When Geopolitics Meets the Game Industry
A Study of Arabic Video Games and What They Teach Us

Abstract
Concomitant with its recent growth, politics have in several cases pervaded the video gaming industry (as in America’s Army by the US Army in 2003 or Special Force by the Hezbollah). Other games deserve closer scrutiny. This article focuses on Quraish, its Syrian developer Afkar Media, and on the reactions to its creation and diffusion. However, instead of being a simple tool of political manipulation, this game is part of a larger phenomenon: an endogenous set of statements from Arab societies about themselves, to themselves and the West. This article intends to demonstrate that popular objects can be used to make autonomous statements about society challenging both endogenous orthodoxy and exogenous Orientalism.

In the past decade, allusions to real events in video games have grown in parallel with their technical complexity. Since the American video game industry has become a bigger market than Hollywood, politics has become much more visible within it. Unexpected actors have begun to re-appropriate this media in order to openly advance their agenda (America’s Army by the US army in 2003, Special Force by Hezbollah, etc.). First- and third-person shooters are particularly useful for carrying a particular message, thanks to their immersive characteristics.

Besides several ambiguous Western games (where the enemy is sometimes represented as being of foreign descent) and obvious responses by Hezbollah (where the characters kill soldiers wearing the Star of David), the Syrian company Afkar Media sells games that deserve closer scrutiny.

The focus will be put on its most recent game, Quraish, on the Afkar company itself, and on reactions to the game. The game is not a direct means of political manipulation toward radicalization, but it is part of a larger phenomenon: an endogenous set of statements (whose radicalism is a small component) by Arab societies about themselves, to themselves and the Western world. If Quraish can be
considered a “tolerance test towards games depicting sensitive events in Islamic history”,¹ the Western public is a target as well.

This article uses a methodology of content analysis, based on qualitative description. Its objectives are: (1) to show the existence of artefacts of popular culture which are emancipated enough from controversies with the Western world to make an autonomous statement about their societies; (2) to show that this autonomous statement is not free from political motives linked to the relation with the West characterized by a feeling of humiliation. The article consists of three parts. The first explains the specificities of the game (its distribution, its technical characteristics and its subject matter) and its developer, Afkar Media. The second examines Afkar’s desire to put an end to Orientalism in video games: (1) Quraish’s features resembling any Western strategy game; (2) Quraish, like Civilization, being immune to political manipulation in favour of the military, which is obvious with first-person shooters like America’s Army (United States Department of Defense, 2002) or Special Force (Lebanon’s Hezbollah, 2003). The third part explores the political content of the game, characterised by an interpretation of history which (1) is free of religious correctness, and (2) matches the cultural demands of Arab societies.

**Description of the games**

Afkar’s C.E.O., project manager and game director Radwan Kasmiya, started up Afkar Media in 1997 with five employees. The company now employs twenty-five people, and has offices in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.² Principally an advertising company, video games are only a small part of Afkar’s activities. In the credits of Quraish, the development team seems to be composed of fewer than ten people. Radwan Kasmiya explains the game cost around US$100,000 to develop. For Western developers, this budget level was common in the 1990s, but is nowadays totally obsolete.³

Since 1998 Afkar has created several games, including the relatively famous Under Ash (2002) and Under Siege (2005), both belonging to the first-person

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³ According to the Entertainment Software Association (the U.S. video gaming industry lobby), the average developing costs in the U.S. were US$40,000 USD in the early nineties; they reached US$10 million for a large title in 2004, [http://www.theesa.com/newsroom/seriousbusiness.pdf](http://www.theesa.com/newsroom/seriousbusiness.pdf) (accessed 15.05.2013). According to the Syndicat national des jeux vidéos (the French video gaming industry lobby), the average costs for developing a PC game in France are €2 million, and more than €10 million for console games (see the SNJV chart in a report by the magazine Jeuxvidéos.com: [http://www.jeuxvideo.com/dossiers/00013178/tout-sur-le-prix-de-vos-jeux-le-cout-global-d-un-developpement-007.htm](http://www.jeuxvideo.com/dossiers/00013178/tout-sur-le-prix-de-vos-jeux-le-cout-global-d-un-developpement-007.htm) (accessed 15.05.2013). The biggest titles now have budgets that reach several tens of millions of dollars, especially in the case of multi-platform editing (PC and consoles).
When Geopolitics Meets the Game Industry

