

Video Games: Teaching Religion through Transmedial Storyworld

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Abstract

For a long time, churches and mosques along with (religious) schools and seminaries have been prominent places for teaching and learning about Christianity or Islam. However, with the technological advancements and digitalization of communication, teaching and learning religion have transcended the traditional boundaries of books, preachers and clergymen. In the twenty-first century, gamification is employed as an essential and effective tool to enhance learning by increasing student engagement, with video games becoming an inseparable part of this approach. This article seeks to explore how video games employ religious discourses and stories, both directly and indirectly, within their storyworlds to impart sociocultural and moral lessons based on the specific practices of a religion. In other words, this study examines how video games like *Safir-e Ešq* (pers., *Ambassador of Love*), as the case study of this article, narrates Iranian-Islamic discourse of Shia in alignment with the governmental propaganda, thereby shaping a specific reality for their users/players. It is noteworthy that this research does not purely focus on religious studies or pedagogical approaches. Instead, it illuminates how religious stories and discourses are reinterpreted and transformed into coded video games that aim to redefine and reestablish specific religious or sociocultural norms and values. Therefore, this article studies *Safir-e Ešq* based on its transmedial storytelling of Islamic stories and assesses how influential this game has been in imparting religious doctrines to its players.

1. Introduction

While twenty years ago the teachers were the god of the class and the sole educator who could teach the students different subjects and led the leaning platform, in the contemporary societies, video games are named as a learning medium through which a specific skill of players will be developed, or a certain piece of information will be delivered to them throughout the game playing. If years ago, memorizing years, names, figures, places of events, and so on were known as torturing tasks for the students, these days you employ the historical

information and the names and places as the story, setting or narrative line of video games and the students (/players) not only memorized them but also comment and analyse their actions. Video games provide a very unique chance for their players to learn about a religion, be it Christianity, Islam or piety throughout the gameplay, story narrations and transmedial storyworlds. For examples, the players in the early 2000s were fascinated with the restoration of Greek Mythologies figures in the video games series of *God of Wars* or experienced to be in Hell by playing Dante's *Inferno*. Currently, they have the opportunity to play the role of Jesus Christ, witness his crucifixion and resurrection, and even perform miracles like healing the sick in the video game such as *I Am Jesus Christ*.

Accordingly, it is important to know how certain ideas are implemented to the users/players mind through video games. More specifically, how video games, employing their interactivity features or "edu-tainment" specifications, influence on the perception and beliefs of its users/players about religion and Islam, as the focus of this article.¹ The specification of being an entertainment tool and simultaneously providing an educational facility play a significant role in the application of video games for specific purposes. In a very recent study, Arditya Prayogi, Faliqul Isbah, and Fachri Ali examine the usage of video games in PAI² learning and "their role as a medium for transferring information and values," which includes to build the entire story worlds based on a specific value.³ In another study, Joshua K. Boren contents that "[v]ideo games offer a liberating, virtual-community building and meaning-making out-of-body experience for those that whole-heartedly engage in them."⁴ As such, instructions in every video game such as what to do, what not to do, which way to go, which ways avoid and how to do to go to the next level, are like religious education that we are warned what to do and what not to and how to do it in order to go to Heaven and not Hell.

Unlike the popular perception about video games, as Boren argues, the number of video games offering or presenting a platform (acting as a media) for "instilling positive morals in society" is increasing. Therefore, Boren concludes that "video games become a religious placeholder or pseudo-religion for many of the most devoted gamers."⁵ For example, it is no doubt that "[t]he lore and backstory of some of the most popular games (*League of Legends*, *Kingdom*

¹ Mark Griffiths (2002), The educational benefits of videogames, 47. Griffiths considers videogames "as educational research tools" because they "have the capacity to engage children in learning experiences, this has led to the rise of "edu-tainment" media."

² PAI is the abbreviation of Personal Activity Intelligence.

³ Arditya Prayogi/Faliqul Isbah/Fachri Ali (2023), The Utilization Of Video Games As A Learning Media For Islamic Religious Education, 1.

⁴ Joshua K. Boren (2016), Playing God: An Analysis of Video Game Religion, 2.

⁵ Boren (2016), 2.

Hearts, and *World of Warcraft*) are heavily influenced by all types of religion.”⁶ Video games, thus, are not merely a new medium but an influential one with a significant capacity to transfer and communicate specific messages, thereby profoundly affecting the beliefs of their players. Perhaps it is for this reason that “computer games are a renowned strong weapon in the hand of Western imperialism to produce Islamophobic ideologies for their users,” as Farshad Goudarzi, Reza Kavand, and Esmaeil Sharifi argue.⁷ According to them, while entertainment and financial profits are the apparent aims of video games, their hidden and ultimate goals are cultural and political.⁸ They argue that Western-produced video games aim to destroy Islamic culture and present an untrue and negative picture of Islam and Muslims to their audiences. The dominant discourse in these games is the control and power of the West, especially the USA, over the rest of the world.⁹ Their argument and fear of the western-produced video games lies in the fact that there are nearly thirty-six million video games users in Iran who spends at least five hours weekly in playing games that result in the revenue of nineteen thousand billion tomans yearly (approximately 739 million USD), Figure 1. and Figure 2.¹⁰ According to the figures based on “National Survey of Digital Game Players: Landscape Report 2021, forty-one out of every 100 Iranians are video games’ users,” which is a high number among the Middle Eastern countries.

Based on the “Landscape Report 2021,” as it is shown in the Figure 3., the share of Iranian-produced video games is less than ten percent. To avoid the influences of western discourses and doctrines, Iranian share in producing games needs to be changed, according to the argumentations of Goudarzi et al. and Mehdi Jafari Jozani, the head of MATNA (pers., Markaz-e Tolid va Nashr-e Digital Enqlab-e Islami [The Islamic Revolution Center for Digital Products and Publications]).¹¹

⁶ Boren (2016), 2. Boren then refers to Catherine L. Albanese’s *America, Religions and Religion* where she introduces four Cs that religion provides: “creed, code, cultus, and community”, which can be found both as the main and backdrop stories in many video games. Boren (2016), 6.

