in this case, video games) is not obligatory for their representation to be an effective vehicle for specific ideological values. This situation is underpinned by the phenomenon of political-cultural hegemony, examined here in the American context.

The contemporary understanding of hegemony is rooted in Marxist tradition with the political-cultural aspect being particularly elaborated upon by Antonio Gramsci. Unlike Marx and Engels, who concentrated on the economic aspects of domination, Gramsci pointed to the fundamental role of culture and ideology. According to him, the ruling class maintains their position, presenting their own world view as obvious and natural (Wróblewski 296-8). As an effect, social acceptance for the existing order is achieved without the need to resort to coercive measures (Morawski 107-08).

Gramsci links the concept of hegemony with the concept of an integral state which encompasses both political and civil institutions (Fusaro, Xidias, and Fabry 12). Perpetuation of privileged class domination is not restricted only to repressive apparatus such as the police or court but also by institutions of civil society – including the Church, family and education facilities. The integral state reflects the ability of the ruling class to control the collective life in political, cultural and ideological dimensions. This may be exemplified by the school system which apart from transferring knowledge contributes to the reproduction of class divisions and shaping attitudes aligned with values of dominant groups which begin to be perceived as natural, obvious, apolitical and “within reason” (Fusaro, Xidias, and Fabry 11-2).

A good example of this can be found in the game *SimCity*, the mechanics of which reflect a neo-liberal foundation, e.g. unlimited economic growth as the main goal, the marginalisation of social affairs and a view of homelessness as a problem of aesthetics rather than as a social matter³.

³ Several factors make *SimCity* a particularly relevant example. Firstly, *SimCity* belongs to a widely recognised series of video games. Secondly, it is the newest addition to the series. Thirdly, due to a lack of violence, bad language or sexual content, it received a PG grading which contributed to a large group of recipients. Fourthly, the game is not associated with politics or perceived as a “political game” in public discourse. Finally, it functions as a medium which conveys a complex ideological load in such a subtle way as to not be detected by either players or

Louis Althusser described this mechanism in his concept of Ideological State Apparatus (Althusser 8-11). In his view, social subordination is first and foremost mediated by institutions considered to be neutral – such as school, religion, family, media or culture – which recreate the existing norms and value systems. As a result, hegemony persists without the need of state-sponsored violence as the individuals themselves, often unaware, contribute to its reproduction. Some of the authors functioning within these apparatuses propagate the defined ideology on purpose, but for many individuals, hegemonic messaging acts on the subconscious level – and this obscurity dictates its effectiveness⁴.

The potential reproduction of figures and patterns of “Middle Eastern terrorism”, originating from the American political agenda and appearing in games created by Polish developers, provides a valuable exemplification of this issue. It would appear that there is no reason for Polish game design studios to conform to a topic which applies mostly to the United States and their political-military action⁵. The above may be said also about the ideological messages embedded in the produced games. Most likely, in most cases the creators of these games are unaware of the ideological impact and immense political load carried and conveyed by these productions. Nevertheless, political-cultural hegemony is highly successful in this domain and this field – in situations of unconscious reproduction and consolidation of specific political-cultural circumstances, which over time become treated as unquestionably natural and default. These are the characteristics that contribute both to the effectiveness of hegemony as well as its goal in and of itself.

media within the industry.

⁴ The thesis is compatible with the theory of organic intellectualists, authored by Antonio Gramsci. According to Italian Marxist, content creating hegemony and contra-hegemony are produced on a daily basis both by the ordinary citizens supporting the hegemony in non-intentional ways, as well as by the constructors designing masterful hegemonic properties with specific belief and specified intentions. The described case is most probably the first case, in which the specific messages are reproduced and replicated almost by sheer momentum and the individuals behind them are unaware of the non-trivial political aspects and considerable ideological content that they produce. (Śpiewak 80-1; Wróblewski 180-90).