The shooter genre (FPS). These games were aimed at counterbalancing the negative image of the Arab/Muslim world, especially in Western countries. Speaking about "digital emancipation", Radwan Kasmiya explains that Afkar’s role is to "help [Arabs] to feel equal to other nations so that they can develop into a civilization which will enrich the surrounding world and not only take from it". The first game sets the player in the events of the second intifada, while the second retells the killing of Muslim worshipers in Hebron by Baruch Goldstein. If Afkar claims these games deconstruct the victimising image Israel built for itself, these games merely reverse the victimisation and present Israel as the arch-enemy. If it is legitimate to use video games to expose the damage, physical and psychological, of the Israeli occupation, Afkar was neither really building "a bridge, advantageous for both sides (...) [nor] trying to break the stereotype models of thinking on both sides, when the West is for Muslims being presented by Britney Spears and our culture is for the West is being presented by Osama Bin Laden". The FPS genre seems inappropriate for this kind of goal, even if it focuses on current events, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is an unavoidable subject in that matter. Nowadays, “the question of Palestine is a bitter mixture of sympathy, irritation, humiliation and a feeling of shame for not being able to help”. It is then not a surprise that both games were weak at establishing intercultural dialogue.

It is only in 2007 that Quraish experimented with a far more convincing game regarding “digital emancipation” and a bridge between the West and the Middle East. It is a more mature game, which attempts to re-appropriate history and help Arabs and Muslims to earn the same respect and admiration as other ‘civilisations’ in the collective imagination.

Future Afkar projects include Swords of Heaven, which will “cover the Crusades from a Muslim perspective and explore the rise of extremism on both sides and the religious and cultural roots of the modern crisis”. The other project is a game called Road Block Buster, where the player takes the role of a Palestinian child who will have to help his fellow Palestinians pass through Israeli checkpoints, using his cunning and without violence.

Quraish is a special game in several respects. First, it is a game that cannot be obtained easily. Second, its technical specifications are lower than average. Third, it deals with the birth of Islam and the caliphate.

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4 Sisler, ‘Digital…’.
5 Ibidem.
7 Sisler, ‘Digital…’.
A product difficult to acquire

In order to explain the context in which the game has been launched on the market, we will describe the unusual steps we had to take to get it.

On Afkar’s website, *Quraish* was “expected to become a hit in all Middle East markets.” It is indeed difficult to get it outside the Middle East. This article focuses on the Muslim market because of the language barrier, but it would be interesting to analyze the impact on (Muslim and non-Muslim) customers in the Western world. The game’s website only lists three distributors, which appear to be Islamic bookstores, located in the United Kingdom, Australia and Denmark. We conducted regular searches on popular shopping websites (such as Ebay and Amazon) in order to obtain a used copy of the game, but there were no sellers. We then decided to buy it in an English bookstore. The shop only ships in Europe, so you cannot order the game if you do not have a postal address in the continent. The game is actually sold for almost €18 (roughly £20). The Australian bookstore ships it worldwide, but the shipping costs are higher and the game itself costs more, at A$60 (roughly €40). The Danish bookstore also ships worldwide, but the game is still more expensive than in the English one: DKK249 (roughly £3). Other ways to obtain the game may be investigated in person in various Islamic bookstores in Western countries, but dealing with these three online bookstores is the simplest way if you do not know precisely where to begin the search. The illegal downloading of the game through peer-to-peer means became common in summer 2010. The game costs an average amount for a Western game, but is 50% to 100% more than any Western game with the same ambitions (a game which includes state of the art technology and a solid scenario, and has been released by the biggest company in the region).

From this experience, we can deduce that Dar al-Fikr, the publisher of Afkar’s game, either could not afford a wide distribution, or was trying to evade political censorship by means of limited but secured contacts. Distribution in the Near East is easy, according to Radwan Kasmiya, because networks are in place already. Concerning the economic issues, Afkar teams “are racing in a pool full of sharks, yet they are surviving,” as the editor of an Arabic-language gaming magazine puts it. According to Radwan Kasmiya, the market is not mature yet: “There is no legitimate game market to speak of in the Middle East. Piracy is nearly 90% of total sales and many Arab countries have no laws protecting intellectual property or trademarks”.

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10 Sisler, ‘In Videogames You…’.


Added to the fact that this industry is still in a fledgling state, Afkar’s business model is operating within strong constraints. However, Syria has fostered the first Arabic video games, and Afkar, established in 1997, is the first and biggest game developer in the Middle East. The company has certainly had time to acquire experience and deal with these constraints. Therefore, Afkar’s will to acquire market shares outside the Middle East is certainly not limited to political considerations (“Quraish is going to help people in the Western countries better understand the people who are living in the East”) but also to penetrate markets where illegal copies are less frequent.

