

# **American Foreign Policy Justification in Video Games**

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## **Abstract**

Orientalism is a concept defined by Said which is “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the orient’ and ‘the occident’” (Said, 2). Orientalism consists of distinctions that generalize the Occident and Orient’s nature of being or way of knowledge. These distinctions are made to separate any connection between the Orient and the Occident. The media uses Orientalism to make unfair characterizations of Asia. In video games this is especially true; Orientalism is used to negatively characterize American enemies in Asia. Consumers play these games and are presented with Orientalist tropes that may lead them to believe that America is justified in its foreign policy. In this paper, I will explain how video games can be used as a tool to help justify American foreign policy. Then, I will propose research which I wish to conduct on video games.

## **Introduction**

Video games are one of the newer forms of entertainment media. They are a mainstream form of media that attracts millions of players who play billions of hours combined (Politopoulos, 4). Players come from various backgrounds which makes video games one of the most diverse forms of media. Like most media, video games contain messages that creators want their audience to take away. These messages have the power to persuade their audience towards specific beliefs. I believe that through designing elements like character, level, and narrative, video games might persuade players that American foreign policy towards Asia is justified.

The tropes are presented using Orientalism. Orientalism is a concept defined by Said which is “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the orient’ and ‘the occident’” (Said, 2). In other words, Orientalism consists of distinctions that generalize the Occident’s (West’s) and Orient’s (Asia’s, East’s) nature of being or way of knowledge to separate any connection between the two. In video games, creators will use Orientalism to make negative characterizations of specific regions of Asia. For example, there are two tropes which I believe are very central in video games. The first trope is the characterization of the Middle East as a region of evil and uncivil men. The second trope is the characterization of China as an overwhelmingly technologically advanced enemy compared to the United States.

It is also important to understand why we use video games as a focus in our research. We choose video games due to their popularity, impact, and potential. Since video games have such a far reach globally, it is important to focus on them when it comes to the idea of justifying American foreign policy. Also, video games are replacing other forms of media in teaching the public and children about sensitive topics (Höglund). If games teach Americans about sensitive topics, then

give false information about those topics. Finally, video games are an experimental form of media that transforms the possibilities for certain messages and tropes to be presented (Politopoulos, 9). This means that video games can do more than literature and film in terms of presenting certain themes and messages which could be potentially dangerous when it comes to justifying a country's foreign policy.

In this paper, I will prove that video games might persuade players that American foreign policy is justified through game elements. I will then present my research on how I will further prove that certain Orientalist tropes are widespread in the realm of video games. Additionally, I will intend to find more Orientalist tropes that might be hidden within games.

## **Literature Review**

Video games became prevalent in society after the digital revolution. The digital revolution was a shift in industry between the 1950s and 1970s where computers became increasingly common in domestic life (Pariona). This revolution completely changed the lifestyle of people around the globe. During this revolution, information could be communicated via the internet, making globalization more possible than ever before (Pariona). As the digital revolution introduced the world to a new electronic age, video games became a new frontier in the realm of entertainment. This new media thus became experimental and had the potential to become more prominent in culture. Video games ended up becoming one of the most popular forms of media worldwide. Since the digital revolution, "video games—more so than schools, religion, or other forms of popular culture—are teaching Americans about race, gender, sexuality, class, and national identity" (Höglund). This trend is a consequence of the digital revolution and video games' popularity, which can be potentially problematic. Video games in no way are meant to be educational media, which means games can be filled with fictional ideas and beliefs. Also, the creator might have certain biases not reflected in educational media. This is dangerous because most Americans might accept these incorrect ideas they have learned from games as true.

Video games also are particularly unique when you compare them to literature and film. They allow the viewer to become a player that interacts with the world the developer created. The player traverses' environments and talks to characters instead of just watching the events of a story unfold (Politopoulos, 9). Thus, certain themes and messages can be presented more powerfully in video games (Politopoulos, 9). For foreign policy, certain characterizations concerning a region can become more apparent as the player interacts with the region. These regions no longer become a "static image" in the mind of the American viewer, but instead, their experience becomes experimental (Politopoulos, 9). Therefore, video games are a superior form of media regarding presenting certain themes and messages.