⁵ There may be two potential reasons for this phenomenon that are not directly related to the influence of American political-cultural hegemony. However, neither of them provides a sufficient explanation for it, as discussed below. The first one could be the fact that the studios developing the investigated games are focused on selling their products overseas, but in this case, this explanation is insufficient, as most of the productions are low-budget games and their main market is Poland. The second one is the fact that Poland, as a NATO member state, participated in the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, as a result of which Polish society systematically absorbed messages directly related to military intervention in the “Middle East” and (due to participation of Polish troops in military operations) emotionally felt its own involvement in the war, e.g. through reports of the deaths of Polish soldiers. However, this answer is also insufficient, because out of the 15 games analysed, only one (!) allows the player to take on the role of the Polish military (*Terrorist Takedown 2*), and only in the version sold in the Polish market; in the international version, the game depicts the actions of American troops.

Methodology

To address the problem under discussion, a set of five research questions was formulated to guide the examination of the portrayal of the “Middle Eastern terrorist” in Polish military shooters set in the present day. The primary objective of these questions is to deconstruct the ideological substratum embedded in fifteen titles, closely connected to the thematic scope of the analysis. The answers provide the basis for conclusions that illuminate the central research problem. The analytical framework draws on Entman’s concept of framing (51–58), focusing on two fields of representation in the selected games: the construction of the opponent and the portrayal of the “forces of good” controlled by the player—always Americans or their close allies. Each of the fifteen games reproduces this dichotomy. Such an approach allows for the effective deconstruction of the ideology connected with the archetype of the “Middle Eastern threat” while simultaneously dissecting the representation of the heroic forces assigned to neutralize it. This dual perspective is essential for a critical analysis of political properties directly associated with a universalized model of “threat”. The research questions are as follows:

1. How are the enemies within the games depicted

The first research question is mainly based on two elements: visual depictions of the enemy and elements of the narrative directly connected with presenting the hostile characters within the studied games. An essential analytical component that emphasizes key features distinguished by their exceptional persuasive and propagandistic efficacy. The fact that video games are a predominantly ocularcentric medium contributes to their indoctrinating potential. Dissemination of specific archetypes are visually decoded and memorised by the players.

2. How are the environments in which the enemy is situated portrayed within the games

Similarly to the previous question, two areas of interest within the realm of game environments relate to visual representation and complementary narrative. However, in this instance, the interest is focused on locations connected with the created threat, or enemy. It is an area of utmost importance for the analysis.

3. How are the motivations and actions of the opponents and their allies presented

This is the last research question directly interested in depictions of the enemy – its primary aim is in-depth exploration of narrative strategies describing actions, intentions, messages and goals behind the hostile activity. This is the layer concerned with the dramaturgical aspect of the game – primarily the actions of “Arab terrorists”. Together with visual assets and locations of plot points, it constitutes a persuasive triad, the direct aim of which is to convince the recipient as effectively as possible about the ominous plans of the adversary.

4. How are the motivations and actions of the United States and their allies depicted

In efficient propaganda activities, it is not sufficient to place the opponent in an appropriate spectrum of morality. Equally important is placing the protagonist, hero and

other benevolent forces within this paradigm. Consequently, this research question serves as an addition which completes the exploration of the non-ludic elements of the game.

5. How do the ludic properties of the studied games relate to the research problem

This question binds the previous issues together to build a complete picture of the analysis. Ludic properties are an integral element of video games, and introduce a component specific only to the medium of digital games to sit alongside the audiovisual messaging. As per the theory of procedural rhetoric proposed by Ian Bogost, the ludic element concentrates on the deconstruction of ideological messages disseminated not by verbal, written or visual narrative, but by the gameplay and mechanics (Bogost 125-136).

Discussion

Based on the established research framework and guiding questions, the analysis examined fifteen games that met the defined criteria. The comparison of the results is presented below, following the order of the research questions.

