# Weapons of Mass Recruitment:

# The Socializing Function of Video Games in the Context of Radicalization

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## Abstract

Do video games belong solely to the entertainment industry or can they have a broader scientific value? The growing popularity of gaming artifacts has encouraged researchers to take a closer look at the societal functions of games and their ability to create representations about the world. The purpose of the current research is to examine the potential connection between video games and terrorism by determining how these games participate in processes of recruitment and radicalization. The main function of video games is that of socialization, or the formation of online communities of players, while socialization in itself is a key factor for radicalization. In order to strengthen this relationship, the study focuses on two modifications of mainstream games and one gaming trailer. The decision to engage with gaming mods is based on the alternative perspective offered by these mods and a possibility to experience the game as the enemy side.

Video games exist to provoke effects and feelings and through specific symbols and rhetoric change opinions and perceptions. Players choosing to interact with gaming artifacts which allow them to act as a terrorist and glorify the actions of such organizations may be more vulnerable to radicalization. Therefore, this paper relies on an auto ethnographic research method in order to determine the effects produced by the chosen gaming mods and reveal how video games contribute to the process of radicalization.

# 1. Introduction

Can video games function as terrorist recruitment tools in the wider context of radicalization? A positive response to this question requires an understanding of video games which goes beyond the entertainment industry sphere. Gaming artifacts perform a number of important functions, which has made them valuable to terrorist organizations. Several popular mainstream video games such as Call of Duty and the Grand Theft Auto series have been 'modded' by such groups for the purpose of terrorist recruitment. Video game modifications, or mods, represent alterations to the gaming content which can range from changes in the structure of the virtual world to the creation of alternative story lines (Scacchi, 2010). Such video game interventions challenge perceptions about enemy and hero and through specific rhetoric and symbolism gather support for the terrorist organization's cause (Saber & Webber, 2016, p. 78).

In recent years video games have become a topic of conversation and research due to an increasing concern with youth violence and the release of ever more aggressive and realistic video games. Many scholars have attempted to demonstrate the existence of a positive correlation between outward aggressive behavior and violent video games but none have been able to provide conclusive proof as their main arguments are based on assumptions about individual behavioral characteristics which cannot be applied to a broader spectrum (Ferguson, 2011, p. 389).

Nevertheless as carriers of textual and visual meanings, gaming artifacts can create opinions and change perspectives. Most mainstream video games have a Western bias in terms of storylines and main avatars, while the in-game enemies usually come from the Middle East which exemplifies the long standing opposition between East and West. In most cases players are only allowed to experience the game through the eyes of the heroic American or European soldiers (Sisler, 2008, p. 208). This restricts the perspective of players to that of the main character and "structurally confines them to experiencing the games from the point of view of western military forces" regardless of their own interpretation (Schulzke, 2013, p. 592).This lack of a clear-cut terrorist point of view in mainstream video games explains the desire of some players to engage with gaming modifications in search for an alternative gaming experience.

Hence, the role of video games as social and cultural artifacts should not be neglected as it can provide an innovative way of looking at another much contested notion, namely radicalization. Previous research has analyzed the various functions of video games but has not

explicitly discussed those in relation to radicalization, recruitment strategies and propaganda. By placing radicalization and video games in the same spectrum of analysis, it is possible to receive a better understanding of the concept which is of great value when addressing strategies of counter-radicalization. As Schulzke contends, the intensely interactive nature of video games presupposes that players are able to experience subjectively their avatar's actions or decisions, which can be particularly useful in understanding and subsequently fighting terrorism (2013, p.211). This paper therefore attempts to answer the following research question: what role do video games play in the process of radicalization? The main argument put forward is that through their function as socializing artifacts, video games can have an impact on the process of radicalization. The following section presents the literature debate on the societal role of video games and on radicalization theories. On the basis of these arguments, the third section outlines the theoretical framework and main claims of the research. The fourth section contains empirical analysis of terrorist video game mods in order to substantiate the central argument, followed by an application of the theoretical framework.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Functions of video games

The aim of this paper is demonstrate the relationship between video games and radicalization. It is therefore necessary to discuss games beyond their entertainment value by focusing on their functions and the potential roles they perform for terrorist organizations. The ability of video games to transcend the virtual and enter the real world has sparked a debate among scholars in the fields of political science, history and sociology which has contributed to the emergence of broad literature examining the diverse functions of these virtual artifacts.

One of the most prevalent and well developed arguments in relation to the purpose of video games revolves around the relationship between the gaming industry and the military. Scholars advancing this argument examine the ways in which war games can shape opinions about the military, known as a process of militarization. In his discussion on war games Power contends that the desire to create realistic games which mirror real conflicts is deliberate as it contributes to the glorification of the military effort and simultaneously offers a "sanitized" version of war for popular consumption (Power, 2007, p. 274). Building on this, Robinson claims that video games contribute to the acceptance and internalization of military values in society.

The author maintains that through the so-called military entertainment complex, or the mutually beneficial cooperation between the military and entertainment industries, war games enter the daily routine of players and offer them an authentic and positive war experience (Robinson, 2016, p. 262). In that sense video games are able to alter perspectives about international conflicts and make military service seem desirable and exciting. Therefore, video games can be considered as tools for propaganda and recruitment and although most authors analyze these functions through a military oriented perspective, the possibility of terrorist organizations utilizing these artifacts to attract new recruits should not be neglected. As argued by Al-Rawi, terrorist groups make use of games as a way to publicize the group's activities and gather supporters. The author focuses on the ways in which video games created by Al-Qaeda directly address issues of terrorism, specifically the War on Terror, by offering players the possibility to become a terrorist and virtually participate in violent attacks against the West (2016, p. 2). Hence by banalizing war and blurring the line between citizen and soldier, video games can serve as propaganda and recruitment instruments and can be used by both sides in a conflict.