Concerning the political issues, the facts are less clear, and we can only build hypotheses. Posts on the English forum of the game suggest that political difficulties made it difficult for the company to bypass distributors and work only with Internet distribution, at least in the early stages of the release: “the problem we are facing here is the money wiring problem, we have too many complications regarding this issue (not technical), however we will solve them soon” explains “Guest” in a post. Radwan Kasmiya and Mohamed Hani Safa, presented in the credits as game designer and additional programmer respectively, are the direct administrators and moderators of both the English and the Arabic forums.

**A game with modest technical characteristics**

*Quraish* was launched in 2007, and is the latest game developed by Afkar. However its technical characteristics are below the standards of other comparable games of this period. The minimum system requirements are the same as those of *Civilization IV*, released in 2005, two years before *Quraish*. The game is supported on only one CD, and required three years of development. The game is available either entirely in Arabic (written texts and audio) or in a bilingual version (English for written texts, Arabic for the audio). Translations are sometimes awkward or incorrect, but this problem exists even with games translated from English to other European languages, and the narrative is still understandable. Radwan Kasmiya explains that these problems are due to the translation from classical Arabic, which is used in large parts of the narrative.

The modest characteristics of *Quraish* are apparent from the short movie introduction. The graphics engine looks old, and the graphic options are limited to average screen resolutions, colour depth and some texture details. Similarly the audio options are limited to in-game sounds and music tuning. The advantage of this is that the game is very light (virtually no loading time with a recent computer) and can be played even on old computers, potentially increasing its customers’ pool.

In spite of these below-average characteristics, Afkar seems to have exploited every penny of its budget in an optimal manner. It offers the first 3D experience from an Arab game. Each element in the game is modelled in real 3D, and a zooming function is included. These functions, nowadays common, have been integrated to

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13 Quoted in Roumani, ‘Muslims Craft Their…’.


15 Sisler, ‘In Videogames You…’.
RTS (real-time strategy) games since roughly 2000. For its first shot in this genre, then, Afkar has chosen the hardest way, but maybe the most beneficial. 3D is indeed one of the most important marketing elements (presented clearly on the website of the game and in the manual) of the game, and this choice shows Afkar’s ambition and capacity to produce unmistakable games, determined to offer an impressive visual experience before anything else.

**The concept: To take part in the birth of Islam and the caliphate**

*Quraish* takes the gamer back to the 6th and 7th centuries, during the transition between *Jahiliyyah* (the ‘days of ignorance’, referring to the pre-Islamic era) and the *post-hijra* era. *Quraish* is specifically the name of the main Arabic tribe in Mecca at that time. The Prophet Muhammad belonged to one of its sub-clans; the introduction of Islam by Muhammad led to internal divisions within the tribe and conflicts.

The game includes the political forces of this time. Four factions are present: the Bedouins, portraying the pre-Islamic clan societies living in the desert of Arabia; the Muslims, portraying Muhammad’s followers and their struggle to create the first Islamic state; the Persians, portraying the Sassanid Empire; and the Romans, portraying the Byzantine Empire. Several types of games can be played: campaign, death match and regicide.

In the campaign mode, the player portrays a Bedouin sheik’s son, who inherit his father’s leadership and must strive for the survival of his tribe in the desert of Arabia. In the beginning, struggling for water against other tribes, the sheikh will quickly become involved in a far greater conflict, including the Persians then the Romans, and the Muslims. The game manual invites the player to follow the campaigns in this order: ‘First Encounter’ depicts life in Arabia before the birth of Islam. The player has to survive in the desert, then to unify the Arab tribes against the threatening Persian Empire and their Arab ally tribes. One mission recreates the battle against the Persians at Dhir Qar in 570 AD. The next and final mission of this campaign takes place in 627, and involves the Muslims. The player then has the choice to embrace Islam, to keep his pagan ‘old religion’ but pay tribute to the Muslims and gain their protection, or to fight the Muslims. Then, the campaign ‘Apostasy Wars’ is focused on the internal battles of the fledgling caliphate. Then two military campaigns follow, relating the conquest of Iraq (and the battles against the Persians) and of the Near East (and the battles against the Romans). Before each mission, the narrative explains the stakes of the incoming battle in detail, and afterwards, the narrative concludes on the gains of the mission and the context of the next one.

“Beyond the crusades, oil and terrorism”16: Putting an end to video game Orientalism

This chapter focuses on a comparison of *Quraish* with Western video games, since Europe and the US are the biggest markets for these products, because the

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16 The key elements of the Western image of Middle East, according to Radwan Kasmiya, quoted in Halter, ‘Islamogaming…’.
West and Middle East have strong and complex relations, and because these relations often have repercussions in games. The second biggest video games producer, Japan, does not share these characteristics.