1. How are the enemies within the games depicted

Analysis of all 15 games depicting contemporary military conflicts reveals an exceptionally high degree of unification across the visual-narrative portrayals of the opponent. In all works included, the image of “Middle Eastern terrorist” is designed based on the set of conventional, Orientalist attributes, perpetuated in Western cultural messages (Karim 55-72; Nacos and Torres-Reyna 39-54; Rane, Ewart, and Martinkus 32-34). Opponents are nearly always depicted as dark-skinned men, with long-beards, wearing turbans, headscarves (including keffiyehs), sandals or long robes. Most commonly they are heavy with ammunition and armed with assault rifles, presented in a conspicuous manner. In numerous games, this is also accompanied by characteristic behaviour – screaming, quarrels, weapon waving – highlighting their alleged savagery and lack of military discipline. Enemy-led dialogues in English are spoken with a heavy accent, sometimes additionally ridiculed (e.g. in *Terrorist Takedown 3* American soldiers mock the captured terrorist for being able to say only three words in English). Some works also include the addition of religious tropes, such as calling the name of Allah during the fight (*Terrorist Takedown 2*, *IS Defense*). This directly references Western biases and beliefs, and portrays bloodthirsty terrorists running into battle with culturally known, Islam-derived slogans, in a form of parody.

In addition to the audiovisual layer, the location of the enemy in context is also important. Games by City Interactive introduce elements such as the fictional book *Terrorist Portrait*, the cover of which presents an individual covering their face with a headscarf – clearly reinforcing stereotypical associations. In the *Heavy Fire* series, the opponents are depicted as “savage”, attacking in waves with no actual strategy. In the case of *IS Defense*, they very often run towards certain, suicidal death, laden with exposed explosives, shouting and waving their arms without any clear plan of action. Unlike individuals represented by the protagonists, there is no strategy behind their actions other than a blind lust for blood and killing. In *Global Ops: Commando Libya*, creators go as far as to name the main antagonist “Raz Ruhan” (which carries a

suggestion of vulgar wordplay in Polish). This is in line with the general trend in games – openly parodical, racist, paternalistic and chauvinistic in their approach to depictions of Arab characters. The parodistic dimension reaches its apex in the closing credits of the first installment of the *Terrorist Takedown* series, where the creators inserted images of their own faces into authentic photographs of “Arab terrorists” drawn from Western media coverage.

Although there are cases that deviate from this presentation – e.g. in *Sniper Ghost Warrior 2*, an Arabic weapon trader from a tropical island is introduced – the predominant form of representation of any Arabic, Persian or Muslim character is as a “terrorist”, a “ruthless killer” (*Terrorist Takedown*, *Terrorist Takedown: Payback*), “cruel fanatic” (*Terrorist Takedown: Payback*) or “relentless enemy” (*Heavy Fire: Shattered Spear*). Such designs efficiently perpetuate simplified, racist and xenophobic archetypes, where the enemy is all at once primitive, “exotic”, irrational and dangerous. Their strangeness is emphasised through the combined efforts of visual, linguistic and behavioural codes, easily recognisable to the viewer socialised within the constructed reality of the US-led “war on terror”.

2. How are the environments in which the enemy is situated portrayed within the games

Analysis of locations depicted in the examined works reveals equally high numbers of stereotypes as in the case of creation and depiction of the enemies. The locations associated with “Middle Eastern terrorist” are in most cases depicted as chaotic, devastated and primitive – full of ruined houses, rusty hangars, collapsed shop signs, make-shift stalls and mosques. Palm trees, wastelands and sandy streets are almost obligatory elements of the scenery, with only the bleating of invisible goats and – present in all 15 games – Oriental-style music, orchestrating the immediate placement of the player in an exotic, foreign space as background sounds⁶.

In almost the whole set of titles analysed (with one exception) civilians are not present in the sites of action – this applies to both villages and cities. The lack of visible civilian life implies that the whole population conforms to the figure of “terrorist”, dehumanising the representation all the more. *Terrorist Takedown 2* is such an exception, as the civilians do appear, but killing them causes no reaction from the game, which suggests that the moral charge of this action is low or non-existent.