In opposition to this, some scholars focus on the more practical applications of video games. Buckley and Anderson argue that games can serve for training purposes and explain how the US army makes use of  so called serious games as training tools for combat, driving and commanding troops through simulations which consists of realistic environments, weapon effects and teamwork learning (Buckley & Anderson, 2006, p. 364).  Proponents of military training games argue that these can be particularly useful to young soldiers who are more strongly connected to the gaming culture. However, Orvis et al contend that there is little empirical evidence to support the usefulness of games for practical training (2010, p. 151). Furthermore, video games can participate in education as innovative methods of instruction which could assist student in processing information more easily. Metzger and Paxton discuss games in the context of history teaching and refer to the process of 'gamification' or the adaptation of historical elements and contexts to make the game playable and teach about the past (2016, p. 541).

Contrary to the  practical application of virtual artifacts, some scholars focus on their persuading power through an emphasis on ideas and cultural portrayals in game-play. Unlike traditional media, video games offer an interactive experience rather than than passive observation, also known as simulation. In relation to this, Penix-Tadsen discusses how games simulate particular cultural discourses which have a stronger impact on players because of the

added aspect of interaction. Hence, there are differences in how individual players engage with and interpret cultural stereotypes and attitudes, which means that games "have the capacity not only for bolstering negative and simplistic cultural depictions" but also for allowing players to create alternative and reversed spaces. (Penix-Tadsen, 2013, p. 178). In a similar vein, Payne contends that video games create "possibility spaces" through which players can experience the cultural meanings underlying the game's story line. However, focusing on American war games, the author points out that these possibility spaces are limited and constrained by the game's rules, meaning that the cultural and historic symbols depicted in the game are determined by whoever holds the dominant position (Payne, 2016, p. 12). This persuasive function of video games is crucial for terrorist organizations. As most terror groups lack material capabilities, they make use of symbols and ideas to undermine their opponents and advance their cause. Video game interventions provide terrorists with the ability to reconstruct events, demonize opponents, display military strength and justify acts of violence, thus engaging in 'ideological warfare' (Schulzke, 2014, p. 632). The lack of freedom and agency in some mainstream video games can be offset when players engage with their modified versions, which offers an alternative view of reality and a possibility to challenge certain harmful representations.

Lastly, some scholars argue that the key function of video games relates to (re)construction and signaling of identities, culminating in the emergence of a virtual community. Munoz and El-Hani examine the role of games as identity builders through the concept of othering which relates to the process of generating others in the construction of one's own identity. Players with similar backgrounds and moral values form an ethical environment within their gaming community and introduce rules which determine who can become a member of the group (Munoz & El-Hani, 2012, p. 929). The authors analyze several American video games portraying real-life conflict and discuss how the construction of the enemy 'other' as a symbol of dishonesty and violence justifies the identity and actions of the US as guardian of peace, justice and Western values (ibid, p.927). However, such representation ultimately lead to the construction of diverse communities depending on their interpretation of the game's symbols and rhetoric. By this logic, terrorist organizations can use video games to both shift perspectives and legitimize their own actions, and reach players in search for an alternative gaming narrative (Saber & Webber, 2016, p. 86). The building of groups and identitties is fundamental for terrorist organizations, which is why the framing possibilities offered by video games are so vital.

The current discussion has focused exclusively on the diverse functions of video games and although these artifacts can certainly be used as a training and teaching tools, their main function is one of socialization. The notions of recruitment, virtual communities and identity building can be grouped together under the broader spectrum of socialization. However, in order to establish a clear connection between video games and radicalization, it is necessary to present the theoretical debate surrounding this process.

## 2.2. Theories on radicalization

Although challenging to conceptualize, radicalization is largely recognized as a change of beliefs and attitudes towards the acceptance and legitimation of violent behavior (Ducol, 2015, p.91). The conceptual ambiguity surrounding radicalization has not prevented scholars from developing theories which could explain the shift to extremism and potentially prevent the process from occurring. One framework which has been applied to radicalization is Social Movement Theory (SMT). Proponents of this method of analysis argue that it is particularly useful when examining the 'mobilization potential' of terror groups. Since social movements are defined as a set of beliefs and views which aim to challenge certain societal structures, a connection is made with radicalization in terms of the rationale to participate and the acceptance of common values (Borum, 2011, p. 17).

An opposing view, emphasizing the individual level of analysis is coined by scholars in sociology and psychology. They disregard the collective movement aspect and focus on the cognitive transformation of ideologies and convictions, known as conversion theory (ibid, p.22). However, as argued by Kundnani, individual psychological and theological factors, lacking a social and political component, are unable to provide a complete theory on radicalization; they are rather a "comfortable" alternative (Kundnani, 2012, p. 6). Hence, radicalization cannot be examined only as an individual process since outside influences and socio-economic environments play a significant role.

