

Gaming the Conflict: Fursan Al-Aqsa's Narrative of the Israeli-Palestinian Struggle

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Abstract:	This study explores Fursan al-Aqsa: The Knights of the Al-Aqsa Mosque (Nidal Nijm Games, 2022) highlighting its role in the portrayal of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a paradigm between propaganda and entertainment. By examining the game's discourse, and its impact on player perceptions, this research sheds light on how video games can shape understanding and engagement with geopolitical issues. The research utilizes Albert Bandura's concept of moral disengagement to analyze the game's content and its reception on platforms like Twitch and YouTube. By assessing how the game frames moral considerations through its narrative and gameplay, this study reveals the potential of digital games to affect player perceptions and contribute to the broader media landscape surrounding political issues. The analysis also explores the reception and reinterpretation of the game by players and content creators, thus offering insights into the complex interplay between video game content, ideological influence, and audience engagement.

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Gaming the Conflict: *Fursan Al-Aqsa*'s Narrative of the Israeli-Palestinian Struggle and Its Reception through Moral Disengagement

This study explores *Fursan al-Aqsa: The Knights of the Al-Aqsa Mosque* (Nidal Nijm Games, 2022) highlighting its role in the portrayal of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a paradigm between propaganda and entertainment. By examining the game's discourse, and its impact on player perceptions, this research sheds light on how video games can shape understanding and engagement with geopolitical issues. The research utilizes Albert Bandura's concept of moral disengagement to analyze the game's content and its reception on platforms like Twitch and YouTube. By assessing how the game frames moral considerations through its narrative and gameplay, this study reveals the potential of digital games to affect player perceptions and contribute to the broader media landscape surrounding political issues. The analysis also explores the reception and reinterpretation of the game by players and content creators, thus offering insights into the complex interplay between video game content, ideological influence, and audience engagement.

Keywords: Israeli-Palestinian conflict; Game Studies; Political Games; Moral Disengagement; Bandura; Player perceptions; Digital Platforms.

Introduction

The prominent role of video games as a cultural industry of the 21st century makes it a "prime ground for indoctrination and propaganda" (Chess & Consalvo, 2022: 161). Despite the academic attention they have received, it continues to be challenging to identify patterns and establish correlations between the intentions of the creators of these games, their contents and their reception. The nuanced influence of video games complicates the analysis, leading to inconsistent success in discourse despite keen media coverage (Wired, 2023) and analytical endeavours (Hammond, 2019). Our study aims to overcome the boundaries of ideological discourse within video games by examining the interaction between game content and player communities. Specifically, the object of analysis is the content and reception of a video game entitled *Fursan al-Aqsa: The Knights of the Al-Aqsa Mosque* (Nidal Nijm Games, 2022). This game is particularly noted for its contentious discourse (Moya & Moreno, 2022) and serves as a lens to explore the portrayal of international conflicts in video games. The relevance of this topic is underscored by recent escalations in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including a significant event in October 2023, dubbed "Operation Flood of al-Aqsa" by Hamas. This situation blurs the lines between fiction and reality, as the military tactics used in this offensive by Palestinian Islamic Jihad mirror several gameplay mechanics in *Fursan al-Aqsa*.

Fursan al-Aqsa introduces a character called Ahmad al-Falastini, a Palestinian fighter in the Gaza Strip. It uses the third person to tell his story. The character's motivation and the justification for his actions are set out in the introduction, where Ahmad is introduced as a university student whose life expectations are dashed when he is arrested and spends five years

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3 in an Israeli prison, where he discovers that all members of his family have been killed in a
4 raid. Upon his release from prison, Ahmad joins a resistance movement called *Fursan al-Aqsa*
5 (The Knights of al-Aqsa, inspired by the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, which is included in the
6 EU list of terrorist organisations) and undergoes combat training. This particular approach uses
7 the biographical experience of the family history of the game's creator, Nidal Nijm, a Brazilian
8 national of Palestinian origin whose family, who lived in al-Qubab, a village that was southeast
9 of the Israeli city of Ramle, was displaced in 1948. Nijm further revealed that his father was a
10 former Fatah fighter who fought in Lebanon before migrating due to the 1982 Israeli invasion
11 of the country (Hasaneen, 2021).

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14 *Fursan al-Aqsa* serves not only as a study subject due to its direct content related to the
15 Israeli-Palestinian conflict but also challenges the prevailing representation conventions in the
16 military video game industry. While games like *Call of Duty* and *Medal of Honor* series reflect
17 and perpetuate a Western perspective on armed conflicts, presenting a sanitized and heroic
18 view of war, *Fursan al-Aqsa* introduces a narrative that provides an alternative perspective. By
19 focusing on a Palestinian protagonist and exploring the personal and political repercussions of
20 the conflict, this game complicates the conventional narratives of "good" versus "evil" that
21 often dominate this video game genre (Schulzke, 2020). This approach not only broadens the
22 scope of what video games can represent but also challenges players to engage with
23 perspectives that are often marginalized in mainstream media.