In visual layer the games utilised a repetitive set of codes: Oriental markets with carpets, spices and fruits, monumental “Arabian palaces”, gates stylised into crossed sabres, straw-covered houses, and bullet marks on the walls. The trope of caves and tunnels in Afghanistan appears as if by obligation, and in *Manhunter*, a mission within these tunnels is titled “Down the rabbit hole”. Locations in these games are often described in pejorative or negative and derogatory tones: such as “third-world hell hole” in *Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2* or “stinking place” in *Global Ops: Commando Libya*.

⁶ In order to create an “oriental” atmosphere, audiovisual works of culture such as movies and video games commonly implement specific soundtracks designed to evoke a sense of strangeness, otherness or irrationality. These are usually linked to specific locations or characters which, according to the creators' expectations, are to be perceived as “oriental” (Head 211-230).

Geographic precision is limited or replaced with fictional names functioning as “safe alternatives” to real life countries⁷. One such example is “Kuamar” in *Sniper: Ghost Warrior Contracts 2* – a fictional country of the “Middle East”, clearly resembling Syria. Such an approach allows the creators to maintain all the stereotypical properties of the region while simultaneously avoiding the political risk of unequivocally pointing in the direction of a real country.

While there exists some scarce exceptions to this convention among the included titles, such as the industrial depiction of Iran in *Heavy Fire: Shattered Spear* which resembles Western cities, the dominant pattern is an Orientalising, simplified and homogeneous vision of “Middle Eastern” spaces as a uniform territory of chaos, poverty and non-stop war. As a result, the presented topography does not function as a real-life projection but as an ideology-burdened landscape inhabited by the enemy – easily recognised by the recipient and immediately evoking a sense of threat.

3. How are the motivations and actions of the opponents and their allies presented

In titles under analysis the motivations attributed to “Middle Eastern terrorists” are extremely simplified and based on the schemes present in Western culture since the dawn of the “war on terror” (Rane, Ewart, and Martinkus 29-47). The dominant trope is the desire to obtain or use a weapon of mass destruction — either biological, chemical or nuclear. To exemplify: in *Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2* the main antagonist is described as a “fundamentalist, fanatic who plans to disperse the bio-agent in the disputed region and start a war,” while in *Terrorist Takedown 3* enemies plan to use deadly chemicals. In *Manhunter*, the plot revolves around the Iranian processing of radioactive material, and in *Heavy Fire: Shattered Spear* the storyline is driven by the alleged production of an atomic bomb by Iran – which leads to a preventive American invasion of the country⁸. In *The Mark*, terrorists in Iraq plan to attack London using WMD (*Weapons of Mass Destruction*)⁹, while in *Codename: Nina - Global Terrorism Strike Force* and *Nina*

⁷ Such measures have been used more frequently in recent years rather than, for instance, in the first decade of the 21st century. Within the corpus of texts examined, this type of measure was used in the newest game and the only one produced in the 2020s – *Sniper: Ghost Warrior Contracts 2* from 2021. It is an isolated case (as most of the games represent the first two decades of the current century), while in other games, specific locations and direct political connotations were directly recommended by the producers at the time. However, over time, certain measures have become riskier in terms of PR, which is why setting a relatively high-budget game in a fictional country in the “Middle East” will attract more potential investors than setting the game directly in a specific “Middle Eastern” country, where political conditions are much more unpredictable, and, generally speaking, capital does not like unpredictability. See, for example, the situation with *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Wildlands* (Hall, “Bolivia formally complains to French embassy about Ghost Recon: Wildlands”).

⁸ The game anticipated these events not only historically but also in terms of the political rhetoric used before and during the actual American attacks on Iran.

⁹ The statement produced exclusively by the administration of the US that Iraq was in possession of weapons of mass destruction – despite it being fully fabricated by the US government – still plays a major role in discourse concerning video games, which reproduce a political-cultural agenda aligned with US administration (Bonn 1-16).

Trilogy the goal of the mission is to “face hordes of fanatics” and destroy a “small factory somewhere in the Far East manufacturing some biological junk” or secret laboratory, hidden in Afghan tunnels.