Regarding the basic structure of the game, *Quraish* appears to have all the classic features of an Real Time Strategy (RTS) games. As Vit Sisler explains in his interview with Radwan Kasmiya:

> The structural differences between Arab and Western production are almost dispensable. When Kasmiya showed me *Quraish* for the first time, we discussed the level of realism achieved by the game, through aspects such as the introduction of water as a crucial resource in a semi-arid landscape, or the economic and religious connotations of slavery. While adding to the game’s realism, these aspects do not alter the fundamental game play.  

The missions bring very little originality to the RTS genre, in spite of the minor variations: gathering resources, raising buildings, securing the camp/town, annihilating the enemy. The utilitarian conception of people is conserved in *Quraish*: workers/slaves, soldiers, blacksmiths, religious men, etc. However, *Quraish*’s visual identity is adapted to the Arabian landscape. It “is distinctively based on Islamic historiography and pays attention to topological, linguistic, and cultural details, as well as to the representation of the Byzantine enemies,” notes Sisler. These details contribute to the immersion into the environment of the game, but do not modify its mechanisms. For example, water management is of the utmost importance, and the player has to maintain enough resources for his people, but it is just one more resource to take care of compared to other RTSs. As Sisler explains regarding the RTS genre as a whole, “aspects previously novel to strategy games, like culture, religion, or nationalism” serve merely to “help the player become more politically, economically, and militarily successful”.

From this point of view, *Quraish* is close to Western games. Afkar’s goal was neither to radically alter the genre nor to transmit a vengeful political message to games misrepresenting Arabs and the Muslims. Instead, it seems as if Afkar wanted to adopt the tropes of the RTS (gathering, building, securing, fighting) with added cultural value. This added value takes the form of the visual identity of the game, the narrative in classical Arabic, references to Arab/Muslim culture and the opportunity offered to the player to participate in the early hours of the caliphate.

**A game independent from the ‘military-entertainment complex’**

The Western digital entertainment industry, especially the branch of it based in the United States, has worked hand in hand with the military for decades, thanks to its simulation features. This collaboration is mostly apparent regarding FPSs like *America’s*
Army, the game developed by the American Department of Defense being the most obvious example. According to Tim Lenoir, the American entertainment industry has hosted several military engineers and programming tools, but the most decisive phenomenon was the use of gaming technology. As a matter of fact, the huge progress made by the entertainment industry in the 1990s, in terms of realistic gameplay and graphics and artificial intelligence, reached a level of sophistication unmatched by the military. As a result, the U.S. military began to use modifications of popular games, like Doom, to train their troops. This moved another step forward in the 2000s, where games were intended to be used before recruitment, as a tool to attract more people in the army. America’s Army (portraying a boot camp, 2002), Real War (portraying an American war against terrorism, released in October 2001 but commissioned before September 11), Kuma War (recreating missions from the war in Iraq, 2004), Mercenaries 2: World in Flames (presenting the potential invasion of Caracas by the U.S. Army, 2008) were all supposed to satisfy an avid demand for realistic war games, and possibly convince them to play the ‘real game’ by joining the army. As Tim Lenoir says:

A frequent trope that appears in the vision statements of the various architects of the military-entertainment complex is the goal of fusing the virtual and the real, the idea of having simulation and training take place under such realistic seeming conditions that the simulation cannot only be taken as a substitute for the real but might actually be an interface of a command and control system to the real event itself.  

The ‘usual suspects’ of these games (Arabs, Iranians, etc.), conscious of the political messages they included, led them to consider them merely as a new tool for an old imperialism, with relevant arguments. For example, in 2005, Kuma War released a new mission called ‘Assault on Iran’. Understanding that past missions had been developed in order to be close as possible to real events (‘Spring Break Fallujah’ in 2004 and ‘Battle in Sadr’ City in 2005), Iran reacted negatively and a political group formed one year later, the Union of Islamic Student Societies, in order to produce a game meant to counterweight this bad publicity. More vigorous responses came from Lebanon, where Hezbollah released two games (Special Force and Special Force 2, 2003 and 2007), which adopt “the rhetoric typical for Hezbollah promotional materials: one of resistance and martyrdom. The game constructs its hero as a fearless warrior winning against the odds, despite being outnumbered by ‘Zionist forces’”.

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21 Ibidem.  
22 Halter, ‘Islamogaming…’.  
23 Sisler, ‘Palestine in Pixels…’. 
After creating several FPSs, a genre apparently condemned to constantly reformulate present events,24 Afkar decided to plunge into the past through the RTS genre with Quraish. The specificity of the RTS genre (focusing on the past) breaks the natural Manichean pattern of FPSs, because they generally allow the player to play as different factions. Already, Civilization III (2001) has been presented by Sisler as “breaking the old pattern”25 of presenting the Middle East as a heaven for terrorists and extremists that only deserve to be cleaned up by a muscular (American) military response.