Now that we understand the impact video games have on the public, it is important to understand that the United States has already taken advantage of its potential. There are multiple early examples of games, namely *Kuma\War*, *Close Combat*, *America's Army*, and *Full Spectrum Warrior*, which received close aid from the U.S. military (Höglund). This aid differs for each game but ranges from strictly developmental aid to partial or whole funding for these projects (Höglund). These games use the Middle East as a setting to convey Orientalist tropes that characterize the region as evil and uncivil. These characterizations achieve the military's goal to continue war in the region. In fact, the military developed *America's Army* for the purpose of recruitment and propaganda—and this fact has never been denied (Höglund). The game was a response to a lack of Army recruits in 1999 (Höglund). This lack of recruits led “Congress to endorse new ‘aggressive, innovative experiments’ in military recruiting” (Höglund). Therefore, the military originally became interested in video games to recruit more soldiers for war.

While *America's Army* was a recruitment tactic, the other games found a new purpose in terms of entertainment. These games “market war as entertainment in the interest of recruiting or training soldiers ultimately willing to practice military violence.” (Höglund). In these games, they romanticize war to convince the public that the military is a benevolent force that protects against terrorist threats. The intense romanticization of American foreign policy in video games might persuade a common American to join America's cause. This argument became even more prevalent after the events of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. In the years after the attacks, there was a surge of war games that take place in the Middle East (Höglund). The reason there was a surge was to find recruits or convince the continuation of the perpetual War on Terror in the Middle East (Höglund).

Overall, the military understands the impact that video games have on the public and uses this to their advantage. This proves that video games can be easily perverted to persuade viewers to conform to certain ideas. In the military's case, they developed video games to convince the public to either join America's war in the Middle East or to help understand why the war must continue.

### **Why does America use video games for justification?**

Now that we understand that video games are heavily influenced by the views of the military to justify American foreign policy, we need to understand why they do it. The use of video games to justify foreign policy originates from America's inheritance of global dominance. After World War II, America's power and influence greatly increased. As Europe recovered from the devastating war, and their colonies across the world declared independence, America was in an ideal position to take power. They were unravaged by World War II and their economy was boosted from a war economy, which made them stronger compared to Europe. As America

inherited global power, they also inherited traditions and policies that assisted Europeans to stay in power. For example, policies that Europe used like colonialism became neo-colonialism, and alliances like the Entente became NATO, et cetera.

The tradition that is most prevalent in video games is Orientalism. Originally, Europe used Orientalism as a method “for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said, 3). In other words, Europe used Orientalism as a justification for their actions towards Asia during the Age of Imperialism. Similarly, America justifies its actions towards Asia through its system of Neo-Orientalism. Neo-Orientalism can be understood as America’s version of traditional Orientalism where “[American] ideology can easily disguise itself as a neutral non-ideology” (Komel, 3). This is achieved through the entertainment industry perpetuating Orientalist ideas through cultural productions (Komel, 3). In addition, Neo-Orientalism contains new tropes that reflect the modern-day relationships between America and Asia (Behdad). It is worth noting that Neo-Orientalism revolves mostly around Muslims and the Middle East, but I believe that it can be expanded to all regions of Asia.

The reason America must use Neo-Orientalism is to maintain power over regions in Asia, which is how Europeans stayed in power. By disguising negative characterizations of Asia as non-ideology, they might be able to persuade viewers that their actions are justified. This practice is especially prevalent in video games. For example, military-funded projects such as *America’s Army* were used negative characterizations as propaganda tools to muster support and recruits for war in the Middle East. These games might convince an American citizen to accept these characterizations as true, which helps justify American foreign policy

### **Common tropes**

Now that we understand how America inserts its ideology into entertainment media, we need to understand the common tropes that are perpetuated through video games. The two common tropes in video games relate to two theaters of American interest: the Middle East and China. The Middle East is characterized as a land inhabited by evil and uncivil men. This may persuade consumers to believe that America’s War on Terror is justified. China is characterized as a land that is overwhelmingly technologically superior compared to the United States. By portraying America as technologically inferior to China, consumers might support America to advance their technology to compete with China. This justifies America’s ongoing rivalry with China, as the two compete economically and militarily.

American characterizations of the Middle East reflect negative historical interactions with the Middle East in American history. Through events like the September 11<sup>th</sup> Attacks, the 1970’s gas shortage (which was induced by OPEC which includes many Middle Eastern nations), the Iran hostage crisis, and various wars with Middle Eastern nations, the United States has developed a

negative relationship with the region. However, like most ambitions for Imperialism, the region contains precious resources and geographical attributes that America desires. Through the War on Terror, America has justified its presence in the region since 2001. Since then, there has been a surge in war games that take place in the Middle East (Höglund). These games make negative characterizations of the region and might supplement persuasion that the War on Terror is justified. These characterizations are assisted by game elements which help make America's negative ideologies toward the Middle East seem truthful.