24 25 26 **Ludic War and Ideological Constructs in Military Video Games**

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29 The American military video game industry has propagated a dominant, unilateral
30 discourse on war representation and significance throughout decades (Allen, 2017). From older
31 titles like *Conflict Desert* (Pivotal Games, 2002, 2004) to ongoing series such as *Medal of*
32 *Honor* (Electronics Arts, 1999-present) and *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward, 2003-present), these
33 games have reinforced Western perspectives on the War on Terror and patriotism. The concept
34 of "Ludic War" (Payne, 2017) generally promotes a sanitized, humanitarian view of war,
35 leading to a virtual absence of civilians in most military games. Additionally, the isolation of
36 combat zones ensures that collateral damage to innocents is virtually non-existent, thereby
37 guaranteeing that every shot or bomb effectively eliminates the "enemy" terrorists (Der Derian,
38 2009). *Fursan al-Aqsa* challenges these stereotypical portrayals of war through its narrative,
39 game mechanics, and codes, offering an alternative perspective on the Middle East conflict.
40 While not the first to present an alternate viewpoint, it stands out for its intense violence across
41 all operational frames, adopting patterns recognized and socially accepted within the popular
42 *Sniper Elite* franchise (Rebellion Developments, 2005-2022). This mimetic approach, albeit
43 with an ideologically opposite direction, is evident even in the portrayal of torture, diverging
44 sharply from mainstream representations like *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell* (Sample, 2008).

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46 Beyond its mechanics and interface, *Fursan al-Aqsa* aims to convey a strong political
47 message through visual propaganda embedded in its missions. As noted by several authors
48 (Sicart, 2016; Ming-Tak & Wang, 2021), video games can serve as potent propaganda tools,
49 especially within a cultural and visual ecosystem of international protests against the State of
50 Israel. According to Payne (2017), immersion is crucial "to reinforce rather than to question
51 the reality of the experience," enabling digital environments to offer new avenues for the active
52 creation of belief. The player's avatar becomes a critical link between the game's narrative
53 spaces and stories, similar to how the political climates of the Cold War and the War on Terror
54 influenced military video game experiences in the 1980s and series like *Call of Duty*.
55 Undoubtedly, the Israeli-Palestinian tensions impact player agency, immersion, and
56 transformation through identification with *Fursan al-Aqsa's* protagonist.

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Fursan Al-Aqsa is situated in a long tradition of pro-Palestinian video games, including titles like *Peacemaker* (Impact Games, 2007) and *Global Conflict: Palestine* (Global Conflict, 2007), which have aimed to provide educational insights into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Alhabash & Wise, 2012). The academic focus has typically pivoted around ISIS's modifications of commercial video games such as *Call of Duty* or *Grand Theft Auto V* to spread its messages and ideology, a practice that has been widely interpreted as terrorist propaganda (Lakomy, 2019; Dauber *et al.*, 2019). This consideration is located within a broader perspective that explores how video games emerge as a vital medium through which popular cultural militarism is articulated and reinforced (Bos, 2016: 333). Tawil (2007) delved into Dar al-Firk company's creations, *Under Ash* (2001) and *Under Siege* (2003), highlighting how these games offer narratives that challenge and subvert dominant Western narratives, typically embodied by US Marines combating global threats, often characterised as Arab and Muslim terrorists, as reflected, for example, in the *America's Army* and *Delta Force* sagas. Dar al-Firk's games provide a perspective of the Palestinian Intifada and its response to the territorial threat of the Israeli army. However, according to their creators, they avoid “including shooting at civilians or abusing them, it does not include suicide bombing or any terrorist simulation...” (Tawil, 2007: 539).

The narrative surrounding the *Special Force* saga (2003-2007) linked to Hezbollah, diverges significantly due to its association with terrorism by the United States Government and the Official Journal of the European Union (2022, 16). Consequently, all activities and projects related to this series have been scrutinized under this classification. Despite this, it's crucial to recognise that these video games, which portray Israeli forces as the enemy deliberately avoid depicting direct or indirect harm against civilians (Lakomy, 2019: 388). It should therefore be noted that they do not contain pro-Islamist propaganda, and they avoided making a call for jihad against the West, as do the products specifically created for this purpose by Al Qaeda and ISIS, including *Salil al-Sawaren* (Al-Rawi, 2016: 746). This approach contrasts with instances in mainstream gaming where sensitivity to cultural and religious contexts has been overlooked, such as Activision's apology for an “insensitive” depiction of the Koran in a *Call of Duty* map, which sparked significant backlash and led to the removal of the offending content (Good, 2021). Further research by Šisler (2009) and Naji & Iwar (2013) suggests that content challenging Orientalist conceptions can disrupt stereotypes and simplistic representations of Middle Eastern cultures, extending Edward Said's theories in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) to contemporary cultural artifacts like video games. Hence, some of these creations have been referred to as 'postcolonial games' (McDonald, 2019: 59), highlighting their potential to navigate and critique geopolitical narratives sensitively.

The backdrop described above is a fertile breeding ground for the video game industry's efforts to circumvent the dissemination of controversial political content, to the point of creating anomalous situations such as the banning of the game *Liyla and the Shadow of War* (Rasheed Abueideh, 2016), initially barred from the Apple Store for having “a political statement” (Frank, 2016). While this statement was merely a reflection of the consequences of the war on Palestinian civilians during Operation Protective Edge launched in 2014, the event generated intense videoludic combat between Palestinian and Israeli developers (Schulzke, 2016).