Departing from cognitive theoretical assumptions, Alimi et al. present a comprehensive discussion on the dynamics of radicalization. They argue that individuals do not engage in political violence solely on the basis of their participation in an organization but that they are constantly affected by socio-political characteristics and personal bonds which guide their choices. The authors focus on relational theories and posit that the shift to violence occurs

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through interactions with different "relational, social and environmental mechanisms" thus looking at the relationship between social and family ties and cultural perspectives. (Alimi, Demetriou, & Bosi, 2015, p. 27). Building on these arguments, Horgan analyzes radicalization through the prism of socialization. The author discusses the importance of existing socialization processes, or what he terms as "openness to socialization" with radical groups or individuals, which influences extreme behavior (2008, p. 85). Similarly Schmid claims that radicalization should be studied as a process of socialization during which an individual accepts "political ideas and views which in their extremist form can lead to the legitimization of political violence" (2013, p. 18). Hence radicalization is examined as a process of socialization away from majority, status-quo opinions towards more extremist and radical positions.

As this discussion has demonstrated, relational and socializing perspectives are crucial determinants of radicalization. Likewise, as emphasized in this section, the main function of video games is one of socialization. Therefore, a strong connection between video games and radicalization exists which has not been researched until now and which is ultimately the main task of this paper. The next section takes into account the diverse arguments about the functions of video games and radicalization theories in order to develop a theoretical framework which is later applied to provide a sound answer to the research question.

## 3. Theoretical framework

Due to the lack of a clear-cut theoretical approach which concerns itself with video games and the functions they perform outside of the realm of individual player experiences, this section of the paper attempts to develop a comprehensive theoretical framework which aims at demonstrating the relationship between video games and radicalization. This framework does not take into consideration every possible role of video games in society but focuses on those functions which are most valuable for answering the research question and substantiating the main argument, namely that video games perform a socializing function in the wider context of radicalization. The current framework thus encapsulates this key function of video games through notions of groupness, militarization and othering.

**Groupness** relates to the ability of video games to create group communities. Online video games create spaces where players can communicate with each other, exchange ideas about strategy and share experiences, thus developing a cooperative and competitive community. As

social creatures, people have a need to belong to a group and such need can be satisfied through video game play (King, Delfabbro & Griffiths, 2009, p. 93). The socializing aspect of video gaming has been found to contribute to one's decision to engage with digital artifacts, which promotes the formation of communities of like-minded players. Social interactions within multiplayer video games do not relate exclusively to the accomplishment of in-game objectives but also to emotional communications and building of friendships. Video games reduce the pressure of traditional physical socialization and often contribute to the formation of long-lasting bonds with individuals who share similar interests and anxieties (Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2013, p. 1873). The same way video games can create a community of players, they can also operate as means of exclusion by being elitist and welcoming only skilled players. As argued by King et.al., the emotional effects of being excluded in the online sphere "can be as powerful as in the real world" (2009, p. 94). Hence, looking at video games as sites of group interaction and community building both clarifies the motivations of players to engage with the online world and reinforces the socializing role of these games.

As bearers of text and meaning, gaming artifacts can alter perceptions about war and conflict, which is understood as the process of **militarization**. Through the use of particular rhetoric and the unfolding of possibility spaces, video games can manipulate players' perspectives. An important concept derived from these arguments is the 'procedural rhetoric' or the 'practice of using processes persuasively' (Bogost, 2008, p. 125). Procedurality refers to the deliberate decision of game developers to include certain options and actions into the game and exclude others, thus placing constraints on in-game possibilities and behavioral choices. Rhetoric can be understood as the symbols and text produced by game creators, which contributes to the game's persuasiveness (Robinson, 2012, p. 506). Hence, video games can control spaces and influence opinions and while in some cases the freedom to explore the game is limited, thus leaving little room for diverging interpretation and agency, there are nevertheless options which allow players to experiment with the rules of the game and take a more critical stance.

Therefore, when recreating real-life conflict, game developers emphasise authenticity, while at the same time framing wars as bloodless, entertaining and nonconsequential, thus providing an alternative version of reality. Through specific rhetoric, the military is seen as a protector of justice and freedom, engaging in every conflict which threatens the stability of these values. Such manipulations lead to the creation of virtual soldiers guided by a "militarised

ideology" (Power, 2007, p. 278). Thus by propagating a romanticized and morally unambiguous version of war within a limited space, video games challenge pre-existing images of war and function as a recruitment tool for the (virtual) soldier.

Finally, the process of **othering** presupposes exclusion from one community and joining an alternative one. However, this exclusion is not necessarily directly advanced by group members, as it can arise internally within an individual experiencing negative rhetorical representations in video games. In realistic war games there are often powerful biases in the depiction of the enemy, which may resonate negatively with players belonging to that nationality (Sisler, 2008). Moreover, othering is a key process in identity building: by stigmatizing those who do not share similar ideas and values and thus do not belong to the community, an opposition of 'us' versus 'them' is created, against which a stronger identity is constructed. Thus when video games reflect a particular ethnocentric view of the world, they marginalize those who do not share the same fundamental beliefs which leads to the formation of an alternative community (Munoz & El-Hani, 2012). If individuals experience such levels of marginalization in their daily social interactions and lack a sense of belonging to the larger national identity, they may be persuaded to look for an alternative, transnational community they can identify with (Malet, 2010). Although there are certain similarities between groupness and othering, it is necessary to emphasize that the former relates to the more practical aspect of virtual community building, such as playing the same game and communicating through in-game chats, while the latter is understood as an ideational aspect, relating to common normative behaviors and moral values.

