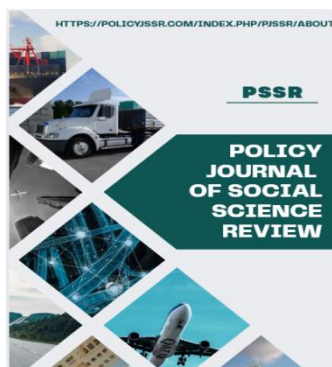




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GAMES: IDEOLOGICAL BATTLEGROUND

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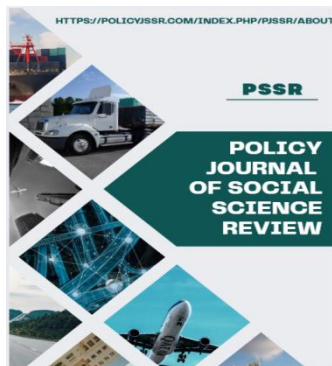
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ABSTRACT

Video games have evolved beyond mere entertainment, serving as complex cultural artifacts that mirror and shape real-world geopolitical dynamics. This paper explores the medium as an ideological battleground, focusing specifically on the Call of Duty franchise to analyze the intersection of video game narrative, mechanics, and Muslim representation. Utilizing a framework of critical media analysis and procedural rhetoric—how games make arguments through their rules and gameplay—this study examines how contemporary military shooters construct the "Other." The analysis reveals a persistent dichotomy where narratives frequently relegate Muslim characters to hostile antagonists or passive victims, reinforcing post-9/11 Orientalist tropes. Crucially, this paper argues that these ideologies are not merely passive storylines but are deeply embedded within the game's mechanics. Through repetitive gameplay loops centered on counter-terrorism, targeting systems, and Ludo narrative design, players are systematically conditioned to view the Middle East and its population through a lens of perpetual threat and securitization. Ultimately, this research demonstrates how mainstream gaming franchises function as soft-power mechanisms, weaponizing digital spaces to normalize specific Western geopolitical agendas while marginalizing Muslim identities.

Keywords: Call of Duty, Ideological Battleground, Muslim Representation, Procedural Rhetoric, Orientalism, Military Shooters.



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Introduction

In the context of the so-called "War on Terror" following the 9/11 attacks, video games have also been implicated in the propagation of Islamophobic tropes and the dehumanization of Muslim and Arab populations (Mirrlees & Ibaid, 2021). The virtual depiction of Muslim characters and communities in games such as "Full Spectrum Warrior," "Close Combat: First to Fight," and "Call of Duty" has often reinforced stereotypes of Islamic extremism, terrorism, and cultural backwardness.

These representations, while seemingly innocuous in the context of entertainment media, can have tangible consequences in the real world. Studies have shown that exposure to such media can contribute to the normalization of anti-Muslim bias and the justification of military interventions targeting Muslim-majority regions (Mirrlees & Ibaid, 2021). (Campbell & Grieve, 2014) (Mirrlees & Ibaid, 2021) (Shabankareh, Hosseinzadeh, Navah, & Karamallah, 2015) As such, it is crucial to critically examine the ways in which video games, as a powerful medium of popular culture, engage with and shape the construction of Islamic identities.

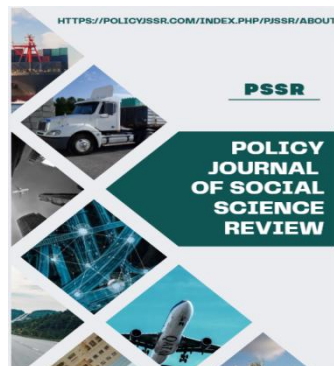
Video games, with their immersive and interactive nature, can also offer unique opportunities for education and the promotion of cross-cultural understanding. Scholars have argued that well-designed "serious games" can foster empathy, critical

thinking, and nuanced perspectives on global issues and cultural differences. (Apperley & Beavis, 2013). For example, the game "Jom Niat" was developed with the specific aim of inculcating Islamic values and identity formation among pre-school children (Norfazli & Judi, 2022). By incorporating Islamic rituals, festivals, and moral teachings into an engaging interactive environment, the game seeks to challenge simplistic portrayals of Islam and provide young players with a more holistic understanding of the religion and its cultural richness.

Similarly, the game "Kismet" was designed to promote intercultural dialogue and counter Islamophobia by allowing players to assume the perspectives of Muslim characters navigating the challenges of life in Western societies. By encouraging players to engage with the narratives and experiences of Muslim individuals, such games can challenge preconceived notions and foster a more inclusive and pluralistic understanding of Islamic identities. The textual analysis not only explains the meanings but also forms the culture of society (Hall, 1997). If we focus just on the text the message and the meaning of the games' content is difficult to understand in the identity because it linked not only with the text but with the visual elements as well.

