

Pixel Pashas, Digital Djinns

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The study of computer and video games (CVGs) is currently a discipline with a large spectrum of research ventures, coming mostly from literary and film studies, cultural studies, pedagogics, psychology, and computer science. The on-topic discourse still exhibits a binary segmentation into narratologists and "ludologists," the latter focusing on games as rule systems and cultural aspects of ludic activity. Moreover, there is little homogeneity in the choice of analytical tools and terminology, especially in less-covered areas such as digital game ethnography.¹

The study of Orientalism or, more precisely, Oriental topoi and Orientalist rationales in CVGs requires an understanding of the specificity of interactive media and the logic behind their production and distribution. First, the topography that the player traverses in the game, i.e. the parameters of spatial construction and orientation, is an important factor that sets CVGs apart from narrative media (like film and literature) and links them closer to spatially oriented media like architecture. Second, the rule-system governing the player interaction is a level on which cultural bias may be communicated. A semiotic reading of game rules can both be helpful to describe built-in signification and the game mechanisms as a projection space for player disposition. A rewarding approach for future research would be to explore representations of Oriental themes in a diachronic perspective with examples such as the *Prince of Persia* series (1989-2005).



Title screen
from *Arabian*
(1983)

Design properties, like the badly implemented joystick controls which make the game frustrating at times, are communicated among players and thus, perhaps unintentionally, reinforce pre-existing ideas such as the association of the Orient with vertigo and hallucination.

Representations and re-representations

How does the "Orient" figure in computer and video games? Game producers draw from a rich field of Oriental topoi and representations that is well established in Western (and Japanese) culture; notions of an imagined Orient as a complex cultural metasign that "is" everything that can be associated with it, could be applied quite successfully. We thus often find adaptations of familiar motifs from popular literature, art, cinema, or even political discourse that appear on various levels. These include visual elements such as tiles, minarets, or localities such as deserts or bazaars (e.g. *Breath of Fire 4*, 2003), character concepts such as warriors-with-scimitars, evil viziers, dancers, or merchants (e.g. *Prince of Persia*, 1989), or narrative tropes such as travel narratives (e.g. *Talisman: Changing the Sands of Time*, 1987), but also contemporary political representations (such as *Commando Libya*, 1986, or *Ter-*

Arabian, one of the earliest computer games with a decidedly Oriental setting came out in 1983. Structurally similar to Nintendo's *Donkey Kong* (1982), the imaginary Orient permeates *Arabian*. The story is told as a "book," consisting of the various scenarios as "pages." Its hero, a scimitar-wielding, turbaned prince, fights his way through ships and castles against djinns and rocs, finally rescuing his princess, and the two fly away on a magic carpet. We thus encounter the Orient in *Arabian* on multiple levels: narrative setting, character design, and even in the game's technical manual, which is filled with carefully-drawn djinns and other Oriental imagery.

rorist Takedown, 2004). CVGs are thus highly intertextual, taking up established representations and reprocessing them into an interactive medium. Additionally, interactiveness allows for innovative ways in which assumptions about the Orient can be invoked. *Khalaan* (1990), a strategy game about four caliphs competing for supremacy, tries to evoke a sense of "Oriental despotism," by giving players extremely fine-grained, but also lavish large-scale control of vast armies and treasures. *Magic Carpet* (1994) is a 3D simulation of air combat on magic carpets.

Technical contingencies

Apart from intertextuality, a second major frame for assessing both structural parameters and potential effects of CVGs are technological contingencies. Accordingly, interactive media should be interpreted as products of code, both in terms of production, usage, and retelling. The act of playing a video game is usually described as a "cybernetic feedback loop," i.e. as an input-processing-output cycle, both from a psychological and communication studies perspective. In other words, interacting with a CVG substitutes hermeneutic understanding for a kind of algorithmic text-processing; the gradual uncovering of the programmed game rules is an inextricable element of play.