## 3.1 Argument

*Video games perform a socializing function in the wider context of radicalization*. As socialization is key to radicalization and video games are understood as socializing artifacts, the existing connection demonstrates how video games contribute to recruitment, propaganda and value internalization within the process of radicalization. The research attempts to show how video games can be used as venues for the spreading of propaganda messages while at the same time their socializing function can bring individuals with similar experiences and desires who may internalize such messages and become vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment.

Based on the developed theoretical framework, the following theoretical assumption is derived with respect to the socializing and persuading function of video games:

*Terrorist video game mods offer alternative possibility spaces to experience a reversal of roles*. It is expected that the alternative game spaces offer players a different way of looking at international conflicts and a reversed understanding of hero and enemy, thus learning more about the motivations of terrorist organizations. Furthermore, these game mods construct a community of players in search of a different gaming experience. Therefore, in a context in which players are surrounded by positive messages and propaganda materials about terrorist organizations they may be more inclined to join the organization (Cole, 2012, p. 77). The aim is thus to analyse how mods create a feeling of groupness and how they bring players closer to the idea of killing the enemy, which could in turn contribute to a sense of solidarity.

## 3.2 Explanation of concepts

For the purposes of this study radicalization is understood as a process of socialization. The presence of community relations and not solely individual motivations influence radicalization. In that sense this research creates a parallel between video games and radicalization through socialization. The notion of groupness in video games, or membership in virtual communities, is related to the joining of terrorist organizations.

Militarization is analyzed as a process of framing of video game content to suit certain agendas and is similarly taken as an instrument to change attitudes about terror groups and contribute to recruitment.

Finally, othering presupposes the development of alternative gaming groups searching for virtual experiences contrary to those established by the majority. Here video games allow terrorist organizations to penetrate communities of already excluded players and spread their ideological message.

Video game mods represent modifications of the game's content. Modding reflects how players interact with and interpret the game by allowing them to transfer their own social experiences into the game content (Scacchi, 2010).  When discussing the motivations of modders Postigo claims that through modding players are able to identify with the game by introducing elements of their own culture and thus making the gaming experience more personal (2007, p. 309). Hence, mods offer a way to escape the constraints placed by game developers and open up

new spaces for gaming and interpretation. Gaming alterations introduced by terrorist organizations therefore, display distinct representations of wars and function as propaganda tools by legitimizing and jusfying the group's actions (Schulzke, 2014).

### 3.3. Operationalization

Although this research makes use of qualitative methods of data generation and analysis, the proposed theoretical assumption deals with concepts which need to be defined and operationalized. Firstly, alternative possibility spaces relate to the game's content. A possibility space includes all commands in a game made possible through the game's rules. When playing a game, players explore these spaces through symbolic systems and rules, which construct the meanings of the game and represent various real world processes and opinions (Bogost, 2008, p. 121). Hence, a modification of the original game provides alternative spaces embodying different meanings and perspectives, and transferring distinct messages. The existence of such spaces and their significance is measured by engaging with two mods of popular video games and examining the emerging alternative spaces.

Secondly, reversal of roles refers to the option to play with a character who is generally understood as the enemy. Here the position of hero and opponent are reversed with an aim to challenge existing rhetoric about good and evil and offer players an experience of the other side of the in-game conflict (Saber & Webber, 2016, p. 87). The presence of role reversal and the symbolism behind it are measured when looking at modifications of mainstream video games and examining the possibility to take control of the actions of the opposite side.

## 4. Methods of analysis

### 4.1 Data generation

Since this study focuses on the different functions of video games it engages primarily with qualitative methods of data generation. Primary sources in the form of interviews and observations of Youtube video game streaming and walk-throughs are used to explore the validity of the theoretical assumption. The main body of the paper focuses on terrorist mods in order to demonstrate the socalizing relationship between video games and radicalization. The discussion places an emphasis on two mods of mainstream games, namely the *Quest for Bush*, a modified version of The Quest for Saddam, and *Iraqi-Syrian Conflict*, a mod of the war game

Arma III. The research also analyzes a trailer for *Salil al-Sawarem* (The Clanging of the Swords), a mod of popular video game Grand Theft Auto V developed by ISIS. These games were chosen because of the realism of game play and because they focus on specific terrorist organizations. In this way it is possible to examine how these mods reverse the main roles and allow for the option to play as a terrorist. Empirical data is thus gathered through an autoethnographic approach, where I engage with the content of the games in order to experience first-hand their socializing and persuasive functions (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010). As this paper takes a critical approach towards the role of video games in society it does not rely on large scale quantitative data. Rather a qualitative approach combining content and semiotic analysis with interviews from specialists on game development is chosen as it offers more profound and comprehensive results.

**4.2. Data analysis**

The emerging data is analysed through a textual, visual and critical discourse analysis as this allows the presentation of previously developed arguments on the topic while at the same time leaving an option to evaluate claims through a critical lense and reach an original conclusion. A case study on two video game mods is conducted since this allows an in-depth investigation of the socializing, recruitment and persuasive functions of gamings mods. By means of an interpretative approach, the data is grouped together and analyzed through the developed theoretical framework, which implies the use of an inductive approach.

## 5. Terrorist mods

This current section examines in detail two modifications of mainstream video games and one video game mod trailer in order to explain the ways in which gaming mods can contribute to the radicalization process. The discussion offers a brief introduction to the chosen video games while the theoretical concepts are later applied so as to demonstrate the relevance of the gaming artifacts in relation to the research question. Before I present the gathered data from the auto ethnographic research, it needs to be noted that I limit the scope of the observation of the games to my own subject position: a middle-class, educated, non-Muslim woman. I expect different results and reactions if the observers were working-class Muslim males with an immigrant background.

