RESEARCH ARTICLE

Constructing Guardians and Threats: Digital Epistemology in War-Themed Entertainment Media

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Abstract

Representation shapes meaning, yet that meaning remains latent until activated through media. This mechanism is manifest in digital entertainment media's [DEM] dissemination of a guardian/threat binary narrative, portraying American soldiers as protectors of *pax mundi* and Arab militants as threats. Despite the pervasiveness of this binary logic, research in this area remains limited. Using critical theory, this study examines how the guardian/threat binary is constructed and communicated in DEM and the possible implications for intercultural communication. We conducted auto-ethnographic, para-textual, and quantitative content analyses of war games (*N*=14) and movies (*N*=15), based on their popularity, release time (2001-2021), and representation of conflicts in Arab/Muslim nations. Findings indicate that the digital communication of American and Arab identities within a binary logic legitimizes US military interventions in Arab nations. This work highlights the ethical dimensions of digital mis/representations and aims to guide policymakers and media creators toward more nuanced representation.

Keywords: Digital Epistemology, Guardian/threat Binary, Military-Entertainment Complex, Proxy Representation, Identity Communication.

1. Introduction

The triadic relationship between representation, belief systems, and communication forms the epistemological foundation through which social realities are constructed, circulated, and ultimately legitimized. Representation provides the semiotic scaffolding that structures how individuals and collectives make sense of the world (Foucault, 1980), while belief systems operate as the cognitive infrastructure through which these constructed meanings are internalized, reproduced, and enacted (Author et al., 2023). Communication functions as the mediating conduit between the two: it translates abstract ideological codes into affectively resonant narratives that audiences readily absorb, circulate, and normalize (Kress, 2009). Much like a digital interface that renders opaque backend operations into visible outputs, communication animates and disseminates the latent ideological assumptions embedded in representation and belief systems, making them experientially real.

While this triad has been extensively theorized in relation to traditional media such as print, film, and television (Hall, 1997), its contemporary articulation within digital entertainment media (DEM) constitutes a qualitatively distinct cultural formation, unprecedented in reach, interactivity, and ideological potency (Guterman, 2013; Klein, 2005). DEM—including digital video games and digital cinema, defined as "the packaging, distribution, and exhibition of motion pictures in digital form" (Swartz, 2004, p. 1)—has become a central arena where popular culture intersects with geopolitical narratives, shaping global understandings of war, security, and identity. Within

these media, conflict is not merely depicted but narratively constructed through stark, often racialized binaries: American soldiers are framed as disciplined guardians of global order, while Arab and Muslim characters are persistently cast as irrational, dangerous, and inherently threatening (Leonard, 2004). Whether resisting occupation or implicated in civilian violence, Arabs and Muslims are frequently subsumed within a homogenizing discourse of terrorism that collapses distinctions between political resistance, aggression, and self-defense (Boggs & Pollard, 2006; Altwaiji, 2014).

Scholarly engagement with these representational practices has grown increasingly urgent as DEM occupies an expanding role in the cultural production of geopolitical meaning. Existing research has shed light on the demonization of Arab and Muslim identities (Shaheen, 2003; Šisler, 2008; Mirrlees & Ibaid, 2021) and the valorization of Western military actors. Yet these studies often examine identity construction in isolation, overlooking the relational logic through which meaning is produced. Specifically, the mutually constitutive dynamic between the guardian—embodied by the morally upright U.S. soldier—and the threat— figured as the irrational Arab or Muslim Other— remains analytically underexplored. Moreover, the field has been dominated by qualitative methods, including hermeneutic, interpretive, and ethnographic approaches. While these have yielded important insights, the relative absence of quantitative analysis limits the empirical robustness and generalizability of existing findings.

This article seeks to address these gaps by adopting a mixed-method design that integrates autoethnography, para-textual analysis, and quantitative content analysis to ensure both analytical depth and empirical rigor. Through this approach, the study systematically interrogates how DEM encode, circulate, and normalize dichotomous representations of American and Arab identities, thereby contributing to the broader production of global hierarchies, securitized identities, and moral narratives that legitimize military intervention.