The content of *Fursan Al-Aqsa* has prompted significant controversy. Itamar Ben Gvir, National Security Minister of Israel, branded the game “an incitement of murder” (Lewis, 2021). Efraim Zuroff, head of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre (a Hebrew institution dedicated to documenting Holocaust victims), said that “this game glorifies Palestinian terror against Jews” (Sokol, 2021). In response to this dynamic, and taking up much of this contextual pressure, Facebook removed the title from its platform in October 2021, months before its final release on Steam. According to the Israel National News, this decision resulted from complaints made

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3 by the Orthodox Jewish Chamber of Commerce to Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook's chief operating
4 officer (Sheva, 2021). In parallel, another pro-Israeli organisation, the Anti-Defamation League
5 (ADL), demanded that Valve Software (Steam's parent company) prevent its release by means
6 of an active campaign on different social networks, including Twitter (Lange, 2021). This
7 campaign involved the removal of the game from the Google Play platform in February 2023.
8 As Nidal Nijm announced on the official Fursan Al-Aqsa Twitter account, Google justified this
9 in the following terms: "We don't allow apps with content related to terrorism, such as content
10 that promotes terrorist acts, incites violence, or celebrates terrorist attacks", as stated in the
11 platform rules. In response, Nijm claimed on the game's website that "resistance is not
12 terrorism". Subsequently, in a video response via YouTube, he remarked: "I'm not a terrorist,
13 I'm not a criminal", and argued that "it is very subjective to call playing as a Palestinian soldier
14 against Israeli soldiers terrorist propaganda" (Youtube, Google Censored My Game 2023). The
15 creator therefore underlined the complex dilemma between Palestinian resistance and
16 terrorism, stressing that an increasing number of people even from within Israel (Abu Amer,
17 2022) are refusing to accept that resistance be tantamount to terrorism in this context
18 (Munayyer, 2021). Part of the difficulty in separating the two notions lies in the ambiguous
19 definitions of terrorism that have been produced internationally in recent decades, which have
20 also informed criticism of *Fursan Al-Aqsa*.
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25 Research questions

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27 This paper investigates the controversy raised by video games as a means of propaganda and
28 indoctrination in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with a particular focus on
29 *Fursan al-Aqsa: The Knights of the Al-Aqsa Mosque* (Nidal Nijm Games, 2022). The research
30 investigates how the game's content, its promotion by streamers, and player reviews contribute
31 to its reception and the perceptions of its impact. The central research questions guiding this
32 analysis are:
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35 - RQ1: How does *Fursan al-Aqsa* represent the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the
36 perspective of "moral disengagement"? To answer this question, an analytical model
37 based on Bandura's theory of "moral disengagement" (Bandura et al., 1996; Bandura,
38 2016; Raney, 2020) and its application to violent video games (Hartman, 2017; Yao *et*
39 *al.*, 2018). The key elements of the discourse were also analysed to assess to what extent
40 it is ideologically loaded and ascertain whether it is a game about terrorism or one that
41 could promote online radicalisation (Schlegel & Kowert, 2024).
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44 - RQ2: How does the analysis of the confrontation from the perspective of *Fursan Al-*
45 *Aqsa* influence players' perceptions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? This inquiry
46 focuses on studying the reception of—and reaction to—the content of the game from
47 a twofold perspective: firstly, through the lens of content creators, such as streamers,
48 who engage with the game for an audience, and secondly, by delving into the player's
49 experience as reflected in game reviews.
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52 To address these questions comprehensively, the study proposes a research framework
53 that examines the interplay between the game discourse, its elements and its reception among
54 different actors. Our goal is not to develop an in-depth analysis of the game discourse, but
55 instead to recognize its more relevant elements from Bandura's perspective to analyze how
56 streamers, acting as cultural intermediaries, contribute to the discourse by offering their
57 interpretations. This approach is anchored in the concept that the construction and reception of
58 meaning within video game content are dynamically interrelated, as suggested by Latour
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(2005). The ultimate goal is to critically reflect on the game's role and its production context, shedding light on its potential impact within the broader discourse of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Material and methods

Methodologically, this research analyses the interaction between the videogame *Fursan Al-Aqsa* and its reception among content creators and players. As we stated previously, our approach utilizes Bandura's theory of moral disengagement as a framework to examine the cognitive processes that may justify certain behaviours within the game environment. It was assumed that there are factors that effectively cause cognitive moral disengagement, based on which what is culpable behaviour becomes honourable through cognitive reconstruction (1991, p. 72). This disengagement takes the form of four strategies used to distort reality and turn violent or transgressive behaviour into acceptable behaviour (Bandura, et al., 1996):

- (a) Reconstructing behaviour so that it is not seen as immoral.
- (b) Minimising the agent's responsibility for causing harm.
- (c) Trivialising the consequences that follow an action.
- (d) Devaluing the victims or disown any responsibility for their misfortune.

Villegas de Posada, Florez & Espinel (2018) adapted these four points of focus and simplified the process of operationalising moral disengagement. This proposal was adapted to the purpose of our study (Table 1). The concept of cognitive reinterpretation was constructed to develop categories that could be used to analyse both the different factors in the discourse of *Fursan al-Aqsa* and the reviews or comments that the video game generated.

Re-interpretation	Factor	Operational definition
(a) Re-interpretation of reprehensible behaviour	Moral justification	Need for an act of violence to accomplish a greater goal
	Euphemistic labelling	Minimisation or justification through euphemisms
	Advantageous comparison	A harmful act is compared to another behaviour considered more harmful
(b) Re-interpretation of responsibility	Displacement of responsibility	Responsibility is attributed to one or several authority figure(s)
	Diffusion of responsibility	Responsibility for actions is attributed to a collective, disclaiming individual responsibility
(c) Re-interpretation of consequences	Disregard or distortion of consequences	The damage or harm inflicted is denied or minimised
	Dehumanisation	The victims are divested of human features (objects, savages, monsters...).
(d) Re-interpretation of victims	Attribution of blame	Victims or circumstances justify violence. Violent acts are committed in retaliation for a prior provocation.