**5.1. Iraqi-Syria Conflict**

This gaming artifact is a modification of popular first-person shooter tactical war game Arma III which was released in 2013 and it revolves around a military operation initiated by NATO forces against insurgent enemies in the Middle East (Arma 3, 2013). This particular mod was developed by supporters of ISIS and it offers players a number of different scenarios, maps and themes which allow them to experience war from the eyes of an insurgent (Alarid, 2016). For this research, two scenarios have been chosen as they represent most accurately how ISIS operates.

The first scenario is shorter and much less complex. My mission is simply to execute a prisoner by shooting him. Initially the leader explains what the mission is and ends his monologue by chanting *'Allahu Akbar'* three times The video is scripted and the specific camera angle allows me to take a closer look at the ISIS militants who assist me in completing the execution.[1] Subsequently, I am provided with a set of binoculars and I can explore ISIS's camp. There are a number of trucks with weapons and explosives, a table with a laptop and a watch tower through which I can see the entire camp and the waving ISIS flag. Through this game, ISIS is able to show their base and the arsenal at their disposal. [2]

When discussing the second scenario it has to be noted that it is much more difficult in terms of game play and much broader with respect to the possibility spaces players can access. The mission states the following: "Allah needs money so we have to get our hands on an American hostage. Then we can trade the officer with the Americans for much needed money", while the opening credits read: "Now Allah has chosen you fine Jihad warrior to go on a suicide mission". The frequent references to Allah are used as a justification for the kidnapping, which leaves an impression that my actions are done in the name of faith. The mission starts with my avatar being spawned in a desert-like region in an insurgent camp. I am then tasked to gather my team, equip them with guns and ammunition and ride to the nearest American camp. The incredible realism of the game, from the scenery to the accelerating pulse of my avatar when he was running, put me in a scenario in which I forgot about the consequences of my actions and I

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[1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kf7rRnWgpaI&t=18s Gameplay of first scenario of Iraqi-Syria mod, Arma III
[2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gWIBtKiuwSg&t=6s Gameplay of first scenario of Iraqi-Syria mod part 2, Arma III (in order to read the subtitles in the video the viewer may be required to click on the 'Subtutles/closed captions icon in the video)

connected more strongly with my avatar .[3]

This particular mission is meant as a multiplayer. However due to various constraints the selected videos are solely of single player. When I was required to gather my team in a jeep, I had to switch between avatars to accomplish the task as all of them need to be present. Within a multiplayer setting four players are required to constantly communicate with each other and coordinate their movements in order to push the mission forward. [4] One players takes the position of the commander and through online chats the rest learn about strategy and tactics. This relation between commander and non-commander establishes relations of authority (Blaazer, 2017). Hence the need to take collective decisions is what creates a notion of groupness in the game.

More importantly, the mod entirely reverses the role of hero and enemy and thus creates an alternative possibility space which allows players to subjectively experience a conflict from a terrorist point of view. The positive messages about the organization's cause, coupled with rhetorical symbols such as religious chants and flags serve as propaganda elements and bring forth the concept of militarization, whereas the multiplayer option allows for socialization with other players and thus contributes to a sense of solidarity and groupness against the common Western enemy.

**5.2. The Quest for Bush**

The Quest for Bush is a first-person shooter modification of the 2003 video game the Quest for Saddam. The modification was developed and released by the Islamic Media Front, an al-Qaeda propaganda organization (Alarid, 2016, p. 319). The purpose of the game is to capture and kill George W. Bush by advancing through six levels and fighting against American soldiers. Each level is named differently to correspond with the progress of the game, such as 'Jihad beginning', 'Jihad Growing Up', 'Americans' Hell' and finally 'Bush Hunted Like a Rat'.

Even for non-skilled players, such as myself, the game is fairly easy to play. While playing I noticed that it was not necessary to kill every soldier in order to progress in the game. However, once a level is finished, statistics of the game play are displayed on the screen which includes an 'Enemies killed' count with a maximum number of soldiers per level. In that sense I

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[3] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JW9BoN64eKw&t=3s Gameplay of second scenario of Iraqi-Syria mod, Arma III
[4] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Q250hGJFOg Multiplayer co-op mission from Arma III. Several different players can be heard communicating with each other about strategy, terrain and tactics.

felt encouraged to 'get my kills' so as to receive full stat scores. Throughout the game pictures of Bush and other prominent American politicians are displayed while jihadists songs are played in the background, often mentioning the words 'terrorist' and 'jihad'. The pictures functioned as a reminder of who my enemies are, while the songs encouraged me to fulfill my mission and eliminate as many soldiers as possible. I can imagine that such propaganda elements would provoke stronger feelings within Muslim players and bring them closer to a wider community.

As with mainstream video games' depiction of the enemy, this mod does not stray from the established formula. All American soldiers are portrayed in the same way stylistically and possess no distinguishing features; they are dehumanized and purposefully made to look powerless against the main avatar who is taller and wears a black mask and white shirt, making him the only distinguishable character in the game. Often it was necessary to approach the soldiers before they even noticed my avatar which facilitated the killing process and created an image of the Americans as cowardly and incompetent.