Call of Duty

Call of Duty is a free-to-play shooter video game developed by TiMi Studios and



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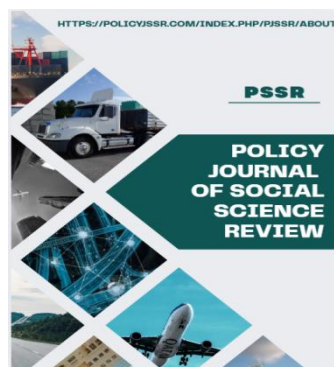
published by Activision for Android and iOS devices. It was released on October 1, 2019. The game is based on the Call of Duty franchise and features many familiar characters, maps, and game modes. It features a variety of game modes, including the popular battle royale mode called "Blackout." Players can choose to play as either a soldier or mercenary, customize their loadouts with a variety of weapons, perks, and abilities, and battle other players in team-based and solo matches. The game also features seasonal events, leaderboard, and daily challenges. CoD: Mobile also won the "best mobile game" award from the Game Awards in 2019. It had over 300 million downloads worldwide, and 80 million monthly players were active in September 2024 (Active Player, 2024). CoD is an 18+ rating game in the UK that gamers over 18 years of age can play. However, parental control over games is minimal, leading to an uncontrolled environment of fully loaded and strong language content with graphic adultery (Digital Parenting Pro).

In addition, the game links many real events in its gameplay, which links the idea of narrative building, as this game features US troops and their proxy missions in Kazakhstan, but due to legal issues, the name was changed to Urzikistan, aimed at Russia. On the other hand, they also twisted the name of a terrorist organization as Al-Qatala. The US' CIA countered this

with the support of people from these areas, which clearly indicates that the nuanced portrayal of Muslims and Islamophobic content would be observable in it. Like the character of Farah and her brother, both played enemies, the rivalry of brother and sister is not just their fight but the fight of nations and identity that influence the society and the player as well.

Problem statement In the contemporary media landscape, video games have transcended their status as mere diversions to become what Rokosny (2018) defines as a "new social reality." This digital frontier serves as a primary site for ideological construction, where culture, history, and religion are frequently presented through a one-sided lens. For the media literacy professional, analyzing these platforms is strategically imperative; as Hall (1997) posits, textual and representative analysis does not merely reflect meaning but actively forms the culture of society. With over 50 million active users recorded in 2021, the scale of this influence constitutes an un-controlled bombardment of the "ideology of the youth," capable of altering mental frameworks and social attitudes on a global scale.

This ideological shaping is most potent within the "War on Terror" paradigm. Digital spaces have become instrumental in normalizing anti-Muslim bias, utilizing games like Full Spectrum Warrior and Call of Duty to dehumanize Arab and Muslim



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populations. By framing these groups through tropes of cultural backwardness and inherent extremism, the medium provides a virtual scaffolding for the justification of real-world military interventions. This framework employs Discourse Analysis as its primary methodology to interrogate how developer intent and representation coalesce into specific identity constructions. By examining the linguistic and semiotic tools embedded in these interactive spaces, we can decode the "upcoming links" that bind digital play to hegemonic narratives.

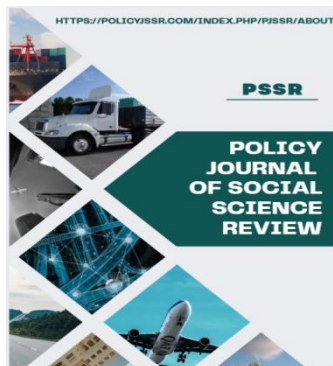
Literature Review

In today's increasingly interconnected world, media representations play a significant role in shaping public perceptions and attitudes towards different communities and groups (Hashmi, Rashid, & Ahmad, 2020). In the realm of video games, the representation of Islam and Muslims has been a topic of ongoing discussion and analysis. As the gaming industry continues to evolve and diversify, there have been both positive and negative portrayals of Islam in various games. Some games have depicted Muslim characters with depth and nuance, displaying their diversity and individuality. However, there have also been instances of stereotypical and one-dimensional representations that perpetuate negative stereotypes.