Source: Developed by the authors based on Bandura (2002) and Villegas de Posada, Florez & Espinel (2018).

To further enrich this previous theoretical framework this inquiry is conducted within the expansive framework of Bogost's procedural rhetoric, which highlights the potential of games not solely "characterised by their ability to carry images, but by their capacity for operationalizing rules" (Bogost, 2007: 171). This characteristic holds particular significance, as long as "digital games have values embedded in them" (Nissenbaum & Flanagan, 2014: 8). This integration is aimed at elucidating the potential of video games to convey persuasive

messages through three fundamental aspects of the game's representation structure, as identified by Pérez Latorre (2015): the character/player, the game world and the game play activities. The ludic design influences the representation of the character/player by defining their action competencies through a combination of four types of game rules: performance, operation, state, and behavior-inducing rules. The second aspect, the game world, considers factors such as spatiotemporal design, rules for blocking/unblocking areas and states of the game world, interactions with non-playable characters and/or objects, and the potential relationship between behavior-inducing rules and the game world's representation. Lastly, each gameplay unit involves performing specific activities to achieve goals or objectives, encompassing patterns of action related to final objectives, winning and losing conditions, game mechanics, and action chains among others.

Nevertheless, this claim faces one of the procedural rhetoric flaws, the absence of an ideal player who engages with the game in the manner the game designer anticipates (Ferrari, 2010: 2). While the rules of digital games typically remain fixed and unalterable during play, as they are usually encoded in a language inaccessible to players (Sicart, 2009: 27). To overcome this limitation, our methodological approach incorporates the concept of paratext in Game Studies, illuminating potential interpretations of the game beyond its explicit constructs (Consalvo, 2017).

The exploration of gaming experiences shared by internet creators on platforms such as Twitch and YouTube constitutes the primary type of paratext we examined. This approach considers how prosumers interpret and create content on these platforms. It is important to note the limited number of videos created for audiovisual content platforms that align with their production parameters. Only five videos garnered more than 5,000 views on either Twitch or YouTube (Table 2), establishing our criterion for selecting them as the analysis corpus. Within these videos, creators share their insights on the game's narrative approach and dynamics, including commentary on their in-game actions, technical errors, strategies, and other relevant considerations. Moreover, they discuss the game's political agenda and the elements that constitute the focus of this analysis.

ID	Creator and number of subscribers	Video title	Duration	Views	Likes	Number of comments
V1	Bad Empanada 2 (25000)	First Try - Fighting IDF Colonisers for Allah!	20:16	15632	1009	146
V2	باركس - BariaX (9950)	تجربة لعبة فرسان المسجد الأقصى Fursan al-Aqsa #1	9:02	10704	390	86
V3	Bad at Video Games (7520)	Fursan al-Aqsa (pt. 1)	1:46:37	9797	385	54
V4	Bad Empanada 2 (25000)	Infiltrating MOSSAD HQ for Palestine, Israel is a CRIMINAL STATE	59:57	8514	432	62
V5	Citizen 17 (763)	Fursan al-Aqsa Demo - Mission 2	5:09	7781	432	184

Source: Data gathered by the authors from YouTube on March 7, 2023.

Furthermore, this research includes an analysis of a second type of paratext: player reviews collected from platforms such as Steam, Itch.io, Gamejolt, IndieDB, and ModDB, totaling 399 reviews. These reviews were gathered either through platform APIs or manually, aiming to capture players' perceptions as articulated in their published feedback across these major distribution channels. To analyze this sample, content and sentiment analyses were employed, following the methodologies outlined by Neuendorf (2016) and Pang & Lee (2008),

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3 respectively. This approach helped to distill the prominent opinions and emotions expressed
4 by both streamers and players.
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6 To systematically analyze this data, two associate researchers used a coding sheet to identify
7 specific factors, including aspects of moral disengagement integrated into the game's elements
8 as previously discussed. This coding process was applied to both the content of *Fursan al-Aqsa*
9 and its reception, as reflected in YouTube videos, comments, and player reviews across various
10 digital game distribution platforms. This multifaceted approach facilitated the identification of
11 recurring patterns of moral disengagement, particularly in how violent acts are rationalized.
12 The analysis aimed to assess mechanisms that potentially mitigate the perceived responsibility
13 of individuals who engage in violence within the context of this pro-Palestinian video game.
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16 Results