A game dependent on political constraints

Hasan Salem, a director at Dar al-Fikr, producer and game manager at Afkar, expects Quraish will promote a more “modern” Islam.26 This can be expressed in two dimensions, and both have been used in Quraish. First, Afkar decided to avoid fundamentalist views about the rise of Islam, characterized by a fossilized and apologetic storytelling about the pious ancestors (salaf as-salihin, the models for the current salafis), in order to show a more realistic narrative. The game deals openly with Muslim conquests, wars and proselytizing against neighbouring empires and pagan Arabs. Second, Afkar intended to produce a game which would not merely be a pretext for gamers to bask in violence, blood and domination over infidels, but would include pedagogic content about the history of Islam and its civilization, and the ways in which the Caliphate expanded. The first section will explore the rather large freedom of interpretation of history taken by the game (which makes it closer to Western games), before examining its will to incorporate culturally commendable content (which takes it farther from them).

A rather large freedom of interpretation of history

According to Sisler, “Radwan Kasmiya claims that they want to show early Islamic history as accurately as possible without legends and superstition. Such an approach doesn’t always have to be in accord with the folk Islamic devotion and might face a harsh critique”.27 This part of the mission can be considered accomplished, since Afkar’s interpretation of history is pretty accurate, or at least as accurate as a game can be. This relative realism is also noted by Sisler, who explains that “Quraish is distinctively based on Islamic historiography and pays attention to topological, linguistic, and cultural details, as well as to the representation of the Byzantine enemies”.28

24 “Strategy games are mostly used for modelling the past, while first-person shooter games typically mediate the present”, Sisler, ‘Palestine in Pixels...’.
26 Roumani, ‘Muslims Craft Their...’.
27 Sisler, ‘Digital...’.
28 Sisler, ‘Palestine in Pixels...’.
The different factions are presented in equal details, and their strengths are equivalent. As the manual introduction frankly explains, “you will not even change history.” Even so, the history of the caliphate may be presented in a glamorized manner, and the distortions of history are inherent in the form of a video game, which have specific constraints.

Besides, the player is not forced to play the Muslims. At the beginning of the campaign, he has to play a pagan Bedouin sheikh who joins the Prophet only later, during the ‘Wars of apostasy’. Two immediate action modes are included (the classic ‘Deathmatch’ mode and the ‘Regicide’ mode, a variation of the first) which allow the player to command an army of Muslims, Persians or Romans.

This specificity of the RTS genre does not transcend the binary nature of mainstream games, characterized by two options to finish the game: winning or losing. But the acceptance of mainstream gameplay is likely to suit Afkar’s objectives better: to enjoy relative commercial success, or to contribute to ‘digital emancipation’. Afkar has firmly pursued the first objective. Quraish indeed includes the classic gameplay of a RTS game (winning more and more elaborate missions, defeating powerful enemies, etc.), offers rather good graphics (true 3D and zooming function), and attention has been paid to the packaging and the online support. If the second objective has been reached, it is thanks to the mainstream form too, by not exactly being an ‘activist game’. Indeed, Quraish avoids the traps of being an awkward, aggressive response to Manichean Western games (as is Hezbollah’s Special Force), but also of being too serious, moralistic and averse to violence (as are Global Conflicts: Palestine and Peace Maker). The first trap leads to disillusions: the Arab and Muslim identity is falsely elevated. This phenomenon is shown by this reaction from a teenager from Gaza:

It is worse with [Special Force] because there I have this feeling that I am really beating the Israelis and winning the cause. But I know it cannot happen here. I know it is not so easy to blow up their tanks or shoot down their airplanes.

The second trap leads to frustration: the Arab and Muslim identity is neither glamorized nor minimized, but nothing is done about the pejorative image transmitted.

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29 For an analysis of alternative games falling within a different framework than the ‘winner/loser’ opposition, see the comments about the ‘counter games’ War in the North (Lebanon, 2006), Raid Gaza! (Newgrounds, 2009) and Wolmert against Rallah (Israel, 2006). See also the ‘activist games’ Global Conflicts: Palestine (Serious Games, 2007, where the player is a journalist arriving in Palestine and has to explore the game-world to write an article on what is happening) and Peace Maker (Impact Games, 2007, where the player incarnates Israel’s Prime Minister or the President of the Palestinian Authority in order to find a peaceful solution). Sisler, ‘Palestine in Pixels…’.