Consequently, elements of Orientalism, whether audiovisual, narrative, or other, must also be analysed against the momentum of technology. Many games with Oriental themes are showcases for particular technological achievements, be it new techniques of character animation (*Prince of Persia*, 1989), zoom effects (*Arabian Fight*, 1992), pre-rendered cutscenes (*Egypt III*, 2004), digitized photographs blended with bitmaps (*Khalaan*, 1990), or large-scale deformable terrain (*Magic Carpet*, 1994). In the context of video game history, the theme of exploring mysterious, Oriental landscapes, often presented in the conventionalized form of travel narratives (e.g. *Sinbad and the Throne of the Falcon*, 1987), starkly coincided with the 1980s' technohistorical perspective of the computer as a "black box," awaiting exploration and understanding at the hand of the user. As Claus PIAS argues, navigation in early computer games derived from technical concepts such as graphs and interconnected nodes rather than from a hermeneutical approach to space popular in textual media. Often, stereotypical representations are derived from technical feasibility, an observation which would allow for a comparison with older media phenomena. For instance, John MacKenzie notes how Orientalist painters developed "rapid sketching" techniques to avoid "nuisances" like the colour bleaching due to the intense desert sunlight and potential attacks, and used these sketches as mnemonic proxies for their final works.² Digital games are constrained by production circumstances in a similar manner. "Libraries" of pre-produced, iconic "Oriental" objects are reused for economic reasons. Interaction patterns like the protagonist's ability to "rewind" time in *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time* (2003) are first and foremost determined by new software techniques and later pass into the inventory of conventionalized representational topoi.

Thus, oriental stereotypes are often part of player dispositions, recursively shaped by interactive and other media consumption. For instance, adversaries in many Oriental games carry a scimitar. In films, this is a key feature identifying them as Orientals; in CVGs, it also carries the technical reading of marking the figure as an enemy, so that the player can discern between "dangerous" and "harmless" figures in a cluttered screen space. When, upon death, the figure loses the scimi-

tar (such as in *Arabian Magic*, 1992), this is meant as a visual cue that this figure no longer poses a threat, not that it ceases to be Oriental. Even narrative contiguity is being technologically dissected and re-assembled through storytelling algorithms which create emergent plots based on a formalist understanding of narrativity particularly suited to computer implementation. Recently, multiplayer games such as the Korean *Silkroad* (2005-6) aim at a collaborative retelling of Oriental narratives by allowing players from diverse personal cultural backgrounds to impersonate figures from their own imagination.

Political and societal backdrop

Another interesting observation is a certain interdependence between computer games and the way political processes and events, along with their representations in Western mass media, shape the imagination of the region in the general public. Since CVGs are usually produced with their consumer base in mind, they tend to incorporate and reflect these imaginations as they change over time. An especially obvious case is the field of military simulation games, most of which put the player into the role of a (mostly US) military commander, foot soldier, tank driver, or fighter pilot in a number of different scenarios worldwide. In the late 1980s, against the backdrop of the first Palestinian Intifada and the US bombings of Tripoli and Benghazi; these scenarios usually included missions in the eastern Mediterranean (*F-15 Strike Eagle II*, 1989) or in Libya, which figured prominently in games such as the extremely violent *Commando Libya* (1986) with its notorious execution scene, or *Airborne Ranger* (1987), the first tactical simulation game. After the Gulf War in 1991, the "Iraq theatre" immediately became a prominent operational arena in military simulation games, such as the 1991 add-on mission disk for *F-15 Strike Eagle II*, where Iraq replaced the formerly rather diffuse "Mediterranean" scenario, and many other games, staying popular throughout the 1990s as the Oriental war scenario per se (*Back to Baghdad*, 1996, or *M1 Tank Platoon II*, 1998). In the second half of the 1990s, it began to be accompanied by other, increasingly detailed Middle Eastern scenarios as the political backdrop changed, such as Yemen after the Yemeni civil war of 1994 (*Apache Longbow*, 1995), Somalia after the failure of UN operations (*F-16 Multi-role Fighter*, 1998), or Afghanistan after the victory of the Taliban (*Hind*, 1998). Since September 11, the focus shifted somewhat; recent games often focusing either on US special forces in Middle Eastern countries (*Full Spectrum Warrior*, 2003) or on counterterrorist operations (*Terrorist Takedown* series, 2004-05). Computer games as consumable goods with rather short market cycles thus allow conclusions on short-term conceptualizations and representations of the Orient among consumers.