17 Key Factors in the Narrative and Propaganda in *Fursan Al-Aqsa*

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21 The content design of *Fursan al-Aqsa* is structured around nine distinct missions (levels), each
22 integral to its overarching narrative. What stands out as a common element implicit in all the
23 scenarios and phases is the propagandistic and emotional component of the music, inspired by
24 Fatah hymns and songs, as well as the fact that the protagonist and hero is part of a spiritual
25 collective (Šisler, 2009: 283). Within the category of “re-interpretation of responsibility”
26 (displacement and diffusion of responsibility), Ahmad is represented as a member of a group
27 that serves Allah in his jihad against the Jewish military forces. In addition, Ahmad's character,
28 as highlighted in the prologue, initially condemned the war and intended to be a perfect Muslim
29 until circumstances (including his family having been tortured and killed) pushed him to fight
30 against Israel. This idea is reinforced by the sound and environmental hymns (“nasheeds”) that
31 accompany all operations. According to the study by Heimonen and Hebert (2012), among
32 others, these are received enthusiastically by the population, as they stimulate the feeling of
33 worship for the nation (Palestine) that is heightened in war environments. This rationale has a
34 prominent political component in the game's interface. For example, the mission “Mossad
35 Executive Office” features photographs of the founding fathers of Israel in 1948, as well as
36 maps recreating the boundaries of the new Hebrew state based on the Balfour Declaration in
37 1917. These are very specific references and require that players have some prior knowledge
38 of the historical-political context that the game is based on.
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42 The game heavily engages in euphemistic labelling and moral justification by
43 contextualising each of the nine missions it presents, consistently following the dynamics of
44 other Iranian video games that make the sacred defence of religion, country and martyrs their
45 main raison d'être (Šisler, 2013). As the game progresses, the portrayal of Israeli troops
46 escalates, and they are labelled as "Zionist," which emphasizes the political dimensions of their
47 presence in Palestine. This political framing is reinforced in missions like “Mossad Executive
48 Office”, which includes visual elements such as photographs of Israeli historical figures and
49 symbols (including the flag or the seven-branched candelabrum, “Menorah”), requiring players
50 to have a degree of historical knowledge.
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52 Moral justification focuses on the use of shocking images of violence. This level of
53 hatred and graphic depiction of pain is taken to the extreme when a chainsaw is used to cut
54 through a member of the military, or when the admiral of the Lahav ship is tied upside down
55 and eaten by a great white shark in the mission “Ins Lahav Warship”. The game's plot further
56 intensifies moral justification in Mission 5, set in the Shuja'iyya district of Gaza. This mission
57 references a real-life attack by IDF forces in 2014, which resulted in significant civilian
58 casualties and condemnation by international bodies (Bayefski, 2014). In this mission, Ahmad's
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3 role is to save as many civilians as possible, marking the only instance in the game where
4 civilians appear. Ahmad is depicted as a hero, and his actions are portrayed as justified against
5 the backdrop of previous atrocities.
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7 The justification of Ahmad's guiding principles is reiterated at the end of the game when
8 he executes the commanding officer of the "Iron Dome" (Israel's air defence system) Control
9 Centre. Ahmad states, "This is for the blood of my Palestinian people, who were killed by
10 Zionist Terrorists". The moral justification for re-interpreting this behaviour, according to the
11 analysis performed in this research, is that character's action is in retaliation to previous killings
12 of Palestinian civilians; revenge is concealed by the metaphor of blood, which is an example
13 of euphemistic labelling, echoing similar media portrayals (Hafez, 2006). Thus, the execution
14 to be perpetrated by Ahmad is merely a response to "other more atrocious acts committed by
15 the victim" (advantageous comparison). The responsibility that is displaced and diffused does
16 not fall solely on Ahmad, for he is depicted as a mere "executor" of the dictates of Allah and
17 his organisation in defence of the Palestinian people. Following the logic of the game, the death
18 of one "Zionist" is not comparable to the deaths of thousands of innocent civilians (disregard
19 or distortion of the consequences). Dehumanisation is not used visually, as the officer's face,
20 far from being hidden, is strongly shown in the foreground to ensure that his "blame" is
21 recognised and he can be identified as a "monster". Finally, the violent killing of this character
22 by a shot to the head implies the attribution of blame, since punishment (according to the
23 narrative logic of Fursan al-Aqsa) is the ultimate consequence of a prior provocation: the
24 decades of Israeli occupation and the continuous violations of human rights. However, this
25 brutality of the protagonist's actions is balanced by his respect for the civilian population, whom
26 he at no point attacks. Moreover, they only appear in the mission concerning the Shuja'iyya
27 district, where Ahmad rescues civilians still alive after an Israeli bombing, transporting them
28 in an ambulance.
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32 The aesthetic design of the game further supports its propagandistic and moral
33 disengagement themes. For example, graffiti with pro-Palestinian and anti-Israeli slogans
34 appears on the city's walls (Figure 1). From the slogan "Palestine Will Be Free" (*sic*),
35 accompanied by a fist in the colours of the national flag, to an image of Leila Khaled (world
36 icon of the Palestinian cause) next to an AK-47. Such visual propaganda reinforces the bond
37 of community and the concept of "Palestinian resistance", and adds to the religious character
38 of the struggle when Ahmad's scourage is bolstered by shouting "Allahuh Akbar" (Allah is
39 great).
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42 Figure 1. Poster with the image of Khalil Ibrahim Al-Wazir (founder of Fatah)
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Dehumanization of the enemy is evident in the game's portrayal of opponents as faceless, anonymous figures, contrasting sharply with the individualized and morally charged depiction of mission leaders and officers. They are among the few characters who verbally interact with Ahmad by accusing him of being a terrorist. The elimination of several officers (by a shot to the head) plays an important role in the narrative, with an abundance of close-ups and dialogue. The disengagement from the violence directed at them is further manifested by blunt messages such as “Kill all Zionists”.