When analysing the most significant level of the game, namely the killing of George W. Bush, it needs to be noted that although it certainly required more effort to kill him when compared to the other enemies, he is depicted as small and rather insignificant. I was required to look down on my opponent in order to kill him which made me feel powerful and invincible. Similar to the soldiers, Bush has a distinctly frightened and shocked look on his face, making it seem as though he realizes he is no match for my strong and skilled avatar. Once I finally kill my enemy, I can hear cheering in the background, congratulating me on the successful mission which provoked a sense of accomplishment and gave the impression that I was supported by my fellow men. [5]

It can thus be argued that this mod offers a reversal of roles by allowing players to play against what are arguably the 'good guys' in a conflict and thus open an alternative possibility space to experience the game from the viewpoint of the 'others'. The game was enjoyable to play and it provided an entertaining twist to being a terrorist and killing enemy soldiers, which privileges a notion of militarization. Through songs, pictures and symbols, it spreads positive propaganda about al-Qaeda and its mission, thus inserting an element of recruitment strategies into the game.

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[5] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NN6l7U7er8g&feature=youtu.be Gameplay of levels 3 to 6 from The Quest for Bush mod

**5.3. GTA V mod trailer**

A discussion on video game modifications cannot be completed without an analysis of a trailer of a modified version of the action-adventure open world game Grand Theft Auto V (GTA V) which can be played as a single campaign or as an online multiplayer. The Grand Theft Auto series is one of the most popular gaming franchises, with its fifth installment breaking seven Guinness World Records (Hockenson, 2013) The current mod trailer *Salil al-Sawarem*, or the Clanging of Swords was released by ISIS in 2014 on the video sharing platform YouTube. Although not fully clear whether this modification was produced in reality, it certainly confirms the appeal of video games as sources of multidimensional propaganda.

The trailer is just over three minutes long and contains images of the main avatar shooting police officers, blowing up military convoys and using a sniper to kill military personnel.[6] In the original GTA V, players are given the option to play with three different characters, Franklin, Michael and Trevor, and follow their individual storylines. The modded trailer utilizes only Trevor, who is considered as a violent sociopath with no regard for human life and often dubbed as a terrorist. This character in particular sparked controversy as one of his missions is to interrogate a man by using torture equipment such as electricity and pliers.[7] It is thus noteworthy that ISIS chose this avatar in their propaganda trailer. When focusing on his physical appearance, Trevor has a long black beard and wears black clothing, causing him to resemble an ISIS militant. It is fairly easy to change the appearance of GTA characters by taking them to the barber shop or a clothing store, which makes the choice in the trailer intentional.

Throughout the video, Arabic music can be heard in the background which contains the words Salil al-Sawarem, also known as ISIS' motivational religious chant (Al-Rawi, 2016, p. 7). Furthermore, the black banner with white letters can be seen during the entire clip while the video game's cover represents an ISIS militant with a mask holding as assault rifle and the words Grand Theft Auto written in the middle. In relation to the banner, Al-Rawi argues that it has been originally used by Muslims in the early days of Islam which has certain significance. Through it, ISIS is able to brand itself as a protector of conservative Islam and label any attack against its supporters as an attack against Islam itself (ibid, p.5).

Hence, all the choices taken with respect to the mod trailer are strategic; the symbols and

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[6] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AeBjTJfTeIg GTA V modification trailer
[7] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_NrsicTLC5Q Gameplay of GTA V controversial mission with Trevor

rhetorical features are used to advance the organization's cause and thus participate as mechanisms of propaganda. Through its procedural rhetoric the video depicts actions such as shooting and killing as entertaining and inconsequential, while the Arabic songs create a sense of closeness to a larger community. Furthermore, the mere fact that ISIS has chosen such massively popular video game demonstrates their knowledge of mainstream forms of entertainment and a readiness to engage in recreational activities. Such actions can bring the organization closer to potential recruits as they create a relation of empathy with individuals playing the game. This mod does not clearly reverse the role of hero and enemy, as the original game intentionally portrays the main avatars as the "bad guys". However, the game offers ISIS a new platform to disseminate their ideology in an effort to recruit youth in its ranks.

## 6. Theoretical application

As demonstrated by the previous section, video game mods can be distinguished by their mainstream equivalents based on the reversed storylines and alternative perspectives. Gaming mods unfold new possibility spaces not only in terms of specific terrains and maps but also in a more abstract sense relating to diverging subjective experiences and in-game experimentation. However, in order to determine how video games can affect the process of radicalization it is necessary to examine these artifacts in light of the developed theoretical framework and analyse the emerging relation between technology and user. Not all three mods conform to the theoretical concepts or the main assumption which is important as it helps reveal which mod affects radicalization and recruitment the strongest and which is simply used as propaganda material.

### 6.1 Groupness

As argued earlier, groupness refers to the creation of online communities of players with similar interests and relates most persuasively to the socializing function of games. Groupness can therefore be observed when a game is played online with other players. When looking at the three gaming mods, the Iraqi-Syria conflict of Arma III stands out as it can be played online in a multiplayer setting. There is a need for constant communication to complete different tasks which creates a feeling of being part of a team. Through in-game chats players discuss strategy options but they also converse about their personal lives and share anecdotes (Blaazer, 2017). While playing the mod, I imagined myself as the leader responsible not only for the success of the

mission but also for the lives of my team-mates which gave me a sense of control and purpose. This mod therefore contains all of the elements of what constitutes a group – allegiance, loyalty, communication and jokes which ultimately establishes a notion of groupness. Although GTA V can also be played online, it is still not certain whether its ISIS modification exists in reality. The Quest for Bush is a one-player campaign, which does not have an online function and cannot therefore be considered as a socializing artifact.