The second reoccurring trope is global threat. In *IS Defense*, the Islamic State dominates the whole of North Africa, spreading a “genocidal understanding of the world’s order” and invading Europe. In *Global Ops: Commando Libya*, a Russian weapon trader extracts the nuclear bomb left behind during the Cold War and sells it to Arabic terrorists. The motif of cooperation between “Middle Eastern terrorists” and Russia appears in 7 out of 15 studied games, which is embedded into hegemonic narratives of the US, merging these two subjects in one axis of evil¹⁰.

The analysis revealed that none of the games situates terrorism within realistic, complex political and social conditions. The opponents are not depicted as reacting to any particular conflicts, interventions or injustices, but as inherently terrorist beings – terrorism is a goal in and of itself, without any genesis, motivation or context. It is accompanied by the use of the term “terrorist” also while referring to actions not fulfilling the definition of terrorism, e.g. classic military attacks (*IS Defense*). This type of conjuncture resonates with the media and cultural discourses of recent decades, which, through specific forms of representation, have redefined the notion of terrorism, detaching it from its original meaning – political struggle – and reframing it as irrational killing associated with a particular race and religion¹¹. This has given rise to a completely

¹⁰ For the “War on Terror”, the then US President introduced the propaganda term “Axis of Evil”, which included countries that, according to the United States, posed a terrorist threat. States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic. We will work closely with our coalition to deny terrorists and their state sponsors the materials, technology, and expertise to make and deliver weapons of mass destruction. We will develop and deploy effective missile defenses to protect America and our allies from sudden attack. And all nations should know: America will do what is necessary to ensure our nation's security. [...] Our war on terror is well begun, but it is only begun. This campaign may not be finished on our watch – yet it must be and it will be waged on our watch (“President Delivers State of the Union Address”, *White House Office of the Press Secretary*, 29 Jan. 2002, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/print/20020129-11.html>). Accessed 11 Aug. 2025.

¹¹ According to M. P. Kumar, alongside the events of 11 September 2001, the world entered an era of “new Orientalism”. According to the researcher, (old) Orientalism was mainly characterised by the superiority of the West over the inferiority of the East, which was intended to legitimise European colonialism towards the colonised parts of the world. After decolonisation in the 20th century and the revival of Islam in Muslim countries, a new Orientalism emerged, interpreted in the spirit of a “clash of civilisations”, where religion and culture became the basis for international alliances and conflicts. New Orientalism permanently links the concept of terrorism with the figure of the “Other”, while rejecting the designation of individuals from within (white, indigenous Europeans or Americans) who commit acts of terrorism as terrorists. Kumar draws attention to the case of Anders Breivik, a white Norwegian Christian who murdered 78 people on the Norwegian

new category of “Muslim terrorist”, intensively replicated in the discourse of (Polish) video games.

The actions of opponents are ancillary to their schemes of brutality, irrationality and greed. The enemies kidnap hostages, murder with no reason, set fire to oil rigs, and involve themselves in drugs and weapons trades. They are often depicted as disorganised and inexperienced (“untrained militia with outdated firearms” – *Heavy Fire: Shattered Spear*), while the ones in command happen to be ridiculously incompetent (in *Terrorist Takedown 2*, they leave a map marked with the location of the hostages behind). The only local characters depicted in a positive light are the informants collaborating with Western forces.

The narrative design seen in these games strengthens the Orientalistic image of the “Middle Eastern enemy” as irrational fanatic – whose motivations are exclusively limited to categories of violence and destruction – deprived of any political subjectivity. Such representation is useful to propaganda because it reduces the complex conflicts at play to a morally unambiguous clash of the “civilised” West with an “exotic”, irrational threat which has to be prevented using any means available (Norris, Kern, and Just 3-23).