Building on an interdisciplinary framework that draws from Hall's theory of representation (1997), Foucault's conception of power/knowledge (1980), Ingvarsson's digital epistemology (2021), and key interventions from International Relations— including constructivism, critical security studies, and Orientalism—this study examines how the guardian/ threat binary operates across a selected corpus of war-themed films and video games released between 2001

and 2021. In doing so, it offers a comprehensive and empirically grounded account of how contemporary popular culture mediates global imaginaries of conflict, identity, and security.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section situates the study within the literature on militarism, representation, and popular culture. This is followed by a detailed elaboration of the theoretical framework. The subsequent section outlines the methodological design and data selection process. The final sections present the empirical findings, explore their broader implications, and reflect on the political significance of the guardian/threat binary in shaping public understandings of conflict in the digital age.

A central limitation of current scholarship on DEM is its tendency to fragment the analysis of identity, treating the "guardian" and the "threat" as independent narrative categories. While research examining Orientalist villainization or Western military heroism has generated valuable insights, such compartmentalized approaches obscure the relational architecture through which these identities acquire ideological coherence (Schulzke, 2013). This article argues that the binary opposition between guardian and threat must be understood as a relational, interdependent structure: the cultural intelligibility of each figure depends on the other. The depiction of Arabs and Muslims as irrational or violent only acquires its ideological potency through its juxtaposition with the disciplined, morally righteous U.S. soldier. Conversely, the legitimizing moral authority of the guardian figure is sustained by the persistent framing of Arab and Muslim geographies as chaotic, regressive, and threatening. The guardian/ threat binary is thus not an incidental narrative device but a core ideological logic through which DEM produce and normalize geopolitical hierarchies.

Interrogating this binary reveals how DEM participate in the production of what Foucault (1980) terms "regimes of truth," wherein militarized, racialized, and Orientalist worldviews are not merely represented but rendered commonsensical for global audiences. Through immersive, affect-rich, and interactive formats, DEM do not simply reflect global conflict; they function as cultural technologies of power that naturalize militarized identities, justify interventionist logics, and solidify moral hierarchies within the public imagination.By centering the guardian/threat binary as an analytical locus, this article advances a more rigorous, relational understanding of how DEM serve as sites of geopolitical meaning-making and as

vehicles for the reproduction of global hierarchies in the digital age.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Binary Thinking and Cultural Representation

Binary oppositions have long served as a foundational mechanism through which cultures produce and circulate meaning, often reinforcing hierarchical worldviews that privilege certain identities over others. As Hall (1997), Said (1979), Bhabha (1994), Elbow (1993), and Van Dijk (1991) demonstrate, symbols—whether linguistic, graphic, or visual—operate as the semiotic scaffolding upon which cultural narratives are constructed. The representational power of these symbols, however, is not fixed but is amplified by the sophistication of the medium through which they are transmitted (Brown, 1993; Author et al., 2023). The global shift from written to visual and, subsequently, to digital modes of communication has intensified this dynamic, embedding binary constructions more deeply into the cultural fabric (Daly, 2009; Grant, 2019).

Western cultural production, particularly, has exploited this binary logic to position itself as the custodian of civilization while casting the Arab and Muslim world as irrational, regressive, and threatening (Said, 1979; Hall, 2014). Though historical power dynamics have allowed the West to dominate this representational field, it is crucial to acknowledge that Arab cultures, when possessing epistemic power, have similarly deployed binaries to assert their own civilizational superiority (Hammond, 2019; Elbow, 1993).