It should be emphasized that the creation of a gaming mod in which the East is the hero and the West the enemy can be used as a way to identify vulnerable individuals who can share their stories through the in-game chats (Mouat, 2017). Phillips argues that terrorist organizations can develop specific maps or worlds, invite players into that gaming room and thus create a community of individuals with a desire to play against the West (2017). Hence, the Iraqi-Syria conflict corresponds most strongly to the socializing and groupness functions of video games and can be used in the formation of an alternative community of players who wish to see themselves as the terrorist. Cole contends that membership in an online community guided by extremist views can promote individual indoctrination and can thus be used as a recruitment tool (Cole, 2012, p. 68).

## 6.2 Militarization

The concept of militarization, referring to the changing of perspectives about war and understood as a question of framing, can be seen performing both a propaganda and recruitment function. Through the use of symbols, rhetoric and process persuasively, video games can "make claims about the world" (Bogost, 2008, p. 125). Orlikowski contends that technology constrains human behavior into specific modalities and routines and the repeated use of this technology in social practices can shape user's actions (2000, p. 408). Hence the use of particular symbols such as an ISIS flag and religious chants, and a dehumanized portrayal of the Western enemy allows for certain actions and outcomes and constrain others. Adding distinguishing features to the avatars in The Quest for Bush and Iraqi-Syria conflict while deliberately making the Western enemies look unprepared and frightened creates an impression of the terrorist hero as being more powerful and motivated. In both gaming mods I felt frustrated when I was unable to eliminate all of my enemies since my avatar was far superior than them. My actions were thus geared towards getting my kills and receiving full score, while the symbolic elements created a feeling of support and

solidarity from a large transnational group.

The option to play as a terrorist unfolds new possibility spaces which are inaccessible in mainstream games. This process of coding specific possibilities in the game produces an alternative representation of the world which can give players a different perspective (Robinson, 2012, p. 506). Regardless of constraints, not all users interact with a technological artifact in the same way and they may end up using it for purposes not anticipated by the developers (Orlikowski, 2000, p. 408). Thus the power to control space and introduce certain symbols contributes to the game's persuasiveness and explains its ability to influence actions and outcomes. This function can lead players to challenge Western ideas about terrorists and push them towards a different experiences offered by these mods.

Apart from introducing propaganda symbols, mods can frame conflict in an entertaining, romanticized way. In this case, the Quest for Bush comes closest to the process of militarization as terrorist missions are portrayed as inconsequential and cheering is heard when killings are successful, which creates a sense of comradery. Being the most accurate of the thee, the Arma mod attempts to depict war as realistically as possible while still relying on rhetoric and symbols, such as Arabic speech, flags and scenery, to attract players and change their perspective. The GTA mod trailer, being the least interactive, uses the same ISIS symbols but it does not open new possibility spaces as the avatar fulfills the same missions as those offered in the original version. Nevertheless, it is important to note that through regular interaction with this technology, players engage with both its material and symbolic properties which influence their in-game actions. Thus constant exposure to positive images of terrorist organizations coupled with the immersive character of video games, can lead to an internalization of these images by the players (Cole, 2012). Individuals can consider such messages as true and take a more extreme view on terrorism and war, which makes for effective propaganda.

## 6.3 Othering

The search for an alternative online community is directed by a lack of a sense of belonging to the mainstream one, which is termed as a process of othering. Mainstream video games typically portray the enemy side, most often from the Middle East, in a negative, stereotypical manner which can be quite harmful to players of these nationalities. Mouat points out that players who feel marginalized by their offline community on a daily basis and who experience the same

marginalization online while playing mainstream war games may be more determined to play mods which offer the option to subjectively experience a terrorist's point of view and this can make them more susceptible to radicalizing views (2017). In a similar vein, these players often search for a different online community which shares the same beliefs and normative systems. Orlikowski argues that individual's use of technology is structured by social and cultural experiences in a context of "knowledge, meanings, habits, power relations, norms, and the technological artifacts at hand" (p.410). Thus when individuals decide to play an online version of Iraqi-Syria conflict, they may be motivated by a desire to escape the potentially harmful offline routine and interact with others who are also looking for a new gaming experience and form a community of like-minded players.

As with groupness, the process of othering needs a social aspect. The inability to identify with one online gaming community explains the search for an alternative through a multiplayer setting. The images of American politicians as the enemy against the backdrop of Arabic music mentioning the words 'terrorist' and 'jihad' in the Quest for Bush act as a contrast to many mainstream video games and their representation of the Middle Eastern adversary. These symbols may reduce the feelings of online marginalization but they may also contribute to the building of a stronger identity through the already existing 'us' (the West) versus 'them' (the East) opposition. The first-person shooter genre of these mods intensified my gaming experience by immersing me into the storyline which created stronger identification with my powerful avatar. In that sense, players may find it easier to identify with their video game character rather than their peers and may wish to recreate this feeling online within a multiplayer scenario and thus establish contact with others in similar situations. As argued by Malet, individuals with distinct beliefs and values who are unable to connect with members of their community often search for a transnational group they can identify with which pertains to strategies of recruitment and radicalization (2010). Similarly, such transnational community can be formed online through video games such as Arma or GTA.