4. How are the motivations and actions of the United States and their allies depicted

In all of the investigated productions, the actions of U.S. forces or their allies (in 12 out of 15 cases the player controls an American character) are depicted in an unequivocally positive manner—morally justified and necessary—thus reinforcing the hegemonic narrative of interventionism as a “civilizing mission” (Hunt 125-170). Military actions are described as “bringing back the balance in the region” (*Heavy Fire: Special Operations*), “stabilising the situation” and “annihilating the forces hostile to US and their allies” (*Heavy Fire: Afghanistan*) or even as a “defence of world peace” (*The Mark*). In *Terrorist Takedown 2* it is stated that “there is no peace unless you fight for it”¹² and *Terrorist Takedown: Payback* simply declares “it’s time for payback”.

It is not uncommon that authentic names of historical operations are used like

island of Utoya in a terrorist attack in 2011. The researcher accurately analyses and compares media reports covering the situation immediately after it occurred (when the perpetrator was not yet known to the public) and a year later, when everyone knew the identity of the murderer and his origins. In this context, Kumar points out that in the first situation – immediately after the attack – the media called the perpetrator a terrorist, hastily writing about a “Muslim terrorist” (even though the perpetrator’s identity was not yet known), whereas when it became known that the killer was a white Norwegian Christian, the media changed their communication from “terrorist” to terms such as “maverick”, “nutball” or “crazy loner”. According to the researcher, new Orientalism has redefined the concept of terrorism from its old meaning and connotations – a form of political resistance in the form of unlawful, brutal violence – to a new meaning, still unlawful, brutal violence, but this time also irrational, with no specific reason behind it other than the Islamic connotations propagated by Western culture and media (Kumar 233-40).

¹² This quotation corresponds with the famous words of the 33rd President of the United States, Harry Truman: “Peace must be built upon power, as well as upon good will and good deeds” (Leffler 18).

“Operation Enduring Freedom”¹³ – used in *Heavy Fire: Shattered Spear* to describe an in-game military invasion of Iran which occurred years prior to America’s actual attack on this country. In *Sniper: Ghost Warrior Contracts 2*, missions are justified by the need to “invite the country into the 21st century”, which clearly refers to the logic of Western chauvinist paternalism (Mamdani 7-10). In the background, typical elements of US foreign politics appear as well: overthrowing the governments, installing their very own candidates in “free elections”, and “off the books” operations, followed by confronting the new government, earlier eagerly endorsed by the United States (Barkawi 107-28).

Military action depicted in games is characterised by extreme violence and thoughtless binaries: targets are marked as enemies to “kill till no one remains” (*Terrorist Takedown 3*) or “purge the area from the last of the terrorist troops” (*Terrorist Takedown: Payback*) and the players regularly receive “permission to eliminate the target”, which the protagonists accept with joy (*Global Ops: Commando Libya*). Euphemisms such as “Street Sweep” or “Final Sweep” (mission names in the *Heavy Fire* series) obscure the complete extermination of the enemy, thereby contributing to the trivialisation of killing. The games offer no reflection on the consequences of the use of violence; for example, in *Heavy Fire: Afghanistan*, the destruction of a large dam prompts no moral consideration, as in the deliberate detonation of a nuclear charge in *Global Ops: Commando Libya*.

In rhetoric layer soldiers and agents of the US are depicted as heroes defending the global *status quo*. The creators of *IS Defense* declare openly that the game is their “personal veto” to the events in the “Middle East” and an attempt “to heroically defend” Europe from an “Arabic invasion”¹⁴. Numerous titles highlight the uniqueness and irreplaceability of white, elite troops (*Sniper Ghost Warrior 2*: “we are the only ones who can”). The image of the premises and practices of US actions, constructed in this manner, leaves no room for alternative interpretations: American intervention appears as the sole effective means against an irrational, uncivilized enemy, while its methods—regardless of

¹³ “Operation Enduring Freedom” is the official name of the invasion of Afghanistan by US-led NATO forces, which began in October 2001 (“Operation Enduring Freedom: One Year Accomplishments”).