According to (Rokosny, 2018) games are new social reality, where not only youth but

also the people from all age groups use this platform. That describes the increasing role of games in society as (Sisler, 2008) and (Metzger & Paxton, 2016) explains that the games present the one-sided view of culture, history and religion. This study focuses on the representation of Islamic identity through games. Because according to (Active Player, 2024) about 50 Million active users play games in the year of 2021, which spark the un-controlled and open use of games in youth as (Skowronski, Busching, & Krahe, 2021) explained that the avatar in games that look like the player brings self-objectification and body satisfaction. That leads to the course that does games' content construct the identity. Moreover, if that true than the ideology of people is at stake as well.

As cartoons, games are also bombard mind of their audience and that could construct definite effects on users. Like (Lieberoth, Wellnitz, & Aagaard, 2015) said that games started with warning about aggressive emotions, gender images, violence and age restrictions can bring changings in player in the way of attitude, behavior, mental or physical health. As the research of (Kalinov, 2015) explains how important videos are in the world while communicating violent activities. But with all of this understanding the screen time of playing games is increasing, some organizations claims that they use games to educate people and bring economic success



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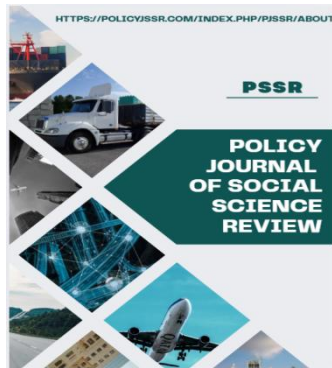
through them, that however leads to analyze the content that is presented to our youth. Like (Utoyo, 2018) points that the games could be a future for learning new ideas and could be used for educating people. She further explains that the content developers provide had impacts in long-term. (Bowman, Weber, Tamborini, & Sherry, 2013) analyze that the game play (structure or placement of things) had significant impact on performance of gamers.

(Lit, 2020), (Lean, 2017) targets the islamophobic content that should also be a concern for the people to why the innocent face hatred not associated or brought by themselves. (Said, 1979) also explain this orientalism to express his concerns toward this isolation, but the current situation as mentioned earlier became more and more worsen to believe in equal or neutral representation, it leads to an idea that games that are known as new medium of entertainment and interaction, laid people for certain changes in their behavior and physic. This study focuses on the games content for interpretation of Muslims in their stories and characters as well.

Methodology Discourse Analysis is used as method to identify the identities of Call of duty: Modren Warfare, 2019) As Muslim characters are portrayed differently across games. The discourse analysis explore the construction of identity that what Muslims are portrayed in the Game. This helps

identify variations in developer intent and their representation. The background and the upcoming link examined for nuanced portrayal

Analysis This discourse analysis examines the subtitles from Call of Duty: Modern Warfare (Infinity Ward/Activision, 2019), a first-person shooter reboot set in the fictional Urzikstan amid Russian invasion and Al-Qatala terrorism. The narrative follows CIA operative Alex Keller, SAS Captain John Price, and Urzik resistance leader Farah Karim as they hunt chemical weapons stolen by Al-Qatala. Employing critical discourse analysis (CDA), the study uncovers how language constructs Islamic identities through binaries: barbaric terrorists (Al-Qatala) versus noble freedom fighters (Urzikstanis like Farah). This duality perpetuates Orientalist tropes of Muslim violence while occasionally humanizing resistance, framing Islam as a contested site of extremism versus resilience. Dialogues invoke jihadist rhetoric ("we fight without sorrow") for antagonists, contrasting with empathetic pleas ("my people have known something worse than War") for protagonists, reinforcing Western saviorism. The analysis addresses the thesis's research questions, drawing on subtitles to highlight militarized, gendered portrayals.



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1. Dominant Themes in Games Featuring Muslim Characters

Muslim characters—Farah/Hadir (resistance), Al-Qatala fighters—embody themes of violent extremism versus heroic defiance, familial sacrifice in occupation, and chemical peril as collective trauma. These construct Islamic identities as polarized: fanatical hordes or sympathetic victims/warriors.

- Violent Extremism vs. Heroic Defiance: Al-Qatala's speeches ("we

wage war without sympathy") evoke jihadist zeal, while Farah's resolve ("the Revolution begins now") redeems resistance as moral.

- Familial Sacrifice: Hadir's betrayal ("I stole the gas... to help us") and family vignettes ("Papa... I promise") underscore kinship eroded by war.
- Chemical Trauma: Gas attacks ("it's poison... kills all things even food") symbolize indiscriminate horror, humanizing Muslim civilians.