However, Edward Said's hypothesis that the Western-imagined Orient is an ahistorical entity, that the Orient of the Arabian Nights and of Palestinian suicide bombers are one and the same, does not hold well for CVGs. Games portraying a contemporary and a historical or fantastical Orient constitute separate categories. Few games exist where connections are drawn between Near Eastern settings and ancient, particularly Egyptian mythology, as in the *Metal Slug* series (1996-2006), where, after fighting turbaned thugs in a Middle Eastern city, the players confront mummies in an Egyptian tomb; or in *Daughter of the Serpent* (1992), an adventure game revolving around ancient Egyptian magic set in a minutiously detailed nineteenth-century Egypt; however, these instances remain exceptions.

How can this approach contribute to Islamic Studies and related disciplines? Firstly, the use of Oriental representations in CVGs allows detailed examinations how these representations are deployed and interconnected, especially regarding the reincorporation of established motifs from other genres, such as literature or art, as well as the adaptation of this imagined Orient to the technical realities of the new interactive medium—whereas in static, literary, or pictorial media the Orient is imagined, in interactive media it can be enacted. Secondly, CVGs allow Western representations of the Orient to be studied in terms of their consumption. While connections between consumption-driven popular entertainment culture and the use of Oriental representations are well known, "Orientalism" is still mainly understood mainly as a mode of cultural production rather than consumption. Games are interesting objects of study here whose consumption is well documented in many forms, ranging from sales figures and popularity rankings to reviews, "walk-through" solution guides, and the emergence of fan communities. We can thus see how representations are accepted, reinforced,



US soldiers in an Oriental courtyard in *Full Spectrum Warrior* (2003)

modified, or rejected on grounds of technical innovation and detail, but also on grounds of familiarity and convergence with political configurations and existing Orientalist subtexts in the target audience. Another aspect are their short product cycles, resulting in feedback loops where producers, intent on maximizing revenue, implement their own assumptions of their audience's tastes, expectations, and consumption habits. Authorial intent and representational strategies within computer games are thus subject to short-term retroactive influence from their consumers.³

Computer games as "neglected media"

As this argument suggests, CVGs should be discussed in a broader context of "neglected media." Briefly, neglected media exhibit strong popular appeal and economic relevance, contrasted by a lack of cultural prestige and scientific coverage. Often, they have a profound impact on the collective imaginary although this "passive" knowledge is seldom accepted as culturally relevant. Examples could include computer games, tabletop role-playing, trading card or board games, comic books, music videos, events, concerts, performances, or pinball machines, as well as corresponding paratextual material such as package designs or advertisements for games. It is methodologically useful to consider them from an explicit overarching "neglected media" standpoint instead of viewing instances of them in the light of specialized disciplines such as, popular or fan culture studies or even more specific subfields⁴ which obstruct the view on general similarities in the mechanisms of cultural representation within these media. Orientalist representations tend to be reproduced in neglected media in more explicit and graphic forms partly because these media are considered less relevant in cultural discourse and thus less subject to media critique.

Key arguments presented here for CVGs can be applied to these media correspondingly. Firstly, in any medium that depends on state-of-the-art technology, technological innovation will immediately impact representations of cultural content such as the "Orient." Secondly, since these media are aimed at a public whose own conceptions of the "Orient" are influenced by political and societal events, representations tend to reflect these political and historical contingencies rather than existing in an ahistorical space; historical tie-ins are equally understudied in computer games as in other "neglected media" such as events or comic books. Lastly, since most of these media operate in an economic context where profit is dependent on consumption, patterns of media consumption and usage are a promising way to study how representations of the "Orient" are reproduced and perpetuated.

Notes

1. T. Boellstorff, "A Ludicrous Discipline? Ethnography and Game Studies," *Games and Culture* 1, no.1 (2006): 29-35.
2. J. MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).
3. R. Döbeli, *Dekonstruktion des ökonomischen Diskurses* (Bamberg: Difo-Druck, 1995).
4. See, e.g., the *Board Game Studies* journal at <http://boardgamesstudies.org>.

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