¹⁴ The game developers – studio Destructive Creations – officially announced that their game was created as a response to the politics of open borders – temporarily initiated in 2015 by Western EU – and the deepening destabilisation of Western Asia, resulting in an increase in immigration to Europe from countries in that region. Up to now, the game remains popular for this very reason. The reviews section on its Steam page contains both older and newer user comments about the game. Below are some examples, with the original spelling and punctuation preserved: “Nice stuff to wind down to. Juicy carnage, dead Arab terrorist scum from left to right”; “Nice and simple game. Surprise, quite well made. Not very long, so you get bored quickly, but at least you can shoot the immigrants.”; “Yeaaaaah... Every true Pole’s dream ;) MMG and... We shoot sand nig... I mean, terrorists;”); “I shot a man screaming ‘allahu akbar’ and he exploded. Most realistic depiction of ISIS ever. 10/10”; “The best European Migrant Crisis simulator currently on the market. 10/10.”; “10/10, would welcome refugees again.”; “I highly recommend Angela Merkel to try out this game, maybe she will learn something!”; “Half-assed and repetitive game. I recommend it only because we eliminate terrorists from ISIS and nobody really likes these guys and they are fun to kill :D”; “Average European dream game: I mean, we shoot from machine gun to terrorists who come to Europe on rafts.”

the scale of destruction or casualties—remain (at the very least) beyond the realm of moral accountability or are framed as acts of noble endeavour. This, in turn, further amplifies the effect produced by the specific orientation of the hegemonic portrayal of the carefully constructed “Middle Eastern threat”.

5. How do the ludic properties of the studied games relate to the research problem

The analysis of gameplay mechanics and gameplay formula in the examined titles corroborates Ian Bogost’s theory of procedural rhetoric—digital games, alongside their narrative and visual layers, are capable of conveying specific ideological content through the very procedures and rules of play. Across all fifteen titles, narrative progression — and, consequently, the completion of successive missions culminating in the completion of entire games — is contingent upon the systematic elimination of opponents. No alternative path of gameplay is available that would enable the player to achieve the goal without resorting to killing. In multiple cases this applies to enemies who were subdued or who surrendered – one example being *Sniper: Ghost Warrior Contracts 2*, where even after obtaining the information by interrogating an enemy, the protagonist immediately kills them, despite the earlier promise of sparing their life.

A key ludic element is the strong gamification of violence and killing. In the *Heavy Fire* series, killing the enemies is rewarded through a point-based system of military advance – the player sees their name on the game screen, alongside a points counter and an assigned rank, which increases with the number of “terrorists” killed and points earned. Each of the games incorporates global ranking boards (the so-called Hall of Fame), where the more efficiently and spectacularly the enemies are eliminated, and the surroundings destroyed, the higher the player’s position becomes. Similar mechanics, although in local form, are present in the first two parts of the *Terrorist Takedown* series. Additionally, a system of trophies and achievements (e.g. in the *Heavy Fire* series) also award the number of kills and the creativity of the killing, and these awards are often given names which glorify the military achievements¹⁵.

In a portion of titles, the game mechanics explicitly endorse killing. In *IS Defense* one of the unlocked skills is regeneration of health after each kill and new maps are accessed only after a certain number of eliminated enemies is reached. In *Terrorist Takedown 2* it is possible to kill unarmed civilians with no reaction from the game or any plot consequences, which further reinforces the normalization of violence against the depicted groups.

Violence is not only an obligatory means to an end but also the object of fetishisation. Weapons are presented as precious artefacts – in *Terrorist Takedown 2*, the protagonist even strokes his rifle with admiration – and heavy equipment (cannons, grenade launchers, heavy machine guns, etc.) are exhibited as the symbol of military domination and technological and civilisational superiority over the invaded local population, which is another dimension of hegemonic, chauvinist-imperial rhetoric (Stahl 28). Additionally, the disappearance of the bodies of slain enemies (a feature common to

¹⁵ The examples of achievements appearing on the screen during the gameplay are: “Uncle Sam would be proud!”, “Perfect killing machine!” or “Smasher”.

the vast majority of the analyzed games) removes the consequences of players' actions from view, contrasting with the meticulous attention to the realistic depiction of equipment and the battlefield¹⁶.