From the descriptions provided, it is clear that the attribution of blame plays a major role in *Fursan Al-Aqsa*. This premise is reflected, at the plot level, in the objectives of the different missions. Thus, in “Old City of Jerusalem” a drone helicopter firing on Palestinian civilians must be destroyed, while in “Gaza City Shuja'iyya District” it is necessary to destroy the Israeli firepower to save “as many innocents as we can”. There is a minimal presence of civilians, and they only appear in the mission “Gaza City” to shock the player into experiencing the effects of a city centre being bombed, especially when this event was criticised by public opinion worldwide (Cohen & Freilich, 2015).

Reinterpreting Conflict and Player Agency in Fursan Al-Aqsa

As stated before, *Fursan Al-Aqsa* mimics traditional Western FPS like *Medal of Honor* or *Call of Duty*, especially the gameplay of *Sniper Elite* series. This reinterpretation of the genre is explicitly noted on its Steam page, which describes the protagonist as “the Palestinian Max Payne on Stereoids”. The game’s character rules adhere to standard conventions, offering no moral choices to the player while explicitly defining Ahmed’s mission through certain behaviour-inducing rules. As Amanda Phillips (2018) insightfully points out, actions like headshots in these games -dynamic prevalent in this title- mirror the cultural traumas of specific societies. When applied to the Palestinian context, sniper assassinations by both sides have been common. Such normalization of violence through behaviour-inducing rules desensitizes players, making them more likely to accept it as part of real-life political conflicts and struggles.

In *Fursan al-Aqsa*, the act of slitting enemies' throats is featured at the beginning of missions such as “Israel Iron Dome Center”. These images are presented in slow motion to emphasise their rawness, or in close-ups that reflect the suffering of the soldiers. This use of “bullet-time” diverges from the conventional pace of most video games. Vanderhoef and Payne

(2022) elucidate that *Red Dead Redemption 2* (another game that uses it) deliberates pacing to challenge player expectations for speed, fostering moments of reflection and emotional depth, thereby critiquing the efficiency-driven norms of mainstream gaming and broader neoliberal values. This game mechanic in *Fursan* serves not only for narrative and emotional resonance by allowing players to reveal the violence against Ahmed's enemies, but also enhances the player's sense of competence and agency within the virtual world. According to Stahl (2010), this shift from passive spectator to virtual citizen-soldier epitomises the "pleasure" of interactive warfare, founded in participatory gameplay that transcends mere observation, fostering a first-person fantasy of kinetic warfare that engages the citizen-consumer by immersing their "citizen identity" within the military entertainment complex, creating a deeply engaging and ideologically charged gameplay experience.

Figure 2. *Fursan Al Aqsa* combines militainment with the player as a "virtual citizen-soldier" for the Palestinian cause.



Fursan Al-Aqsa intricately crafts its content, particularly through the behaviour of non-player characters (NPCs), all of whom are antagonistic towards the protagonist. This design choice reinforces the portrayal of a besieged Palestinian perspective, notably omitting civilian figures (except in the "Gaza City" mission) that featured in games like *Under Ash* or *Under Siege*. The game explicitly clarifies that "the player does not shoot Israeli civilians, women, children, elderly, only soldiers", underlining its focus. Nevertheless, encountering uniform hostility from all characters steers players into a moral framework where the roles are limited to executioner or martyr. This scenario promotes a hostile environment, advocating for the elimination of Israeli soldiers, reminiscent of the "Sniper Elite" series with its extensive array of death mechanics.

In conclusion, *Fursan Al-Aqsa* reinterprets traditional FPS mechanics to frame the Israeli-Palestinian conflict within a specific ideological context. By reinforcing aggressive behaviors and presenting a polarized moral framework, the game desensitizes players to violence and promotes a narrative of resistance and retaliation. The gameplay requires players to undertake actions characteristic of the FPS genre, emphasizing aggression against all hostile entities as essential to reaching the winning condition. This aligns with the recurring message within the game: "Whatever was taken by force can only be reclaimed by force". This

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3 philosophy integrates a convergence of game actions and narrative within the game, offering a
4 reinterpretation of responsibility through Bandura's lens of moral disengagement.
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7 ***Moral disengagement by content creators***