30 When explaining his work, Radwan Kasmiya says “we also don’t want to do something about Arabs killing Westerners.”, quoted in Roumani, ‘Muslims Craft Their...’.

by Western games, and their dense political content discourages ordinary players. Middle Eastern games are scrutinized by Western observers looking for any sign of support of terrorism, jihad, anti-Semitism, or the ‘extermination of infidels’. Dealing with remote events in remote places implying remote empires allows Quraish to talk about the violence surrounding the birth of Islam without triggering fear and suspicion from the West. Muhammad’s conquests in Quraish are as deprived of geopolitical implications as Napoleon’s or Moctezuma’s in Civilization. And the classic RTS characteristics are likely to attract players who do not want to deal with politics when they want to enjoy a game.

**A will to incorporate culturally commendable content**

As Sisler explains, “the key topics pertaining to Arab production continue to be issues of identity and religious and cultural relevance”. This assertion appears to be even more accurate regarding Quraish, which aims at telling a story about the birth of Islam. But in contrast to games dealing with present issues (Western imperialism, the Israeli occupation of Palestine, etc.), the context of hijra allows greater liberty to create a more neutral self-representation. Dealing with the Israeli occupation, for example, leads almost inevitably to a need to “reverse the polarities of the narrative and substitute the Arab Muslim hero for the American soldier and schematize Israelis as enemies”. The RTS genre allowed Afkar to produce a statement by Arabs about Arabs devoid of any reference to the West. This does not mean the West did not influence the game: the Western audience is a target claimed by Afkar. But for Afkar the game was the occasion to formulate a statement on the Arab world from A to Z, independent of current geopolitical issues.

The game is independent of the news, but it still depends on political and cultural demands, to which Afkar answers twofold: first, the will to elevate the game from an entertaining product to a noble pedagogic tool; second, the will to re-appropriate the history of Islam, in a positive but still lucid manner.

**The opposition to ‘instinct’ and ‘destructive industry’**

The first lines of the introduction in the manual are clear regarding the high cultural level aimed by Afkar: the game must be an entertaining product through which you learn about history, the past, Islam and spirituality, and the importance of fighting

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32 As a gamer and game developer says about Under Siege: “You must feel the challenge in the game. They are paying so much attention to the political and religious part, they are not concentrating on the technical parts of the game.”, quoted in Roumani, ‘Muslims Craft Their…’.

33 Sisler, ‘Palestine in Pixels…’.

34 Sisler, ‘Palestine in Pixels…’.

35 Proof of this is numerous: on the game box, we can find a favourable quote from USA Today and Computer Gaming World reviews; in an interview, Radwan Kasmiya hopes the game will “help people in the West better understand the people who are living in the East”, Roumani, ‘Muslims Craft Their…’.
for a community. Gaming for the fun of it is seen as a waste of time, and all too widespread in the industry. The texts implicitly refers to the Enlightenment and its faith in human rationality, humanism and progress, in an old-fashioned style (very common in popular speeches) praising the “modernity of Islam”:

Quraish attempts to liberate reason in a world of amusement dominated by instinct. It simply tries to turn amusement into a constructive rather than a destructive industry. Unfortunately, most of the makers of amusement in the world are inclined to inject increased doses of the elements that kill humanity using a deeply selfish, violent, sexual, commonplace, racial and material style. Upon finishing the various levels of Quraish, you will not gain a kiss from a heroine [which may be a reference to the famous Mario games] or use a destructive weapon or a fast car to demolish all that comes in your way. You will not even change history. But rather, you will have a better comprehension of the concept of time. What is more important still is that such comprehension is accompanied by an overwhelming pleasure. Such pleasure might appear to be unfamiliar. You do not need to worry because those feelings spring from your mind rather than your instinct.

The manual goes on by asking questions which the game is supposed to answer, and, with a hint of exaggeration (or hypocrisy?), presents the Muslim expansion as a gift:

Were the Muslims as other invaders who crossed the paths of the world? What gives them distinction over others?
How could they become a part of human civilization although they were absolutely illiterate?
How could they hold different races, cultures and religions while the world’s peoples endeavor to eradicate one another?
How could they defeat the greatest two empires in the world and build a state which we still live in to the present moment?
Were Muslim generals such as Khalid Ibn al-Walid and Abu ‘Ubaidah, like Napoleon and Alexander, aspiring to register their ambitions in letters of blood and fire?