The ludic properties described here enhance the message in the game narrative: a Western (most commonly American) soldier is able to self-handedly defeat hundreds of opponents, which constructs the image of his absolute qualitative advantage over the enemy¹⁷. As an effect, the gameplay does not only reflect but also actively internalises in the consciousness of the player the hegemonic paradigm of the "war on terror" – depicting extermination as natural, non-questionable and a reward-worthy element of a civilised mission.

Conclusion

The analysis of Polish military shooter games that refer to the so-called Middle East and include the character of an Arab or Muslim terrorist reveals that these games reproduce and propagate the image of the "Middle Eastern terrorist" in alignment with the foreign policy of the United States. The study was guided by five key research questions designed to deconstruct the ideological properties connected with the figure of the "Middle Eastern enemy" appearing in the analysed titles. Each question was directly or indirectly related to the topic, and all games were subjected to a multi-dimensional analysis. This approach ensured clarity of findings and enabled well-founded conclusions addressing the core research problem.

In games under analysis, the opponent is always depicted in an unambiguous way: as a "Muslim terrorist" deprived of complexity, political or social motivations, reduced to

¹⁶ This is a side effect of technological limitations rather than an intentional measure, though this does not alter the former interpretation of the situation. In turn, the technological limitation in rendering a large number of dead enemies in the game world only confirms their enormous number (depending on the game, counted in hundreds, thousands or even higher numbers).

¹⁷ This coincides with the thesis proposed by Edward Said in 1997, when he drew attention to a media trend that began in the 1980s (and intensified after the end of Cold War) in movies and tv shows, which consisted of portraying Muslims as easy targets for highly trained Western (mainly American) soldiers. Said wrote: "All this, as I said earlier, marks a serious deterioration in the situation I described in the original edition of *Covering Islam*, published a decade and a half ago. There is now, for example, a new wave of large-scale feature films (one of them, *True Lies*, Karabell reminds us, 'had as its villains classic Arab terrorists, complete with glinty eyes and a passionate desire to kill Americans') whose main purpose is to first demonize and dehumanize Muslims in order, second, to show an intrepid Western, usually American, hero killing them off. *Delta Force* (1985) began the trend, but it was carried forward in the *Indiana Jones* saga, and innumerable television serials in which Muslims are uniformly represented as evil, violent, and, above all, eminently killable. One of the changes from an old habit of exoticising the Orient in Hollywood films is that romance and charm have now been completely eliminated, as they have also been in the ninja films that pit a white (or even black) American against endless number of black-masked Orientals, all of whom get their just deserts" (Said XXVI-XXVII).

a stereotypical picture of fanatical “savage”. The locations tied to the enemy are unified, degraded “Middle Eastern” wastelands, without the presence of civilians, which reinforces the notion that such areas framed as dangerous are inhabited exclusively by “terrorists”. This is in line with American hegemonic patterns of Orientalism according to which the “Middle East” is reduced to a space of constant threat, and its inhabitants to potential terrorists.

Motivations of the antagonists are limited to eagerness to obtain weapons of mass destruction or to finalise their apocalyptic plans. They contrast with the portrayal of the actions of the United States and their allies as the defenders of freedom, stability and the global order. Military practices depicted in the games are deprived of any moral dilemma: to exterminate the opponent is an obvious goal which is prized and glorified. Such a perspective further degrades and devalues the moral worth and meaning of life of the enemy, already dehumanized at the stage of their very creation. The ludic layer of the games additionally amplifies this message – to progress in the game is possible only by killing, which in turn serves as a basic mechanism of gameplay and as a fetish for military aesthetics itself.

As a result, war-themed Polish military shooter games set in contemporary history not only replicate but even perpetuate the political-cultural archetype of “Arabic terrorist” as the primordial enemy of the so-called civilised West in global discourse. The absence of attempts to nuance or challenge this figure – and, on the contrary, its maximal intensification—renders the analyzed games not so much a commentary on real-world conflicts as an instrument of reproducing an orientalist schema, in which “terrorism” and “Muslimness” merge into a single cultural amalgam constituting an inseparable category.

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