Debates within structuralism, post-structuralism, and post-colonialism reveal both the resilience and instability of binary thinking. Structuralist scholars such as Saussure (1916) and Lévi-Strauss (1963) emphasized the centrality of binary oppositions in meaning-making (Joseph, 2017; Johnson, 2003; Battani et al., 1997). However, post-structuralist critiques, notably from Foucault (1972), Derrida (1967), and Barthes (1967), exposed the contingent and politically laden nature of these binaries, revealing how knowledge production is intimately tied to power (Culler, 1984; Ramond et al., 2008). This critique is further developed within post-colonial scholarship, with Fanon (1961), Said (1979), Bhabha (1994), and Spivak (1988) demonstrating how binary constructions serve as ideological instruments for legitimizing colonialism, racial hierarchies, and geopolitical domination (Williams, 1966; Hall, 2014).

2.2 The Guardian/Threat Binary in Digital Entertainment Media

The guardian/threat binary is one of the most persistent and consequential manifestations of this logic within contemporary digital entertainment media (DEM), particularly military-themed films and video games. As Klien (2005) observes, DEM has become a potent vehicle for reducing complex geopolitical dynamics into emotionally charged, yet reductive, dichotomies that shape audience perceptions.

This binary structure has evolved from earlier civilizational discourses—civilized/uncivilized, East/West, civilized/savage—into the contemporary opposition between the heroic guardian, often embodied by U.S. soldiers, and the threatening Arab or Muslim Other, frequently represented as terrorists (Aruri, 2017; Bos, 2020). These depictions are neither arbitrary nor purely aesthetic; they reflect historically entrenched narratives that position the West as progressive, rational, and legitimate, while constructing the Arab and Muslim world as static, chaotic, and inherently dangerous (Aguayo, 2009; Elbih, 2015; Grondin, 2011).

The Military-Entertainment Complex (MEC) plays a central role in this representational process. Stahl (2009) and Der Derian (2009) have convincingly argued that the fusion of military, media, and entertainment industries has created a powerful apparatus for naturalizing militarized worldviews, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11. Through DEM, this apparatus produces immersive, interactive experiences that valorise Western military intervention as both inevitable and morally righteous, while constructing Arab and Muslim identities as existential threats (Lenoir & Lowood, 2005; Mirrlees & Ibaid, 2021).

While scholars such as Schulzke (2013) have documented the prevalence of this hero-threat binary within DEM, a comprehensive theoretical and empirical examination of its ideological underpinnings remains limited. This study responds to that gap by interrogating how this binary operates not as a narrative afterthought but as a foundational ideological structure embedded within contemporary popular culture.

2.3 The Genisis of Guardianship and Threat Myths

The ideological architecture underpinning the guardian/threat binary is deeply rooted in American national identity and foreign policy discourse. Central

to this construction is the pursuit of pax mundi, a self-ascribed mission to universalize Western values while neutralizing perceived threats to global order (Puar & Rai, 2002; Horne, 2018). U.S. military interventions, from early colonial expansion to contemporary conflicts in the Arab and Muslim world, have consistently been framed as acts of guardianship, justified by ideological constructs such as Manifest Destiny, American exceptionalism, and the Clash of Civilizations (Aguayo, 2009; Robinson, 2014).

Simultaneously, Arab and Muslim identities have been systematically constructed as a threat through overlapping narratives of coercive, ideological, and economic danger. These depictions, drawing upon Orientalist discourses, colonial legacies, and geopolitical anxieties, have shaped public imaginaries that frame Arabs as incompatible with, and even antithetical to, Western modernity (Said, 1979; Van Dijk, 1991; Makdisi, 2002). The post-9/11 period has further intensified these representations, with the MEC actively promoting narratives of Arab and Muslim monstrosity to justify military interventions and sustain the economic and ideological imperatives of perpetual warfare (Stahl, 2009; Der Derian, 2009).

2.4 Digital Epistemology, Misrepresentation, and Technological Asymmetries

The digital era has amplified these representational dynamics, embedding them within the epistemological structures of contemporary knowledge production. As Van Leeuwen (2006) and Kress (2009) argue, meaning-making in the digital age is inherently multimodal, blending text, image, sound, and interactivity to produce complex, yet often reductionist, cultural narratives.