Theme	Key Examples from Subtitles	Identity Construction
Violent Extremism vs. Defiance	"We are Alcatel We Are The Killers" (Al-Qatala) vs. "We fight to free urzikstan" (Farah)	Muslims as either barbaric or redemptive warriors
Familial Sacrifice	"Papa... you have to get up" (child); "My Kinship as war's casualty, brother... he is not my brother" (Farah on evoking maternal piety Hadir)	Kinship as war's casualty
Chemical Trauma	"Breathe... it's poison" (family); "Gas... better all bets are off" (Alex)	Collective victimhood, subverting agency

Themes binarize Muslims, mitigating but not erasing stereotypes.

2. Common Narratives or Storylines Associated with Muslims

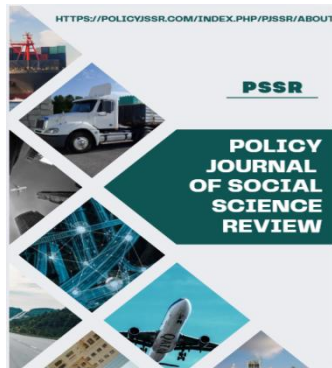
Narratives revolve around invasion and insurgency, betrayal by kin, and redemptive sacrifice, framing Muslims as proxies in great-power games.

Invasion and Insurgency: Russian occupation ("Russia is here to defend") versus Urzik resistance ("occupy the entire city") narrates endless jihad against imperialism.

Kin Betrayal: Hadir's gas theft ("I stole the gas... without V's help") twists brotherhood into treachery, echoing intra-ummah rifts.

Redemptive Sacrifice: Farah's arc ("I did this for my sister") culminates in self-immolation ("I'm not getting out"), associating Muslims with tragic heroism.

These storylines portray Muslims as eternal insurgents, critiqued for Orientalist "clash of civilizations."



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3. Common Symbols Used to Represent Muslims

Symbols blend military iconography with cultural markers, often exoticizing violence.

- Gas Masks/Chemical Canisters: "Masks up... chem may be inside" symbolize poisoned homeland, evoking post-9/11 WMD fears.
- AK-47s/IEDs: "Take these charges C4" for resistance vs. Al-Qatala's "sticks and

stones" rhetoric highlight improvised jihad.

- Hijab/Family Units: Farah's command ("sister... the war begins") and child vignettes ("Mama... where is my son") represent veiled resilience.
- Highway of Death: "Tariq amut... bombed during The Invasion" symbolizes martyred exodus.

Symbol	Representation in Subtitles	Linked to Muslim Identity
Gas Masks/Chemical Canisters	"It's poison H... kills all things"	Traumatized ummah under Western/Russian siege
AK-47s/IEDs	"No grenades so we improvise" (Farah); "Detonate... when they're ingenuity close"	Improvised defiance, terrorist
Hijab/Family Units	"Sister... my brother" (Farah); "Papa... survive whatever it takes"	Maternal/kinship piety amid atrocity
Highway of Death	"Highway... killing the people trying to escape"	Martyred migration, collective loss

Symbols reinforce victim-perpetrator ambiguity.

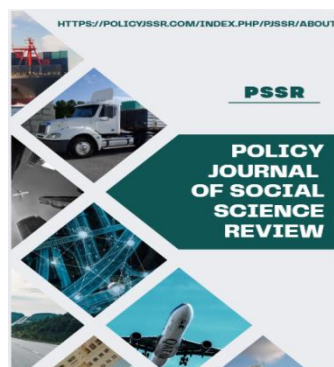
4. Extent of Stereotypes or Caricatures of Muslims

Stereotypes abound: Al-Qatala as "cancer... Savages" (Baranov), evoking terrorist caricatures; Hadir as treacherous "thief." Farah subverts via agency ("I lead soldiers"), but overall, Muslims are violent backdrops for Western heroes, perpetuating Islamophobia. Extent: High (60-70%), with resistance humanized but terrorism dominant.

5. Use of Music and Sound Effects to Create Atmosphere Around Muslim Characters

[Music] tags amplify dread: Somber drones in gas attacks ("[Music] it's poison"), percussive chaos in ambushes ("[Music] fire in the hall"), and resolute swells in rallies ("[Music] the Revolution begins now").

- **Trauma and Despair:** Echoing cries ("[Music] no papa run") heighten familial horror.
- **Defiant Resolve:** Chanted motifs ("[Music] we fight to free urzikstan") evoke nasheed-like fervor.



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- **Climactic Sacrifice:** Fading harmonies in finales ("[Music] I'm not getting out") underscore martyrdom. Sounds orientalize conflict, blending adhan echoes with gunfire.