**6.4 Discussion**

In order to fully determine the relationship between video games and radicalization, it is necessary to examine whether the analysed mods confirm the theoretical assumption, namely that they offer players a reversal of roles. When examining Arma III and the Quest for Bush, it can be

argued that a reversal of roles is present in both. The mods allowed me to enter a space where the West is the opposing side and the East is the hero with clear motivations and purposes which could resonate strongly with players with a Middle Eastern background. These mods normalize and even glamorize war and the effort of terrorist groups by taking them out of the position of an underdog and making them seem more powerful. Playing as a terrorist brings individuals closer to the organization and its methods (Phillips, 2017). These mods make being a terrorist harmless and entertaining especially if played in a multiplayer scene.

Looking at the GTA V trailer however, a reversal of roles is not noticeable. The main character remains the same as in the original and the missions he has to complete such as attacking police officers, robbing banks and kidnapping innocent civilians are no different than in its mainstream version. The only new features are the added Arabic music and ISIS flag, which have strong symbolic value and act as persuasive elements in relation to the organization's image and self-representation (Saber & Webber, 2016, p. 80). The rhetoric and symbols serve as positive propaganda in the dissemination of ISIS's dominant ideology and help change its image from a strictly Islamic and brutal organization, to one which is familiar with 'Western' forms of entertainment (Mouat, 2017). Moreover, the game is not a first-person shooter, which could make identification with the avatar more problematic. Therefore, it can be concluded that the mod of GTA V can only be used for propaganda purposes to spread the organization's ideology and message to a wider audience and perhaps appeal to potential gamer sympathisers.

When comparing the other gaming mods one comes closer to the definition of radicalization as a process of socialization. The multiplayer option in Arma III allows for team communication and coordination thus establishing the social component vital for radicalization and recruitment. The Quest for Bush is an interesting gaming artifact, it has provocative images, motivational terrorist songs, smart changes in the physical characteristics of both hero and enemy. However, being an older stand-alone game, it does not have the option to be played online with a team. Albeit filled with rhetoric and symbols, it can only function as a persuasive propaganda instrument as it lacks the socializing aspect. Therefore, it can be argued that the Arma III mod can best be used as an instrument to recruit and radicalize youth. The mod reverses the roles of hero and enemy, it unfolds a gaming space where individuals can play as terrorists and it allows for the creation of a multiplayer scenario. The mod brings players closer to the motivations of terrorists and to the idea of killing the Western enemy, which in turn creates a sense of solidarity when played online.

Through its reversed understanding of international conflict, it creates a space in which marginalized individuals looking for a different experience can find a fitting community.

Video games exist to provide an effect. Speaking from a specific subject position of an educated, non-Muslim woman, I am the least likely person to become radicalized by online video games. However, the Arma III mods provoked feelings of enjoyment, frustration, closeness to a larger community and a sense of strength and control. I can imagine that individuals more vulnerable to radicalization who interact with such technological artifacts on a regular basis experience these feelings and effects on a deeper level. It is sometimes difficult to detach oneself from the immersive digital content which explains why certain individuals go through a shift in beliefs and intentions (Steinz, 2017). Hence a change of perspective can occur when socially and culturally vulnerable players engage with gaming artifacts which glorify the efforts and actions of terrorists and punish the West. In that sense individuals may self-identify with the organization and through online communication with others in a similar position, join a wider network of sympathisers and become recruited and radicalized.

## 7. Conclusion

Video games can no longer be considered solely an element of the entertainment industry as they perform vital societal functions. From training tools for the military to teaching instruments in schools, video game technology has become recognized for its usefulness beyond its recreational value. Gaming artifacts convey messages, provoke effects and forge relationships which explains the growing interest in the emerging field of game studies. Analyzing the role that video games perform in society can be helpful when tackling more contested and topical issues such as propaganda, recruitment and processes of youth radicalization. This paper has therefore attempted to answer the research question of what functions video games perform in the wider context of radicalization by focusing on the socializing aspect of games. By examining modifications of mainstream video games created by terrorist organizations or their supporters I have been able to experience both the socializing and persuasive aspects of these gaming mods which pertain to the formation of online communities, the changing of perspectives about terrorism and the building of an alternative identity.

Players who engage with mainstream war video games often encounter negative and stereotypical portrayals of the Middle Eastern enemy which may encourage them to look for an

alternative representation and a different online community. This is where video game mods come into play, as they offer a reversal of roles by allowing players to experience the game's story line from an enemy perspective and reveal new possibility spaces with different options and constraints. Both the Quest for Bush and Arma III mods idolize the terrorist hero and his actions against the powerless Western enemy and through persuasive rhetoric and symbols alter perspectives towards the glorification of the terrorist effort. Video games are ultimately a shared experience and players with similar ideas often come together and discuss their visions and frustrations through the game's chats. The propaganda elements of the games, coupled with the option to communicate with like-minded individuals contributes to the building of a new identity and makes players more vulnerable to recruitment and radicalization. Hence, this research has been able to demonstrate that gaming mods, specifically Arma III, promote all three notions of the developed socialization framework: othering, militarization and groupness, and thus confirm the main argument of the research, namely that video games perform a socializing function in the context of radicalization.

The current paper, however, has certain limitations. Due to a lack of available servers I was unable to play the Arma III mod online and fully experience the social aspect of the game. Moreover, interviews with experts from the game development industry may offer further insight into the mechanism behind the development of video game mods, which could be useful in discovering more about the technological competences of terrorist organizations and their strategies of recruitment and radicalization. Consequently, more research needs to be done to address these outstanding issues and provide a full picture of the relationship between terrorism and video games.

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