Ingvarsson's (2020) framework of digital epistemology, grounded in Foucault's (1980) power/knowledge thesis, emphasizes how digitization reshapes the production and circulation of knowledge, embedding cultural hierarchies and ideological biases within the technological and aesthetic logics of digital media (Machin & Van Leeuwen, 2005; Krippendorff, 1980). The asymmetrical distribution of technological power has resulted in what Spivak (1988) terms "representation by proxy," whereby marginalized groups—particularly Arabs and Muslims—are systematically constructed by Western media producers, often in ways that reinforce existing stereotypes and geopolitical hierarchies (Author et al., 2023).

This dynamic is especially visible in military video games, where immersive environments not only reflect but actively construct militarized worldviews that normalize U.S. exceptionalism and Orientalist binaries (Robinson, 2012; Bos, 2020). Video games, by virtue of their interactivity, offer a particularly potent site for embedding these ideological logics, providing players with simulated experiences of guardianship and threat that both entertain and indoctrinate (Mirrlees & Ibaid, 2021; Schulzke, 2013).

2.5 Hypotheses Development

In light of these theoretical insights and empirical gaps, this study advances the following hypotheses:

H1: There will be a significant positive correlation between the depiction of traits associated with guardianship—such as integrity, valour, and wisdom—and the portrayal of U.S. soldiers in war-themed movies and video games.

H2: There will be a strong positive correlation between threat traits (hypocrisy, pusillanimity, dogmatism) and the depiction of Arab/Muslim militants within these media.

H3: The perpetuation of the guardian/threat binary within DEM is not merely a product of media saturation but stems from the deliberate, ideologically motivated construction of narrative and visual content.

H4: Video games, given their heightened interactivity and emotional engagement, will more intensely reproduce the guardian/threat binary than films.

H5: The popularity and market success of military-themed films and video games will correlate with the prevalence of binary representations, suggesting a relationship between ideological content and cultural consumption patterns.

Given that cognitive categories such as interests and intentions are inherently interpretive and thus elude direct empirical verification (Puar & Rai, 2002), this study complements its quantitative analysis with a qualitative, hermeneutic approach designed to expose the ideological architecture underpinning digital entertainment media (DEM). Specifically, it interrogates how the binary construction of U.S. soldiers as virtuous guardians and Arab/Muslim militants as existential threats functions as a politically consequential narrative device that systematically reinforces militarized, racialized, and exclusionary worldviews. These representations are not mere artistic or entertainment choices; rather, they align with historically entrenched stereotypes and geopolitical hierarchies that have long legitimized Western interventionism and securitized conceptions

of the Arab/Muslim world (Clearwater, 2010; Boggs & Pollard, 2006). In this context, the perpetuation of guardianship and threat traits reflects not only residual cultural biases but also the calculated reproduction of ideological narratives that serve dominant political and epistemological interests (R. H. Brown, 1993; J. A. Brown, 2016; Krippendorff, 1980). This analytical stance builds on and extends the critical insights of scholars such as Stahl (2009), Robinson (2012, 2014), and Der Derian (2009), who have demonstrated that DEM—particularly war-themed films and video games—operate as key instruments within the Military-Entertainment Complex, shaping public consciousness and cultivating global imaginaries that normalize militarism, moral exceptionalism, and the vilification of the Other. Through this integrated, mixed-method approach, the study offers a theoretically grounded and methodologically rigorous contribution to understanding how popular culture actively participates in the production and circulation of geopolitical meaning.

2.6 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary critical framework that integrates Cultural Theory, Poststructuralism, and International Relations (IR) Theory to interrogate how digital entertainment media (DEM)—particularly war-themed video games and films—construct and circulate a binary opposition that frames American soldiers as global guardians and Arab or Muslim characters as existential threats. By synthesizing the theoretical contributions of Stuart Hall, Michel Foucault, Jonas Ingvarsson, and Edward Said, and embedding them within the IR paradigms of Constructivism, Critical Security Studies (CSS), and Popular Culture and World Politics (PCWP), this framework enables a nuanced examination of the representational politics and epistemic power underpinning DEM narratives.