⁷ Farshad Goudarzi/Reza Kavand/Esmaeil Sharifi (2023), *Computer Games and Applications Promoting Islamophobia*, 210.

⁸ Ebd., 213.

⁹ Ebd.

¹⁰ The numbers are based on the report of Bonyad-e Meli- Bazihay- Rayanie (Digital Games Research Center (DIREC) and Iran Computer and Video Games Foundation (IRCG) in 1400 (2021) in Iran.

¹¹ “Interview with Mehdi Jafari Jozani, Producer of *Safir-e Ešq*.” 11 January 2021. <https://www.javanonline.ir/fa/news/1034592/>.

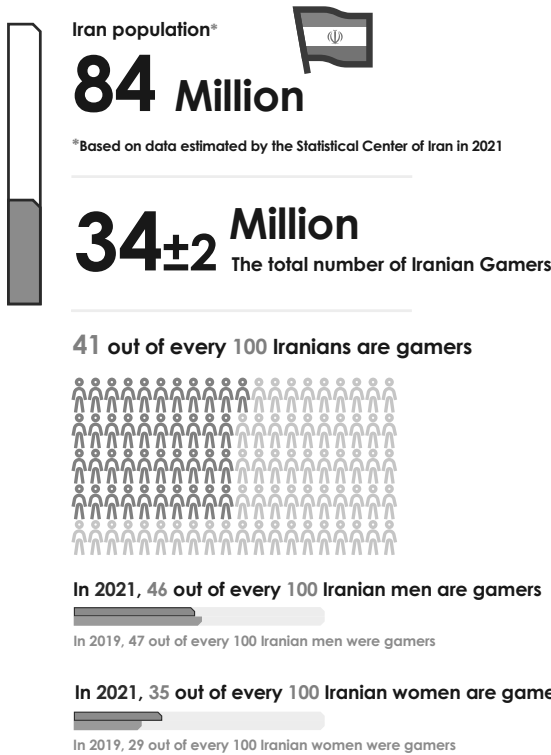


Figure 1. Video games users/players in Iran in 2021.

Source: “National Survey of Digital Game Players: Landscape Report 2021.”

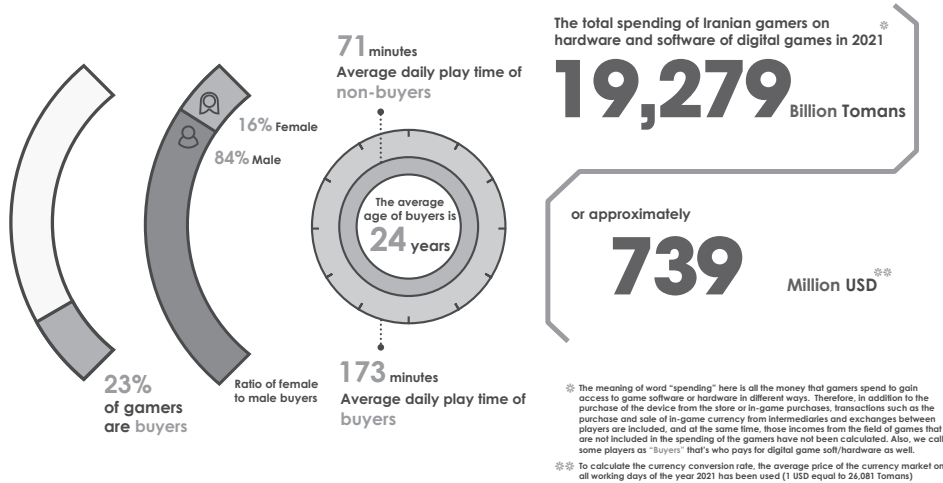


Figure 2. The revenue of video games in Iran in 2021.

Source: “National Survey of Digital Game Players: Landscape Report 2021.”

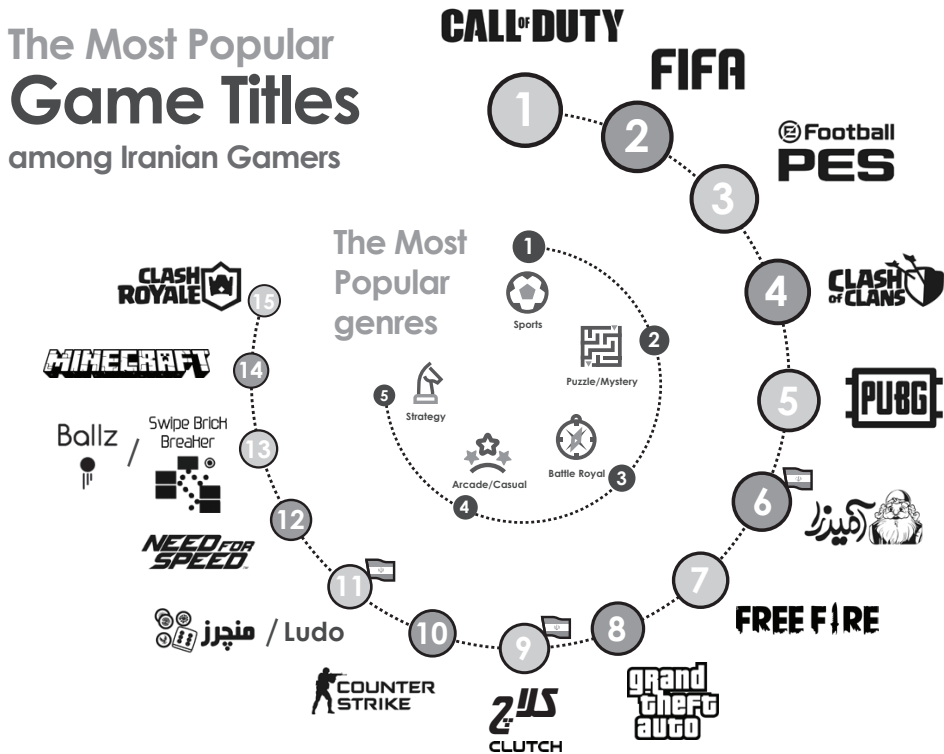


Figure 3. The most popular games among Iranians.

