Fursan Al-Aqsa: An Analysis of Moral Disengagement in the discursive strategies of a Pro-Palestine Video Game

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Abstract

The terrorist extremist activities of radical groups have benefited from the development of digital society and its new narrative formulas to make their proclamations visible and attract sympathisers. This logic also extends to video games and their distribution platforms, which, according to the European Union´s TE-SAT 2021 report, are increasingly used to spread extremist ideology and disseminate propaganda (Schlegel, 2020; Schlegel, 2021).

This situation has been denounced and has attracted the interest of international security and propaganda organisations, such as the National Security Agency of the United States or the East / South Stratcom Task Force of the European Commission. In this context, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been one of the most virulent fronts of support and opposition. This assumption is the starting point for proposing an analysis of the controversial game *Fursan Al-Aqsa: The Knights of the Al-Aqsa Mosque* (Nidal Nijm Games, 2022), an action game that addresses the conflict between Israel and Palestine from a Palestinian perspective, and that has been the subject of a series of bans and rehabilitations on the Steam platform, which is currently facing a lawsuit for violating U.S. anti-terrorist legislation by offering this game on its platform (Standwithus, 2021; Kredo, 2022).

Our research will focus on two key questions:

PI1: *On what communicative codes and geopolitical identifiers is the narrative of Fusan Al-Aqsa built in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?*

To answer this question, we will develop and apply an analytical model based on Bandura's "moral disengagement" (1996; 2002) and its application to violent video games (Hartman, 2017). We will also analyse the key elements of its discourse to assess its ideological intensity and determine, as various international actors and Hebrew media have pointed out, whether it is a terrorist-nature game or one that could promote online radicalisation. The application of the model will be developed through "utilitarian play" (Mäyrä, 2008), a procedure that allows critical reflection on the role of the game and its production context.

PI2: *How does the conflict analysis from the perspective of Fursan Al-Aqsa influence players' perceptions of the conflict?*

This question analyses the reaction and reception of the game content based on player reviews and comments on the Steam platform (n=132) and the main gameplay available on platforms such as Twitch and YouTube. To do this, on the one hand, user reviews and comments were collected through the API of these platforms and stored using the paid version of exportcomments.com. On the other hand, the analysis will be proposed based on the operational categories of the content analysis (Neuendorf, 2016) and the sentiment analysis (Pang & Lee, 2008) to extract the prominent opinions and emotions expressed by the players.

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