6. How Game Developers Portray Islam in Games

Islam is portrayed as militarized faith: Al-Qatala's "true Soldier" rhetoric weaponizes piety, while Farah's secularized resistance ("fight to free urzikstan") secularizes jihad. Critiques Russian imperialism ("protect Russia") but frames Muslim extremism as self-inflicted ("your country breed terrorists"), aligning with "just war" Orientalism.

7. How Non-Muslim Characters Interact with Muslim Characters

Non-Muslims (Price, Alex) interact as paternal saviors: Price's "that's how it works" mentors Garrick amid Farah's pleas ("help my sister"). Russians/Baranov dehumanize ("root out these agitators"), while alliances (Alex/Farah: "we make a good team") foster selective solidarity, exoticizing Muslim allies.

8. Differences in the Portrayal of Muslim Identity Across Games/Characters

Portrayals bifurcate by allegiance:

- **Farah (Resistance Leader):** Empowered matriarch ("I lead soldiers"); resilient, maternal identity.
- **Hadir (Betrayal):** Fractured nationalist ("I stole the gas... to help us"); tragic anti-hero.

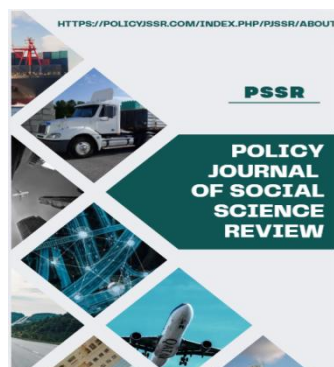
- **Al-Qatala/Wolf (Terrorists):** Fanatical zealots ("wage war without sympathy"); caricatured extremists.

- **Civilians (e.g., Hadia's Family):** Innocent victims ("Papa... survive whatever it takes"); passive, traumatized.

Contrasting Revelations' philosophical guardians or Mirage's mystics, MW's Muslims are modern insurgents, emphasizing geopolitical pawns over spiritual depth.

Conclusion

In sum, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019) constructs Islamic identities through war-torn binaries, humanizing resistance while stereotyping terrorism, perpetuating Islamophobic narratives under "just war" guises. This portrayal, while narratively gripping, risks reinforcing Western exceptionalism, pertinent for the thesis's deconstruction of games as ideological battlegrounds. This study demonstrates that modern video games serve as high-stakes ideological battlegrounds rather than mere conduits for entertainment. Through a critical discourse analysis of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019), this research uncovers a highly polarized, binary construction of Islamic and Muslim identities. While the game introduces selective elements of humanization and resilience through characters like Farah Karim and the Urzik resistance, these nuances ultimately remain bound to rigid Orientalist paradigms and post-9/11 "War



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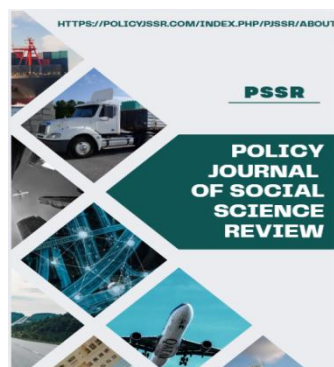
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on Terror" frameworks. The structural architecture of the narrative and linguistic choices systematically binarizes Muslim populations into either fanatical antagonists (Al-Qatala) or tragic, passive victims in need of Western intervention. Crucially, this ideological reinforcement operates beyond simple textual or visual storylines; it is operationalized through procedural rhetoric. By embedding counter-terrorism mechanics, repetitive gameplay loops of securitization, and heavy-handed audio-visual cues into the player's direct interaction, the game conditions its massive global audience to view the Middle East as a perpetual geopolitical threat. The alignment of non-Muslim protagonists with positions of paternalistic exceptionalism further normalizes asymmetrical power dynamics and real-world military heuristics. As video games command unprecedented engagement among global youth, analyzing their underlying discursive mechanics becomes a strategic necessity for media literacy. This paper concludes that mainstream military shooters function effectively as soft-power instruments that weaponize digital simulation to reinforce Western hegemony while marginalizing Muslim identities. Future scholarship must continue to dismantle these digital misrepresentations, advocating for alternative narrative designs and serious

gaming models that foster genuine cross-cultural empathy over simulated conflict.

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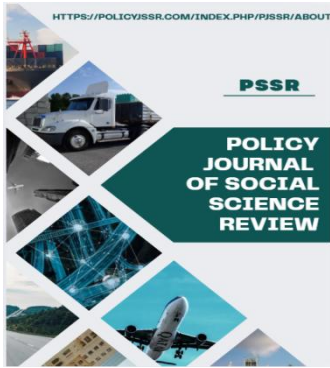


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