Source: "National Survey of Digital Game Players: Landscape Report 2021."

One of the recent first attempts of Iranian-produced game with religious historical theme is the trilogy of *Safir-e Ešq* which its first instalment produced and released in 2020 for PC platform. *Ambassador of Love* narrates Iranian-Islamic discourse of Shia in line with the governmental propaganda to implement their own reality for the users/players. *Ambassador of Love* provides its players the world within which Islam, specifically Shia, is depicted as the only saviour of humanity and defender of freedom. Described in an Iranian newspaper as "the greatest historical religious video game of the Islamic world" (Bultannews 2020), *Safir-e Ešq* is a trilogy, with its second episode, *Mokhtar: Fasle Qiam* (pers., *Mokhtar: The Season of Revolution*), published in 2021. The producers plan to release international versions in Arabic and English, as well as versions for console platforms such as PS4 and X-Box (Bultannews 2020). This article, however, focuses solely on *Ambassador of Love* because it is not only one of the first video games to advertise and propagate a specific historical event in Shia Islam, but it is also widely promoted as the greatest historical religious game ever produced. Moreover, based on Figure 4. the rate of its sales and appealability among the players put this game among the rare Iran-produced video

games that draw both national and international attention among gamers. With MATNA as the game's investor, supported by the Iran Computer and Video Games Foundation (IRCG), it is of great significance to study the transmedial storytelling of Shia Islam in *Ambassador of Love* and assess how influential this game has been in imparting religious doctrines to its players.

Video Game	Genre	Year	Producer	User's rate	Critic's rate	Sale's rate
<i>Ambassador of Love</i>	Hack and Slash third-person (historical) action-adventure	2020	MATNA [The Islamic Revolution Center for Digital Products and Publications]	4.1/5	7/10	Over 100,000 in the first five months
<i>Mokhtar: The Season of Revolution</i>	Hack and Slash third-person (historical) action-adventure	2021	MATNA [The Islamic Revolution Center for Digital Products and Publications]	4.3/5	7/10	Digital distribution (no information)

Figure 4. The rate of sales and appealability of *Ambassador of Love* and *Mokhtar: The Season of Revolution*.

Sources: for users' rate, it is gameup.ir and hayoola.com. For Critic's rate is gamian.ir. For the sales rate the source is tahlilbazaar.com.

It is noteworthy that this research does not purely focus on religious studies or pedagogical approaches. Instead, it illuminates the ways through which religious stories and discourses are transformed and reinterpreted into coded video games. To do so, this article examines *Ambassador of Love* as the case study based on its transmedial storytelling of the application of Islamic stories and assesses its influence in imparting a certain degree of religious doctrine to its players. However, there are several limitations to this approach. Firstly, focusing solely on a single case study like *Ambassador of Love* may not provide a comprehensive understanding of the broader phenomenon of religious storytelling in video games. Western-produced video games such as *Call of Duty's* series, *Assassin Creed's* Series, and *Resident Evil's* series (as two of the most popular games in Iran), also incorporate religious narratives in their second or third layers of storyworlds, but they are not considered in this study. As a result, the insights gained from analyzing *Ambassador of Love* might be highly specific to this particular game and not generalizable to other games that incorporate religious narratives. Secondly, considering transmedial storytelling approach limits the examination of game's interactivity, while it highlights how religious stories are reinterpreted across different media. Thirdly, assessing the influence of video games on imparting religious doctrine involves various factors, such

as individual backgrounds, personal beliefs, and the degree to which players absorb religious messages versus the entertainment aspects of the game. Therefore, this study focuses on the direct and apparent messages conveyed through the gameplay to the players.

Furthermore, while this research explores the (indirect) pedagogical implications of using video games as a tool for religious education, it primarily examines the transformation of religious stories into game narratives. It does not thoroughly evaluate whether these transformed narratives are effective or appropriate for educational purposes compared to traditional methods of religious instruction. As such, while this research sheds light on the innovative intersection of religion and digital media, namely video games, it is essential to acknowledge these limitations to provide a balanced and critical perspective on the implications of transforming religious stories into video game narratives.

2. Video Game as an “edu-tainment” Medium

Besides its entertainment, the *interactivity* and *multimediality* of video game are its unique specifications that increase its applicability in different fields, namely direct or indirect education of traditions, values, and religions. As such, video games act not as a passive medium but rather are an active medium through which players/users are involved in the storyline while they are playing. For example, they can choose what to do and how to do it while they decide on the course of actions themselves. Furthermore, with the increase of digital access, players can play video games regardless of their residency place, which turns video games into a *global medium*. Arditya Prayogi considers video games “as educational tools” that “are specifically designed to have learning content aimed at increasing students’ interest in learning” through “interactivity, interaction, active and interactive visualization, kinesthesia, and closeness to themselves.”¹² These specific specifications make video games a distinctive medium for ideological transmission to their players/users worldwide.

Accordingly, why are video games important in teaching/learning a religion? And how do they implement a religious lesson to their users/players? In my interpretation, video games use various forms of media such as (literary) texts, paintings, comics, (short) films, etc. to create an exceptional experience for their players/users. Additionally, video games function as a cultural practice to induce a particular form of reality (/narrative) to the players (users). More importantly, they provide this opportunity for the marginalized nation (from the global south), such as Iran, to reach gigantic global and local (glocal) audi-

¹² Arditya Prayogi, Application of Video Games as Part of Learning Islamic History, 23.

ences¹³ through the creation of a storyworld and narrative that move beyond the national border of game's origin.