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9 Within the game ecosystem, content creators hold a pivotal role, particularly in
10 engaging with titles that espouse a political agenda. Consalvo's interpretation of paratext in
11 video games is particularly relevant here, as these creators add complex layers of meaning to
12 the game, significantly influencing audience reception. *Fursan al-Aqsa* exemplifies this
13 dynamic, where the depiction of Palestinian protagonists against the Israel Defence Forces
14 (IDF) transcends traditional gameplay, entering into narrative construction and moral
15 justification as interpreted by these content creators and influencers. The consensus among
16 content creators in portraying the IDF as a "terrorist group" highlights a unified narrative
17 approach. This depiction broadens to categorize the state of Israel as a "criminal state" and its
18 citizens as dehumanized entities. Such portrayals are not incidental but are deeply woven into
19 the content and titles of their videos, suggesting a collective endorsement of the game as a
20 medium for the Palestinian decolonization narrative. This perspective is vividly expressed by
21 the YouTuber Bad Empanada, who blends gameplay with pointed political commentary,
22 stating: "Die Zionist terrorist settler colonist occupier. [Music] Die Zionist terrorist settler-
23 colonist occupier. Die Zionist set the colonist on fire. I'm just like running around with no
24 regard for my own safety and, oh, you can interact. Whoa, don't shoot me. Guys, buying a set
25 of colonies of occupier" (V3).
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28 The portrayal of violence in *Fursan Al-Aqsa* intensifies the atrocity of actions by
29 attributing responsibility to the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), and by extension, to Israel, for
30 violence against vulnerable groups such as small children. This is exemplified by dialogue such
31 as "Come out Israeli, I'm a child, I'm just a child. I'm your preferred target, come out, you can
32 take me like a baby" (Video 5). This is undoubtedly a recurring element to signal criminal
33 status and to downplay the importance of the attacks on Israel's characters by the player. A
34 moral justification is thus developed that peaks when reference is made to the Palestinian Jihad.
35 This is not so much a construction as an imprecation ("Jihad!"), which is repeated at times of
36 tension or excitement during the game. On some occasions, content creators have stated that
37 their action in the game is aligned with the objectives of Palestinian Jihad as a warlike action
38 against Israelis ("Now that was a good time to say Jihad, my brother" V1; "Oh, were there
39 enemies? There aren't any more, don't worry. They cannot stop my jihad" V5). In a "milder"
40 form, the game is simply legitimised as a tool for attracting the attention of the international
41 community: "This game is a great way to raise awareness about the Palestinian cause and the
42 atrocities committed by Israel" (V3). While this endeavour is certainly controversial, it is
43 consistent with previous attempts to provide "digital dignity" for the Palestinian people in the
44 face of the clichés and stereotypes of hegemonic Western markets, thus allowing more people
45 to support Palestinian aspirations ("I hope more people play it and join the movement"). The
46 objectionable interpretation of playing a violent video game of the type described, regardless
47 of any other considerations, is reviewed by the content creators. One of them noted that there
48 is a certain degree of hypocrisy, as "the Americans make video games all the time about killing
49 Arab countries, Russians, etc., but apparently doing the same to them and their allies is wrong"
50 (V1). This critique underscores the broader geopolitical and cultural dynamics at play in the
51 reception and critique of *Fursan Al-Aqsa*.
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54 Content creators' re-interpretation of responsibility is based on not questioning the
55 responsibility of their actions during the game. In other words, they do not hold themselves
56 responsible for the content they disseminate, as they are merely players seeking to create
57 content for their followers on YouTube or Twitch. This aligns with Consalvo's (2017)
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3 observation that content creators adhere to the “primary” meaning of the game as a text. This
4 perception allows them to express their support for the game's narrative while maintaining a
5 certain degree of “indirect” responsibility: “The fact that a game like this is allowed to exist on
6 a major platform without being banned just because of who it paints as the good guys and who
7 paints the bad guys is a miracle. It's a sign that culturally things might be shifting. Palestinian
8 resistance might become more mainstream very slowly. 10 years ago, this wouldn't have been
9 possible” (V1). This comment places responsibility not on the game's creator, but at the feet of
10 the popular Steam platform “which allows it to exist”. In this regard, moreover, no one is
11 unaware that the very fact of presenting *Fursan Al-Aqsa* through Twitch could lead to
12 temporary suspensions of its activity on this platform, as “even thinking about playing a game
13 where Palestinians are the good guys against IDF terrorists will probably get you banned” (V4).

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16 In a somewhat different vein, no significant references to the consequences of the
17 (virtual) actions that take place in the game context can be found. Moreover, the creators
18 explicitly refer to violence and death in the game as if they had no consequences in real life.
19 Thus, although there is no distortion or denial of the players' actions, there is a slight process
20 of dehumanisation in these justifications when Israeli soldiers are portrayed as “targets” and
21 violence against them is justified by the cruelty of their army towards the Palestinian
22 population: “It's so satisfying to blow up these Israeli buildings, they deserve it after all the
23 suffering they've caused to the Palestinian people” (V3). Some lessened traits of
24 dehumanisation can also be seen in comments to the effect that “Israelis are heartless” (they
25 murder babies), since “Ah no no, that's just the baby, because Israelis are heartless”. From the
26 creator's point of view, this cruelty is combined with the cowardice of Israeli soldiers when
27 faced with an adversary capable of confronting them: “Oh, what's the matter? I'm not a little
28 kid. I'm not a woman. I'm not a defenceless pregnant woman or a grandma or something. Is
29 that why you ran away? Classic Israelis”. This advantageous comparison, following Bandura's
30 terminology, makes it possible to juxtapose Palestinian bravery with the cowardice of Israeli
31 soldiers. In this way, content creators resort to moral or ideological justification (in the form of
32 oppression or Jihad) that leads to empowerment through video games in which “Israeli Defence
33 Forces lose to one brave Palestinian soldier. Palestinian James Bond. How do you say James
34 Bond in Arabic?” (V5).

35 36 37 38 39 *Analysis of reviews*

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41 The sample of reviews (n=399) of *Fursan Al-Aqsa* found on distribution platforms such as
42 Steam reflect the political perspective of the game. While a considerable number of them
43 merely address technical issues (performance and frames per second, among other issues) or
44 aspects of gameplay, most of them dealt with its political content. This participation took
45 various forms, whether by supporting Palestinian demands or symbolic violence perpetrated
46 through the game (e.g. justifying violence against the IDF) or in other ways. Players' affinity
47 with these reviews was evidenced by their popularity (those with a higher number of “likes”),
48 the most popular being those aligned with the ideological content of the video game. For
49 example, the review considered the “most useful” on the Steam platform expresses the view
50 “finally I get to play as the good guys”. This discursive legitimisation of a hegemonic counter-
51 narrative makes it possible to locate these comments both in the re-interpretation of
52 responsibility and in the dissemination of the moral justification expressed by the rest of the
53 users who share their opinions through evaluation mechanisms.