Islam is presented as the object which gave the Bedouins science and knowledge; the caliphate is presented as a realm of tolerance towards non-Muslims which has survived to the present day; Muslim conquerors are presented as wiser and more civilized than Western ones. This excessively positive description has two goals: first, reassuring the Middle Eastern players about their identity and history; second, striking the Western players with an unusually flattering presentation. Although history

36 “Unlike the American games, where the hero is usually individualized, Arab shooter games generally promote a higher obligation to a collective spiritual whole,” notes Sisler, ‘Palestine in Pixels…”.
38 Ibidem.
does not exactly match the previous positive statements, they hold a part of the truth that is not said enough, according to Radwan Kasmiya:

Most video games on the market are anti-Arab and anti-Islam. Arab gamers are playing games that attack their culture, their beliefs, and their way of life. The youth who are playing the foreign games are feeling guilt. On the outside they look like they don’t care, but inside they do care.39

Besides the goal of helping Arab players boost their self-esteem lowered by Western games, Radwan Kasmiya wanted to show the world a more positive image of the Arab-Muslim world, and even suggests a rare self-criticism:

I get very embarrassed by the way we are showing our civilization. There were rational laws that were governing Muslims at that time. This allowed this civilization to last for a long time, and to accept the other civilizations that they came in touch with. It was not a conservative or sectarian civilization. But people have stopped taking the ideas behind the laws, and are taking the laws themselves. They do not understand the essence of the laws.40

In the game, several original details show this will to transcend ‘instinct’ and ‘destructive industry’. Although they do not deeply modify the gameplay based on conquest, their goal is to show (more or less convincingly) that ‘constructive industry’ is taken seriously. The whole morale system, for example, is specific. In RTS games, units usually have a life bar and a morale bar, in order to measure their physical integrity and their determination. In Quraish, the morale bar is displaced by a faith bar, whose level is determined by injuries, the level of taxes, the leadership of the general and the influence of the religious men. The presence of religious men among the troops raises their faith level. The religious men have several special capacities (identical for Muslims, Romans and Persians). The first is the classic healing capacity, but the other two are rather innovative: the ‘conviction’ capacity allow the religious men to convert enemy units; the ‘writing’ upgrade enhance the capacities of the religious men. A minor detail, but writing is of the utmost importance in the Muslim world. Considered a gift of God, the Arabic language is revered and praised through calligraphy, a major art in Arab societies. While in Civilization, writing is merely part of a technological tree indicating a level of development, in Quraish it represents an almost magical ability. The narrative, spoken in classical Arabic in the beginning of every mission, contributes to the immersion into the universe of the game, and pays tribute to the “Arab oral culture heritage”.41

39 Roumani, ‘Muslims Craft Their...’.
40 Ibidem.
ability to free Arab or African slaves (gaining their abiding loyalty in the process) and the diplomatic and trade screens, are used to explain that the caliphate can be built through war, proselytizing or charisma. During the missions, the player receives advice from Ibagh, a loyal fighter who favors energetic and muscular solutions, and from Abu Qutada, a religious old man who encourages diplomacy and cunning. The player is also forced to make difficult choices, having to balance his tribe’s survival and Arab unity against enemies from outside. The player has to cope with moral dilemmas, which may lead him to understand better the choices made by real characters at the hijra time.

A game that leads to re-appropriation of history

When speaking about Afkar’s games, Radwan Kasmiya evokes ‘digital dignity’:

their games are meant to deconstruct the negative image of Arabs and Muslims transmitted by Western games and emancipate them from this image. But in contrast to their previous games, Quraish does not invent heroes and battles, but re-creates real (or near-real) ones. In this process of emancipation, the game cannot be neutral: the Muslims are the most glamorized faction. In FPSs and RTSs, the different factions generally have specific strengths and weaknesses that impact on their strategies, and then on the player her- or himself through the gameplay. As Sisler notes about Command & Conquer: Generals, a game depicting a fictional global battle between the U.S., China and an Arab ‘Global Liberation Army’:

The description of these struggling factions is significant. “The United States has powerful and expensive units, including well-armed infantry and vehicles that can heal themselves. Their superior intelligence capabilities and flexible air force allow them to strike quickly anywhere on the map.” The Arab Global Liberation Army, on the other hand, is distinguished by “terrorists with car bombs and truck bombs, suicide bombers with explosives strapped to their bodies, anthrax and biotoxin delivery systems and angry mobs of Arabs wielding AK-47s.” In such cases, as Gerard Greenfield has noted, “the choosing to be ‘enemy’ adds no objectivity, it just makes it harder to win – the enemy is still depicted in racist terms”.