To better explain these characterizations against the Middle East, I will examine the popular game *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*. In the game, there is a story arc in which U.S. Marines must invade a nameless capital city speculated to be on the Arabian Peninsula. This arc attempts to make a strong characterization of Middle Eastern men. The villain of this game is Al-Asad, who overthrew the government of an Arabian state to implement a revolutionary regime. The US reacts to this by invading the overthrown democracy in attempt to liberate them. During the invasion, the Navy SEALs infiltrate the palace where Al-Asad is suspected to be. With Al-Asad nowhere to be found, The SEALs find a nuclear device which is rigged to detonate. In a cowardly attempt to destroy the US military, Al-Asad set the nuclear device off, effectively killing every soldier within the capital city. He also killed his own personal armies of Middle Eastern men in collateral damage. Meaning he cowardly sacrificed their lives, instead of himself, in a vain attempt to kill American soldiers. These attributes together make Al-Asad appear as a malicious and cowardly leader. This characterization of Al-Asad is the ideal characterization of a Middle Eastern leader that the military would want the public to imagine. With the public imagining Al-Asad as the stereotypical leader from the Middle East, then they might support America's War on Terror to dispose of leaders vilified like him.



**Image 1:** *Modern Warfare*: U.S. Marines desperately escape the capital city in helicopters from a nuclear attack denoted by Al-Asad.

American characterizations of China reflect the animosity America holds against China. Through events in their history, America and China are natural rivals. They have conflicting economic systems, and America is violently opposed to any Communist nation. In addition, American outposts in Korea and Japan make China uneasy America's influence in East Asia. In general, China and the United States have many reasons for animosity to grow. This characterization is best described by the words of Toshiya Ueno in the book *Techno-Orientalism*. They explain, "The Orient exists in so far as the West needs it because it brings the project of the West into focus" (3). In other words, the West uses Asia as a comparison to their own country, and in turn, makes the West anxious. This comparison is both justification and fuel to out-compete

Asia in all aspects. The strategy for Techno-Orientalism is to convince Americans that China is technologically superior, and potentially might induce anxiety in citizens that America needs to out-compete China. This in turn strengthens American dominance over the region, which is the original goal for American foreign policy. This characterization of Asians as a technologically superior enemy is a form of Techno-Orientalism. Formally defined, Techno-Orientalism is "the phenomenon of imagining Asia and Asians in hypo- or hyper-technological terms in cultural productions and political discourse" (Roh, 2). In other words, Techno-Orientalism makes characterizations about Asia's technological capabilities. This trope works best in a speculative fiction setting but can be applied to all genres (Roh, 5). In speculative fiction, authors can create a near future in which our lifestyle as American citizens is jeopardized by an emerging racially and technologically advanced Other (Roh, 5). This genre is implemented in video games to justify America's anxieties towards China and continue animosity between the two.

To better explain Techno-Orientalism, I will examine the popular game *Hitman 3*. In the game, they visit the city of Chongqing, China. Through the design of the environment, we can see Techno-Orientalist tropes being enforced. In *Hitman*, you play as a renowned assassin who is on a journey to find the truth of his identity after being raised to be the perfect assassin. In Chongqing, the player is to assassinate two high-value targets. There are Techno-Orientalist tropes hidden within the game environment. In Chongqing, the streets are constantly monitored by surveillance drones that fly above the street and police the area. This is an unfair characterization of China using its technological might. The game is making China seem malicious in its use of technology. If the game can convince the player that China is using advanced technology to spy on people, it might impose certain anxiety about how advanced China might be with its technological development. Therefore, this might lead a player to defend America in a continued rivalry where America tries to out-compete China technologically.

Overall, video games use Orientalist tropes that might persuade a player to support the justification of American foreign policy. These Orientalist tropes are prevalent in games that depict the Middle East and China. These tropes make characterizations that negatively reflect these regions and help justify America's foreign policy. This is because viewers might accept negative characterizations as true which benefits America's goal to convince citizens that these regions are our enemies.



**Image 2:** *Hitman 3*: Chinese surveillance drone uses design elements to make the drone seem technologically advanced.