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56 Despite the perceived affinity with the ideological discourse of the game, the comments
57 do not address the responsibility for the character's actions and the consequences they could
58 have in real life in any meaningful way. Therefore, while there is emotional and affective
59 polarisation on the part of the users who access the product, there is neither a foundation nor a
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3 space for discussion backed by data, historical facts or life experiences. Consequently, this
4 space, created by and for players, does not seem to interact with the political and media
5 background that Fursan Al-Aqsa has promoted in other contexts.
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8 **Discussion and conclusions**

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10 The analysis of *Fursan Al-Aqsa* reveals how this video game engages with a complex and
11 controversial narrative surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict under the moral
12 disengagement prism. The game sparked significant controversy, as exemplified by the
13 October 2021 denunciation of its alleged “jihadist and anti-Semitic content” of *Fursan Al-Aqsa*
14 to the European Commission (European Parliament, E-004948/2021). This denunciation
15 illustrates the complex reception of the game because of the notions of anti-Semitism and
16 terrorism in security and human rights issues used and their conceptual application in many
17 areas of the digital cultural scene (e.g. Cerví & Divon, 2023). The response of the European
18 institutions was based on the definition given by the International Holocaust Remembrance
19 Alliance (IHRA) (European Parliament, 2017/2692), as one of its points includes as a
20 characteristic of anti-Semitism “(d)enying the Jewish people their right to self-determination,
21 e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor.” In this regard, the
22 introduction of *Fursan Al-Aqsa* and within a screen with the image of Hebrew members of the
23 military labelled as “Zionist Militias” states: “the Zionism is a racist movement with the aim
24 of creating a Fascist State inside Palestine...”. The designer himself warns on Steam that he
25 “does not intend to promote hatred of any kind”, but the controversy and criticism surrounding
26 the game soon became unusually virulent for minority content (Nidal Nijm Games, 2022).
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30 In this backdrop, *Fursan Al-Aqsa* contributes to the geopolitical discourse by shaping
31 and influencing perceptions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The game does so through the
32 representations and social (re-)constructions created by the communities engaging with it,
33 including content from streamers and platform reviews. This phenomenon is situated within
34 the 21st-century digital communication landscape, where users assume roles as prosumers,
35 either leveraging digital media opportunities or contributing to media engagement forms and
36 policy. This underscores the ability of video games to disseminate political messages and
37 promote counter-narratives, as evidenced by *Fursan Al-Aqsa's* challenge to Western
38 stereotypes and clichés to draw international attention to the Palestinian situation.
39

40 This research supports recent studies and surveys that have provided evidence that the
41 presence (or absence) of moral disengagement features in video games effectively influences
42 the sense of enjoyment, guilt or even subsequent rejection experienced by users. Moreover,
43 evidence suggests that most gamers feel irritated, if not outright guilty if a video game incites
44 them to consume visual violence against certain social groups without applying the elements
45 included in Bandura's moral disengagement (Hartmann *et al.*, 2014: 313). The limits of such
46 disengagement in *Fursan Al-Aqsa* are related to the fact that criticism often revolves around
47 the difficulty, performance, finish or bugs in the game. However, the technical barrier that
48 makes it difficult to convey the political and ideological agenda of the content still exists,
49 regardless of the existing production constraints.
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52 As discussed, moral disengagement may render violence against Israeli troops
53 “acceptable” among audiences with a predisposed stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,
54 negating the need for justification mechanisms among users who perceive the game's narrative
55 as “Palestinian resistance to Jewish aggression”. However, the reviews collected indicate a
56 limitation: many are superficial and align with the game's stance on the conflict, without clear
57 evidence that their alignment is due to gameplay experience.
58

59 *Fursan Al-Aqsa* exemplifies the capacity of video games to act as vehicles for
60 propaganda and moral disengagement, particularly in the context of geopolitical conflicts.

Through its re-interpretation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its justification of violence within its narrative, the game not only influences public perception but also contributes to shaping media politics. The depiction of Ahmad as a "hero of counter-terrorism" aligns with Schulzke's (2013) analysis of how individuals may view such figures as embodiments of a "logical response to state terrorism," thereby fitting into a broader framework of dissonance theory. This framework provides a nuanced understanding of the mechanisms of moral disengagement and highlights how video games can reinforce ideological narratives by justifying violence and moral transgressions.

The game's portrayal of Ahmad as a martyr-like figure, with his violent actions framed as justified retaliation against perceived atrocities, exemplifies how video games can manipulate moral perspective and contribute to ideological discourse. By embedding a specific ideological agenda within the game content, *Fursan Al-Aqsa* demonstrates the role of video games in indoctrination and propaganda, as discussed at the outset of this study. Recognizing this potential is crucial, as such games can significantly influence and polarize public opinion, making them powerful instruments for shaping ideological beliefs and fostering moral disengagement in the digital age.

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Figure 2. Fursan Al Aqsa combines militainment with the player as a "virtual citizen-soldier" for the Palestinian cause.

1283x721mm (38 x 38 DPI)

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206x133mm (120 x 120 DPI)