Furthermore, video games have the features of "being a narrative" (transmedia narratology) and "possessing narrativity" (transmedial storyworld).¹⁴ On the one hand, video games possess narrativity (the main/grand story [mission/adventure] of the whole video game). On the other hand, they present a single narrative in each part of the game, which can work differently for each player. Video games, in this regard, can integrate multiple texts (and media forms) to make a shared narrative, which in turn becomes a common ground for promulgating a certain perspective (local, global or even glocal) to diverse nations and cultures. The uniqueness of video games, referring to Marie-Laure Ryan's study, is its specification of combining semantics, discourses and pragmatic matters.¹⁵ Therefore, a one-dimensional analysis or approach that views video games merely as a textual (oral) medium with storylines fall short. Such an approach tends to focus solely on identifying symbolic elements or references to religions or myths, overlooking the crucial aspects of *interactivity* and *multimediality* inherent to video games.¹⁶

In their examination of video games as vehicles for transmitting Islamic values, Prayogi et al. propose three conceptual paradigms for incorporating PAI (Personal Activity Intelligence) into video games. The first paradigm treats video games as tools for behavioral intervention, aiming to instill specific values that alter players' behavior patterns. The second paradigm sees video games as interactive mediums that simulate meaningful experiences, enabling players to achieve tasks that impart educational values. The third paradigm considers video games as immersive environments where educational content is seamlessly integrated into the gaming experience, allowing Islamic values to be conveyed through gameplay.¹⁷ These paradigms suggest that video games can effectively transmit norms and values by engaging players in tasks that reflect these principles. Prayogi et al. refer to the values that can be reproduced in the gameplay of the video games and then influence the mindset of the players or their behaviors. As such, players will internalize and adopt the certain values and principles (a belief system) presented in games through playing or

¹³ In the contact zone created by the storyworld of video games, glocalization is an important term because it refers to "simultaneous presence of globalizing and localizing dynamics where precise boundaries between the two do not exist and where neither dominates the other" (Mansbach/Rhodes (2013), 7).

¹⁴ Marie-Laure Ryan, *On the Theoretical Foundations of Transmedial Narratology*, 6f.

¹⁵ See Ryan (2005), 19.

¹⁶ See Christopher P. Scholtz, *Religious education and the Challenge of Computer games*, 3. Scholtz argues that we neglect "the interactivity" of video games by reducing the video games into texts for analysis.

¹⁷ See Prayogi et al. (2023), 7.

completing the actions that they have been asked for in the role of the game's hero.

Additionally, Griffiths mentions six features to justify the application of video games for educational purposes. His aim is to provide us with an overview of how video games can be practical and useful not only as research tools but also to educate children specific themes and abilities:

- Videogames attract participation by individuals across many demographic boundaries (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, educational status)
- Videogames can assist children in setting goals, ensuring goal rehearsal, providing feedback, reinforcement, and maintaining records of behavioural change (..)
- Videogames can be used when examining individual characteristics such as self-esteem, self-concept, goal-setting and individual differences
- Videogames are fun and stimulating for participants. (. . .)
- Videogames also allow participants to experience novelty, curiosity and challenge. This may stimulate learning (. . .)
- Videogames can act as simulations. These allow participants to engage in extraordinary activities and to destroy or even die without real consequences. (2002, 47–8)

In Griffiths's idea, video games can improve the skills of children in language, math, reading, and social connection. Among these benefits that make video games a distinctive medium, they can also be applied for more than educational purposes, to apply a belief system to its users. When players begin the game, they enter into a belief system of the game's storyworld and through their adventure and activities they either crosses religious symbols or places that indicate the existence of a notion of good vs. evil. For example, Boren refers to the direct references of "religious messages" in *Bible Adventures* or *Wisdom Tree* (1991) while there are more "subtle meanings" in games like *Halo Series* and *Bungie* (2001).¹⁸ In his perspective, "[r]eligion exists inside games. The plots of games are fueled by religious stories, offering the player good moral decision making via positive reinforcement of in-game benefits for your character."¹⁹ He continues that in most of games, there "exists numerous religious symbols, both apparent, in the form of churches and holy grounds or crosses, and hidden in the form of discrete messages and commentary about current events, direct parallels between religious icons and video game characters, and so much more."²⁰ In addition to Boren divisions, there are games that are based on religious historical persons. The link or connection between the historical portray of a person with its playstyle (resemblance) in the video games can be known as a

¹⁸ Boren (2016), 11.

¹⁹ Ebd., 26.

²⁰ Ebd.

part of the religious narrative or story of the video games, e.g. *Ambassador of Love* and *Assassin Creed Series*.

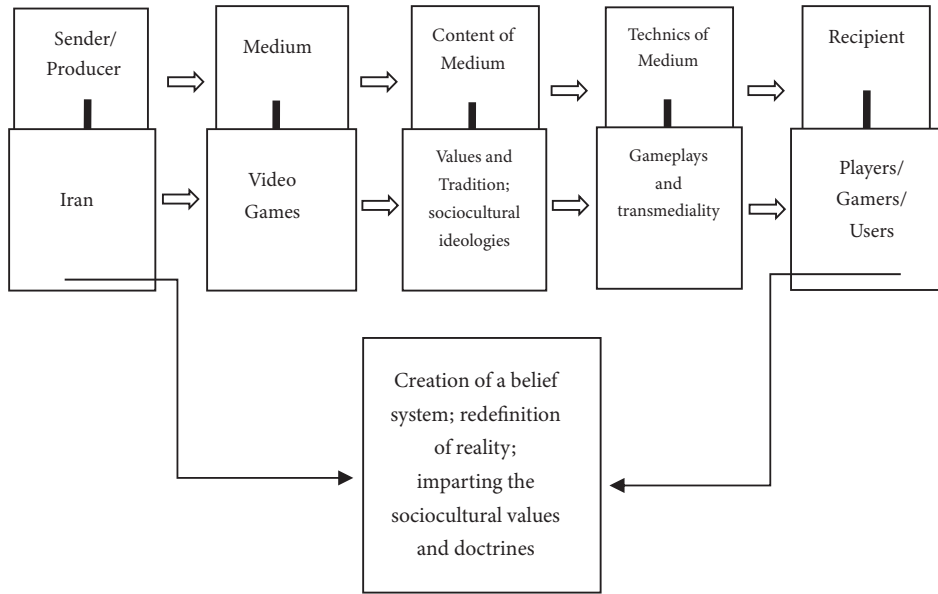


Figure 5. The process of creation of a belief system through video games.