Quraish does not go this far concerning the imbalance between the factions. Each one is approximately of equal force, the Bedouins being perhaps the weakest faction due to their lower technological level. In the manual chapter regarding tactics, the Bedouins are said to be “characterized by the small costs of buildings and units. However, they lack industry and agriculture which are the basis of civilization.” Romans are distinguished “by their excellent armour which makes their armed units the most dangerous and capable of breaking into other armies which are weakly armed. The

42 Sisler, ‘Representation and Self-Representation…’
43 Ibidem.
Romans are also characterized by two kinds of rapid fighting carts.” Persians distinguish themselves “by their war tactics which basically depend on the quick and accurate strikes of their dangerous archers. Persians are also characterized by the heavy elephant units which can have a strong effect on the enemy infantry units”.

The game thus includes classic tactic distinctions in war games: the heavy and expensive troops which smash onto the enemy; the light and mobile troops who rely on hit and run tactics; the cheap and numerous troops who count on the swarming of the enemy. It is in the description of the Muslims that the narrative shows its preference for them: “Muslims are characterized by their faith as well as the existence of distinguished leaders among them. If you are able to use these heroes ideally, you will be able to defeat any army regardless of its size”. The neutral description of the Romans and the Persians then serves to show that Muslims can defeat enemies of great valour. Conviction seems to be the Muslims’ best asset: almost nothing is said regarding their troops, equipment or tactics, and yet they can defeat anyone. The comparison between the Bedouins’ description to that of the Muslims is striking: faith is their only difference, but the former is backward and weak, while the latter can vanquish the strongest empires.

This presentation of the Muslims marks a real re-appropriation of history. Violence, in the game or in history, is not eluded or minimized: the caliphate defeated the Persians and the Romans, and this was the starting point of one of the mightiest empires in the world. If the game is meant to be a tolerance test regarding the possibility to discuss Muhammad and the birth of the caliphate, this presentation is ambiguous: the Muslims are glamorized, but they are also presented as conquerors, and not merely as innocent believers legitimately defending themselves from oppressive aggressors. Reactions on the Internet suggest that the reception among the target population (gamers and journalists in the Middle East and in the West) was positive, but further research has to be made regarding the reaction of theologians or orthodox public figures who might consider this product as not really halal.

Conclusion

_Quraish_ is remarkable because it is the first Middle Eastern games which manages _mutatis mutandis_ to emulate current Western RTSs, openly competing on the same ground as them. But in contrast to Western games (except army funded games like _America’s Army_), _Quraish_, and Afkar games more generally, take responsibility for the political messages they include. This could be termed as ‘post-propagandism’: “the authors realize their media image and intentionally work with the themes of manipulation and propaganda. The freely accessible demo on _Tahta al-Hisar [Under Siege]_ introduces the game with a slogan: ‘A true story or political propaganda? You have the right to decide.’ (…) A short montage of news about Afkar Media follows [the presentation clip], with captions describing their games as political manipulation

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46 Ibidem.
Quraish does not blatantly ignore political issues between the Western world and the Middle East about who has the legitimacy to speak about Arab societies. But the discourse it proposes on identity is subtler and more neutral than in previous Afkar games, since it depicts the beginning of a civilization, and not merely current events.

It is not a tool likely to whip up radicalization, but rather to contribute to help Arabs and Muslims to re-appropriate the information vector (the video game) and its content. Although the game deals with crucial events of Islam, it cannot be considered a proselytizing game, resorting to “Muslim speech”. Much more attention is given to politics (the threatening neighbour empires, the divisions among Arabs) and on the depiction of Arabs, be they pagan or Muslims. In the end, the player controls a tribe of loyal, honorable and selfless people against traitors who collaborate with the Persians and the Romans, who use them without shedding their own blood. In that sense, we can speak not about ‘Muslim speech’, but about an ‘Arab speech’ (a more ‘secular’ version of the former) that draws on glorious events from the past to tell what values modern-day Arabs should incarnate and promote. Therefore, Quraish is based on the same premises as Islamism (a feeling of humiliation, a deprivation of a speech on the Self, an intellectual immobility) but proposes solutions far from the ethical and cultural exclusivism that characterizes rigorous Islamism. The prudent openness which the game proposes is then likely to seduce Arabs disillusioned with rigorous Islamism, and even more Westerners afraid of it.

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47 Sisler, ‘Digital…’.

48 François Burgat defines “Muslim speech” as any political ideology using Muslim references as guidelines for their program. This expression, in his opinion, applies regardless of the ‘radicalism’ of the political formation: “Islamists are political actors who resort on a vocabulary borrowed preferably, even exclusively, and ostensibly from Muslim culture.”, François Burgat, ‘Les mobilisations politiques à référent islamique’ [Political Mobilisation with Reference to Islamism], in La politique dans le monde arabe [Politics in the Arab World], Elizabeth Picard (ed.), Paris: Armand Colin, 2006, p. 79.