## Research and Design Methods

For my research, I will examine a list of games series thoroughly to discover if the Neo-Orientalist tropes I defined are perpetuated. I have limited my list to developers that are from the US or Europe. I do this to exclude any game of Asian origin, as my research pertains to American video games and any game that is catered toward an American audience. I will also reduce my analysis of games to a Neo-Orientalist critique instead of traditional Orientalist critique. This is because Neo-Orientalism specifically benefits America, while traditional Orientalism benefited European empires. In addition to searching for the two tropes, I will also attempt to deduce any other tropes potentially hidden within a game. Once I find a game that perpetuates a trope, I want to interview developers with questions that will determine if there was an intention behind characterizations of Asia. It is possible

that these characterizations are not made with malicious intent, but rather a reflection of the influence American ideology might have over culture. Even if this is the case, there are still messages of Neo-Orientalism that viewers can walk away with, and I want viewers to be aware of these tropes in video games.

Step	Procedure
1	Play main game and take notes on Neo-Orientalist features.
2*	Repeat step 1 for supplementary game features
3	Establish connection between game and trope
4	Write critique of game
5	Formulate and send questions to developers
6	Investigate external influences on game
7	Determine why trope was used in game

**Table 2:** Summary of prospective research methodology. Asterisk (\*) indicates that step is executed if deemed necessary.

China or Middle East Trope?	Game	Developer
Both	<i>Elder Scrolls</i> Series	Bethesda Game Studios*
Middle East	<i>Mirrors Edge</i> Series	DICE
Middle East	<i>Call of Duty: Modern Warfare</i> Series	Infinity Ward*
China	<i>Call of Duty: Black Ops</i> Series	Treyarch*
Both	<i>Hitman</i> Series	IO Interactive
China	<i>Fallout</i> Series	Bethesda Game Studios*
Middle East	<i>Assassins Creed</i> Series	Ubisoft*
China	<i>Battlefield</i> Series	DICE*

**Table 1:** Tentative list of game series I will analyze, and the developers of those games. I hypothesis which trope is being perpetuated in each game. Asterisk (\*) indicates the main developer among multiple sub developers.

My methodology will consist of an algorithmic approach to identifying games with Neo-Orientalist tropes. I would first engage with a game by playing the game and completing the main story entirely. While doing so, I will take note of any game detail that might hold Neo-Orientalist characterizations. Game details refer to the design of characters, environments, stories, and even aesthetics. If I finish the game and I feel like there will be more Neo-Orientalist characterizations, then I will engage in supplementary features of a game. These supplementary features refer to side quests, reading in-game lore books, and even exploration of environments. If I deem it necessary, this

deeper study could potentially uncover much more hidden Neo-Orientalist characterizations. Once I finish the game I will determine if the game holds enough characterizations to classify the game as Neo-Orientalist. If the game is without a doubt Neo-Orientalist, I will then review all notes I have taken on the game. Next, I will try to find a connection between the Neo-Orientalist characterizations I have found and the tropes I am trying to prove. If I cannot find a connection, I will attempt to find an explanation for the tropes, or even discover a new trope. Once I find a connection, I will write my own critique of the use of Neo-Orientalist tropes in these games. These reports will serve as a basis from where I can draw my questions to developers. I will formulate questions to send off to developers that ask if they were conscious of these characterizations, and if so, what motive was there for these characterizations. Once I receive a response from developers, I can formulate a reason as to why Neo-Orientalist tropes are being used in video games. While I wait for developers to respond, I will also conduct research to see if any external influences (Primarily organizations within the United States government) helped develop the game. This will enable me to strengthen my argument regarding America interfering with video games to potentially justify their ideology.

With the information the developer gives me and the research I conduct I will be able to assess how widespread Neo-Orientalist tropes are and why developers use these tropes. If I need to add more games to the research, then I will edit the list accordingly. Otherwise, from there I will write a paper containing my findings and all tropes I have identified from my list.

My research will prove that Neo-Orientalism is widespread in video games and justify American foreign policy. In addition, it will give me the opportunity to find more specific tropes for regions of Asia that reflect that region's foreign policy. The research will be valuable in the realm of Game Studies, which is an emerging field concerned with the analysis of games and the cultures surrounding them. With video games potentially becoming the main form of media soon, it is crucial we understand as much as we can about them. If we can expose ways that video games are used negatively, we can prevent future developers from using them erroneously. This can help make video games a fair form of media, which is something I am passionate about facilitating. I will help introduce an emerging issue within video games to the public, which could inspire other researchers to expose other influences in video games.



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