Apart from the above-mentioned elements in video games, this question arises: how can one delineate and examine the belief system, especially religious discourses, within a video game? To address this question, I step forward from Boren's argument that video games possess a religious system and Ryan's concept of transmediality in video games and suggest the formation of belief system in video games. The process of the creation of the belief system and the impartation of it on the players are shown best in Figure 5.

As Figure 5. suggests, certain values and ideologies can be transmitted and transferred to the players or gamers through the content of video games. Critically, these features provide a framework for identifying and analyzing how a belief system works and is employed in video games. To scrutinize a belief system in a game, whether it is a social ideology, piety, or monotheistic religions, I introduce the following features. These features include:

- The quest for righteousness. In most action-adventure, third-person or role-playing games, there is a quest for the main character(s) which needs to be fulfilled. The approaches being used to fulfill this quest, which can be to save a person, to find an object, to overcome an enemy, etc. can content highly religious narratives.

- The hierarchy among characters, such as masters, mentors, and followers that the main character(s) must follow to achieve his/her goals.
- The depiction of religious or ritual ceremonies to convey specific beliefs.
- The iconization or symbolism of weapons or relics. For example, in some games such as *Assassin Creed's* series, or even *Ambassador of Love*, there are symbols on the weapons of main character(s) that are either direct references to a person or to rituals.
- The transmedial storyworld of the game and its narrative's line which is told based on historical religious stories.

Additional factors to consider include the game's duration, setting, difficulty level, sense of competition, participation, characterization, and age rating. The narration and presentation of these elements throughout the game's story will shape the belief system conveyed by the storyworld.

It is important to mention that there are two methods in learning media, one is individual, and the other one is group learning model (referring to the online gaming platforms). This research focuses on video games designed primarily for individual player experiences. In the following sections, I will analyze *Ambassador of Love* to trace the religious stories and the belief system it aims to impart to its players/users. While focusing on individual learning experiences in video games allows for a deeper personal engagement with the content, the individual-centric approach may miss the social dynamics and collective experiences that significantly influence how religious teachings and belief systems are understood and internalized. Therefore, analyzing a game like *Ambassador of Love* offers insight into the effectiveness of conveying a belief system aligned with governmental propaganda of Shia Islam in individual gaming experiences.

3. *Shia's Belief System in Safir-e Ešq*

Once Samuel Phillips Huntington mentioned that the source of conflicts in the new world will not be political or economic, but rather cultural and prophesied the "clashes of civilizations."²¹ By then Huntington's propose seemed unfamiliar and inapplicable but now we are facing hidden clashes of cultures and religions and, at some point, nations in the virtual storyworlds of video games. The belief system, storyworld, and rules of the video games determine and/or create sociocultural or religious clashes for players, as they become a part of game's strategy to react or decide on a specific course of action which is in favor of one religion or discourse and against the other. This hidden sociocultural and religious clash has been instrumented not just by the games productions

²¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilization?*, New York 1993, 22–49.

studios, but the governments employ and invest heavily in this industry to implement their own doctrine and principle for the global audiences. As such, video games create a new form of religion literacy for their players/users based on the narrative designed by the governmental doctrine and discipline. This literacy might have positive or negative effects on players' worldview and life in the real world. For example, *Ambassador of Love* is an official attempt of Iranian government to present a positive portrait of Islam or Muslim, better to say Iranian Shia, to its users/players and influence on the perceptions of players.

Ambassador of Love is a third-person action-adventure, and hack and slash game for PC produced by MATNA in 2020. The game begins with the journey of Muslim ibn Aqil al-Hashimi (AS),²² the messenger of Imam Hussein, to Kufa a few days before the Ashura uprising that led to the martyrdom of the Imam and his companions in 680 Hijri (1281 CE). Alongside this historical figure, the game introduces an Iranian character named Mehran, who embarks on a journey from the Iranian city of Rey to Kufa, where he visits Muslim ibn Aqil. The story of the game is narrated by Mehran, offering a unique perspective on these significant events. Mehdi Jafari Jozani, the head of MATNA, states that it took them two years to write the story of the game and receive the authorization of Islamic centers. The main reason behind its production is to resist against the Western propaganda of "accusing Iranians of propagating the Islamic thought and motivating the youngster and teenagers to fall in the trap of the terrorists and radicals even though it is they who do that through the games such as *Call of Duty* series," where the holy places and mosques are being destroyed as the targets and the players burns Quran, or kill the Muslims.²³ In order to fight back the western propaganda against Islam and Muslims, they created a game based on the Shia's historical figure of Muslim ibn Aqil whose life has been narrated through the perspective of an Iranian cavalier named Mehran Irani.

Emad Rahmani, the writer and director of the game, states that "the specific feature of *Ambassador of Love* and the story of Muslim ibn Aqil is the eternal clash between good and evil" (2020). The storyline narrates the life of Mehran who suffers from a spiritual-psychological trauma caused by Hasan ibn Ali's peace treaty with the Umayyads. Meran returns dishearteningly to his

²² Muslim ibn Aqil al-Hashimi (Arabic: *مُسلم بن عقيل الهاشمي*) was a relative of the Prophet Muhammad. He was the son of Aqil ibn Abi Talib and a cousin of Hussein ibn Ali, the third Shia Imam. Hussein dispatched Muslim to Kufa in Iraq to gauge the city's support for him upon the accession of the Umayyad caliph Yazid (r. 680–683). Ibn Ziyad, the new governor of Kufa, induced Kufis tribal leaders to abandon Muslim and withdraw their men, employing combination of threats and promises. Deserted and alone, Muslim was arrested after putting up a strong resistance and subsequently executed in 680 Hijri. Before this turn of events, he had written to Hussein and urged him to come to Kufa which ended to the tragic massacre of Hussein in Karbala, known as one of the holy days in Shia Islam (Ahlul Bayt Digital Islamic Library).

²³ Jozani (2021) qtd in "Bazihy Rayanie ba Sabke Zendegi Irani-Islami az soy Garb Sansor Mishavad [Video games with an Iranian and Islamic lifestyle are censored by the West]." Mohammad-Reza Jafarmalek. 21 April 2022. <https://www.irna.ir/news/84729888/>.

hometown of Rey, Iran; however, as the pressure on the Shia followers of Ali increases over time, he sets out for Kufa where he realizes that Hussein ibn Ali's messenger, Muslim ibn Aqil is there to study the faithfulness and honesty of Kufis in their invitation of Hussein. Besides the entertainment aspect of the game, Rahmani declares, "Mehran's character grows throughout the story, sacrifices himself for his family, and stands firm on his beliefs" (2020). The dilemma of Mehran to decide between two ways or approaches in his life stands at the heart of the game's storyworld: to support and take care of his family, or follow what he believes and fight for freedom and his faith. The game begins with the dialogue/monologue of Mehran with himself, presenting the dilemma in choosing the right way in his life:

(Narrator's voiceover): Mehren, what has happened to you? Do you want to abandon Hussein, son of Ali? Do you want to leave him alone? He has taken refuge in the Kaaba from the oppression of Yazid.

(Mehran): I cannot. Wasn't I with his brother Hassan, son of Ali, before? What happened? Except that he was martyred on this path because of the ignorance of the people and the unfaithfulness of his companions. This family is not deceitful. But Yazid knows well how to ride the camel of people's ignorance with threats and inducements. Be sure that this time Hussein, son of Ali, will get himself trapped just like his brother. I am afraid of leaving you alone.

I don't know what I did to deserve this. I sought nothing but truth and pursued justice.

(Narrator's voiceover): Finally, you saw the end of the road. Everything is over. Everything. Was it worth it, Mehran? Burning in the fire of separation for the rest of your life, at what cost? Muslim was also left alone and Hussein will not be spared either. Does losing have any other meaning?

(Mehran): Walking on the path of love and reaching the truth is a divine promise. Where did I become heedless on this path?

(Narrator's voiceover): You lost because you pursued your ideals so much that you forgot your family. Neglecting family is not a small sin. Now that neither this nor that remains, poor Mehran. Wounded Mehran, imprisoned Mehran. Muslim is alone, and you will die here.

(Mehran): We shall see. (*Ambassador of Love*, opening video)

Through the above lengthy introductory video, players learn that Mehran has left everything behind and now questions himself where he went wrong and what mistakes he made during his quest for righteousness, which ultimately ended in tragedy. Interestingly, the players begin the game from the end of its narrative of storyworld. Instead of deciding to choose which paths they want to embark on, they need to start Mehran's chosen path, his quest toward righteousness, to find out Mehran's mistakes and wrong doings. While you expect to see the challenge of Mehran in choosing between love of his family and faith in his Imam, this duality and hesitations gradually faded away during the game and instead Mehran's strong will of supporting Hussein and his causes shown to be his choice of life. In other word, in creating a system of belief through presenting a quest for the righteousness, the game is successful by presenting the actual discourse of Shia: devoting and sacrificing your life for your

Imam, which is apparent in the above transcript of the game's introductory video. In this respect, this dilemma stands merely at the surface and becomes more slogan, propagating Iranian version of Shia even though the director and designer-team attempt to show otherwise.

Another element of presenting and introducing Shia's history is through the texts on the places, Pictures 1., and 2. These texts refer to two most important events in Shia's history, the glorification and sanctifying of Imam Ali as the first believer in the Prophet Mohammad, and Hasan ibn Ali's peace treaty with the Umayyads. The information about the historical events and figures is narrated by the texts combined with the depiction of locations where these events occurred, making the narrative (along with the storyworld) more believable for players/users.



Picture 1. Historical Information



Picture 2. Historical information

Furthermore, the game's menu is enriched with additional information about the locations and events depicted in the game, as illustrated in pictures 3., 4., 5., and 6. As shown in these images, *Ambassador of Love* not only narrates a historical Shia's story, but also seeks to educate its players/users with the detailed information provided through the extensive texts in its menu. This approach allows the game to present and reinforce a specific belief system regarding Shia's incidents. By integrating these transmedial narration, informative texts as a part of game's storyworld, the game serves as a medium for imparting religious knowledge to its players. This approach acts as an educational element because the players acquire their understanding of historical events based on the information and narratives they encounter throughout their gameplay experience.



Picture 3. Information about the place of peace treaty



Picture 4. Information of Hasan's treaty



Picture 5. Information of Sheikh Saleh



Picture 6. Information of Mehran's Home

Another element in implementing religious belief through the video game is the iconization, which plays a crucial role in *Ambassador of Love*. Iconization involves the representation of religious symbols and artifacts to convey deeper spiritual meanings and connections. The three most significant examples are Mehran's sword, given to him by Sheikh Sulaiman, his shield, and the flags adorned with the names of Allah, Mohammad, Ali, which are prominently displayed in various locations throughout the game, as shown in pictures 7, 8, 9, and 10.



Picture 7. The flag at Mehran's background



Picture 8. the flags in Kufa's mosque



Picture 9. The symbol of lion on Mehran's shield



Picture 10. Mehran's Sword

The sword and the shield are very symbolic in the game. While the shield has an Iranian symbol of “lion” (picture 9.), meaning to be brave and courageous, and have patriarchy, the sword resemblances Imam Ali's famous two-edge sword named Zulfikar (picture 10.). Mehran receives the sword from Sheikh Sulaiman who tells Mehran the story of the sword: “it is made after Imam Ali's sword by one of the Shias to support Ali's ideology” (*Ambassador of Love*). Upon its recipient, Mehran says, “I swear to God, I will fight in the path of Ali and his family with this sword” (*Ambassador of Love*). Mehran's sword symbolizes not only his physical prowess and readiness to defend his faith but also serves as a metaphor for the spiritual strength and divine support bestowed upon him. The shield with its lion's symbol represents Mehran's lionhearted and heroic character in fulfilling his quest, embodying the idea that Mehran's

Iranian ancestors' spirits will protect him against adversity.²⁴ This duality of combining Iranian and Islamic elements and symbols splits over throughout the game in different circumstances.

For example, while Mehran goes to inform the Kufa's elder about the presence of Muslim ibn Aqil and they greet Mehran by calling him "son of Arman, the hero of Iran," Mehran introduces himself as "a follower of Ali ibn Abi Talib, residing in Kufa" (*Ambassador of Love*), emphasizing his religious identity and allegiance to Shia and Imam Ali. Whereas Mehran's behavior, actions and thoughts reflect his adherence to Islamic principles and doctrines throughout the game, Rahmani describes Mehran's character as a symbol of Iranian bravery and masculinity, stating that "he is the epitome of Iranian valor" (2020). However, in contrast to Rahmani's claim, the frequent presence of the flag (as seen in picture 8.) in various locations and as a background of Mehran's surroundings (picture 7) along with the engraved sign of Allah (picture 11.) on Mehran's armor suggest that Mehran is more an icon of Muslim valor than Iranian valor, willing to sacrifice his life for the great cause of his religion (/faith).



Picture 11. The engrave name of Allah on Mehran's armor

These iconic elements are strategically integrated into the game's transmedial narrative, enhancing the immersive experience and fostering a deeper connection to the religious themes being presented. By embedding these symbols within the gameplay, the developers ensure that players are continually exposed to and influenced by key aspects of Shia religious belief. This method of using

²⁴ It is worth mentioning the symbolic meaning of Mehran's family name, Irani. "Irani" signifies that Mehran comes from Iran and is a genuine Iranian. By choosing this symbolic family name, the developers aim to emphasize and highlight Mehran's Iranian identity as strongly as his faith. This deliberate choice underscores the dual aspects of Mehran's character, portraying him as both a devout Muslim and a proud Iranian, thereby intertwining national and religious identities.

iconization not only enriches the storytelling but also serves as a subtle yet powerful tool for imparting religious doctrine, making the game's educational impact more profound and memorable for the players.

“preaching” by Muslim ibn Aqil stands as another instance of propagating Shia's principles. Muslim's preaching is displayed two times through employing the video narrations throughout the game, which is as an additional trans-medial narrative. These videos not only provide players with extensive historical religious background stories about Muslim's goals in Kufa, but they also teach players Shia's worldview and perspective towards life. The first preaching happens when Muslim reads the letter of Imam Hussein to the elders of Kufa. The speech reminds me exactly of the speeches that normally people hear in the Ashura's or the mourning ceremonies in Muharram²⁵:

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

From Hussein, son of Ali, to the Muslims:

The letters you sent have reached me, and I have read them and understood your request. What most of you have said is this: that we do not have an Imam. Come to us. Perhaps God will guide us and bring us closer to the truth through you. I am sending my brother and cousin, who is trusted by me, namely Muslim ibn Aqil, to you. If Muslim writes to me that, as you have stated in your letters, the general consensus and the views of your wise and virtuous ones are united on this matter, then, God willing, I will come to you soon. By my life, the Imam will judge according to the command of the Quran and justice. The Imam is the one who has accepted the true religion and has sacrificed his life for the faith.

Peace be upon you. (*Ambassador of Love*, The letter of Imam Hosein to the Kufis)

There are two messages in the above speech: first, it is indicated that the righteousness of Hussein to be chosen as the Imam and not Calipha; second, it reveals the role, function, and place of Imam in an (Shia) Islamic society—which can also be accounted as the message of the government for naming Iranian supreme leader, Imam Khamenei and not Ayatollah Khamenei. This is a hidden religious lesson to convince the players that the naming in the contemporary Iranian society has its root in Imam Hussein's martyrdom, tradition and beliefs.

In the second “preach,” Muslim ibn Aqil speaks in Kufa's mosque where is surrounded with the flag with three names on it: Allah, Mohammad, the Prophet and Ali. It is important to note that the extensive presence of this flag serves as constant reminders of the central figures in Shia Islam, reinforcing the religious atmosphere and continually reminding players of their divine presence and guidance. As such, Muslim ibn Aqil's second preach is not solely the transmedial narrative of a historical incident, but he rather reproduces the

²⁵ In Shia Islam, Ashura commemorates the death of Hussein ibn Ali, Muhammad's grandson and the third Shia Imam. Hussein was killed, alongside most of his male relatives on 10th Muharram 61 AH (10 October 680) in the Battle of Karbala against the army of the Umayyad caliph Yazid ibn Muawiya.

official narration of Shia's doctrine, as if he is not talking in the games but is preaching to us, players:

The family of Ali only seeks justice for all, joy for the community, and prosperity for the world. They believe that the path to the One and Only God comes from pure hearts, and pure hearts come from lawful sustenance, and lawful sustenance comes from justice. Hussain did not accept allegiance to Yazid because Yazid had forgotten that power belongs to the Lord of the worlds and the caliph is merely a means from Him. Today, you people of Kufa, with thousands of letters, have called Hussain to Kufa. You have taken a step towards achieving the divine will. Do not doubt that it is difficult and full of hardships, but its result is so sweet that it cannot be confined to words. During this time, seeing your love and steadfastness in inviting Hussein, I have been proud of myself, and we will shout the song of love in every corner and alley. (*Ambassador of Love*, Muslim ibn Aqil's speech in the mosque)

In the above text, the same messages and lessons of Shia's principles are repeated: the important place and role of Calipha and Imam, the righteousness of Hussein ibn Ali and his family, along with the right call for fighting and standing for the truth and faith. Following the introduced principles by Muslim ibn Aqil, his mentor and guide, Mehran begins to launch his quest for the truth and to sacrifice his family for his faith. As Goudarzi et al. argues, as soon as we begin to perform the actions required of us in a social order (system) [like Muslim ibn Aqil of other Muslims], we start to believe in those actions and a sort of belief of them fabricates within us. (...) The same thing happens in video games. As soon as we do as we are told in the video games, it turns to shape our belief and thought.²⁶As the process occurs silently, most of the time people do not realize "the infiltration of ideology" within their thoughts and beliefs.²⁷ Considering this function of video game along the above-mentioned examples, the belief system in *Ambassador of Love* is depicted in Figure 6.

The Belief System in <i>Ambassador of love</i>	
The Storyworld and its narrative's line	The game mingles the historical religious journey of Muslim ibn Aqil al-Hashimi (AS), the messenger of Imam Hussein, to Kufa with an Iranian character named Mehran Irani, who embarks on a journey from the Iranian city of Rey to Kufa, to visit Muslim ibn Aqil. The time period of the game is a few days before the Ashura uprising that led to the martyrdom of the Imam and his companions in 680 Hijri (1281 CE). Mehran is the protagonist of the game, narrating the story which offers a unique perspective on the significant events prior to Ashura.
The transmedial narratives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cinematic video narrations - Historical religious texts in game's menu - Epic music throughout the battles, adding to the heroic elements of the game

²⁶ Goudarzi et al. (2023), 219; cf. Gonzalo Frasca, *Simulation versus Narrative*, 221–235.

²⁷ Goudarzi et al. (2023), 219.

The quest for righteousness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mehran's constant dilemma to decide between two ways or approaches centers the game's storyline: to support and take care of his family, or follow what he believes and fight for freedom and his faith. - Muslim ibn Aqil's support and sacrifice for Imam Hussein. - Kufis' reaction and support of Imam Hussein's messenger.
The hierarchy among characters	Imam Hussein → Muslim ibn Aqil → Mehran/ Kufis
The religious ritual or ceremonies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Preachers at Mosques - Prayers at Mosques
The iconization or symbolism of weapons or relics, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mehran's sword, with the form of Imam's Ali's sword - Mehran's armor with the engraved name of Allah - Mehran's shield with the symbol of lion - The flag with the name of Allah, Mohammed, Ali.

Figure 6. The belief system in *Ambassador of Love*.

As it is described in Figure 6, it can be concluded that *Ambassador of Love* imparts directly but unforcefully Iranian version of Shia's doctrines and principles to its players. While in forms of its genre, hack and slash, action-adventure, *Ambassador of Love* provides its players the significant experiences of battle-fields, fights and access to armors and weapons, its content and narration stand faithful to the official discourse of Iranian version of Shia. In other words, *Ambassador of Love* narrates not only a very sacred religious event in the history of the Shia, but it also presents what the role of a true faithful believer, like Mehran, is: to sacrifice his life for his belief and truth. Of course, based on the argument of the producer and director of the game, *Ambassador of Love* attempts to challenge Mehran's action in answering a single question: Is this his war?, which remains unanswered due to Mehran's determination of choosing one path over the other. As such, Mehran's character, heroic journey and his religious quest, are more in favor of helping the players better and more tangibly comprehend the story of Muslim ibn Aqil and his role as the messenger of Imam Hussein. In doing so, therefore, *Ambassador of Love* is a successful game because it serves its assigned purposes: retrieving the culture of martyrdom and sacrifice of the self for your faith, protecting the truth and faith (your Imam) as is described in (Iranian version of) Shia's faith.

4. Video Games and Religion Teaching-Learning

Video games have firmly entrenched themselves as an inseparable part of youth and children's culture, playing a pivotal role in shaping their understanding and perceptions of various themes and areas, either directly or indirectly. These digital platforms create immersive virtual worlds that connect players to sociopolitical themes reflective of contemporary events, allowing them to engage with and even alter historical narratives. Through such interactions, indicating the

interactivity of video games, players can experience historical periods, embody historical figures, or participate in scenarios imbued with religious significance and purposes.

Beyond entertainment, video games serve as powerful educational tools. They enhance concentration, spatial skills, and computational abilities while simultaneously offering historical insights and have the potential to redefine reality and propagate stereotypes. As shown in Figure 5. in the previous pages, the process of creating a belief system works through the content of video games and its gameplays. Video games can shape perceptions about specific groups, such as Muslims and Islam, by embedding certain narratives and images within their gameplay. A pertinent example of this is *Ambassador of Love*, which weaves religious stories and symbols into its narrative, enhancing the realism of its story world for a specific purpose. In essence, *Ambassador of Love* transcends its identity as a mere third-person action-adventure game. It functions as a religious medium, showcasing an Iranian version of Shia Islam. This game offers players a unique opportunity to explore and uncover religious messages, symbols, and icons while engaging in a secret mission to rescue a significant figure in Shia history, Muslim ibn Aqil. For gamers who lack the time or inclination to delve into historical texts, video games like *Ambassador of Love* become primary sources of historical knowledge. However, this comes with the risk of presenting a skewed version of history that aligns with the objectives of specific groups or nations. By narrating reality in a way that favors certain perspectives while opposing others, such games can influence players' perceptions and understanding of history.

Ultimately, the power of video games lies in their dual capacity to educate and influence. While they can offer valuable educational experiences and insights into history, they also hold the potential to reshape reality and propagate biased narratives, which is a field needs more comprehensive research. As such, it is crucial to approach video games with a critical perspective, recognizing their ability to both inform and manipulate. In doing so, players and educators alike can better harness the educational potential of video games while remaining vigilant against the dissemination of stereotypes and biased historical interpretations. As a result, *Ambassador of Love* dismantles the history to suit the purpose of a certain groups or nations through narrating the reality in favor of one part and in opposition of the others.²⁸

²⁸ Cf. Edmund Hayes (2020), *Playing the CyberSultan: Videogames and the Islamic Empire*.

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