At the foundation of this inquiry is Stuart Hall's theory of representation, which conceptualizes media as central to the production and circulation of meaning. Hall (1997) argued that cultural texts do not passively reflect reality; rather, they actively construct it through ideologically charged systems of signs and discursive codes. His notion of articulation is particularly pertinent for understanding how DEM narratives systematically associate American characters with virtues such as honor, discipline, and integrity, while Arab characters are frequently portrayed as violent, irrational, or regressive. These symbolic constructions

sustain hegemonic ideologies such as American exceptionalism and reproduce global hierarchies of race, civilization, and morality.

This analysis is deepened by Michel Foucault's theorization of power/knowledge, which posits that knowledge is not a neutral reflection of the world but a product of historically situated discursive formations that regulate what can be known, said, and seen. Within this framework, DEM becomes a site of disciplinary representation, where power operates through both narrative structures and visual regimes. Arab and Muslim subjects are frequently represented as "governable threats"—terrorists or targets—while U.S. military figures are depicted as rational actors operating within a moral and legal order. Foucault's concepts of surveillance, subjectification, and the archive are instrumental in analysing how gameplay mechanics and cinematic conventions discipline the player's field of vision, constrain moral choice, and constitute normative perceptions of war and identity. These media do not simply reflect geopolitical realities—they actively produce them through forms of visual and interactive governance.

To account for the epistemological dimensions of digital media, this framework draws on Jonas Ingvarsson's theory of digital epistemology, which examines how digital infrastructures—interfaces, algorithms, databases, and metadata systems—shape not only the circulation of knowledge but the very conditions of knowing itself. Ingvarsson argues that digital media, like their early modern counterparts (e.g., cabinets of curiosity, archives), encode specific modes of thought and classification. Within DEM, such epistemic architectures are embedded in the design of missions, character hierarchies, and visual styles, thereby governing what narratives are intelligible, what identities are visible, and what actions are possible. His insights enable a critique of how platform aesthetics and interactivity reinforce ideological binaries by privileging militarized, solutionist logics over complexity, ambiguity, or ethical reflection.

This media-focused critique is situated within broader IR paradigms, particularly Constructivism, which emphasizes that international relations are shaped not merely by material capabilities but by intersubjective meanings, social identities, and cultural narratives (Wendt, 1992; Hopf, 1998). From this standpoint, DEM contributes to global politics by circulating representational schemas that construct the U.S. as a moral agent and the Arab/Muslim world as a zone

of disorder. Such constructions do not emerge in a vacuum; they are constitutive of the broader ideational structures that naturalize intervention, securitization, and civilizational hierarchies.

Critical Security Studies (CSS) further challenges the notion of security as an objective or self-evident condition. Scholars such as Booth (2005), Buzan et al. (1998), and Neocleous (2014) argue that security is a political and performative act—one that involves naming threats, designating enemies, and justifying violence. DEM, viewed through this lens, functions as a securitizing apparatus, reinforcing racialized security discourses that depict Arabs and Muslims as pre-political threats requiring military containment. These narratives work not through policy documents but through the affective and symbolic power of media, which make war emotionally resonant and morally persuasive for mass audiences.

The inclusion of Edward Said's Orientalism (1979) provides critical historical depth to this framework. Said demonstrated how Western representations of the East—as irrational, violent, exotic, or passive—serve not only cultural but geopolitical functions by legitimizing imperial domination. DEM perpetuates these Orientalist logics in digital form, recoding them into high-definition graphics, tactical objectives, and immersive storylines that re-inscribe Arab/Muslim bodies and spaces as dangerous, chaotic, and in need of Western control. The guardian/threat binary, far from a neutral narrative device, becomes a digital reiteration of colonial knowledge that sustains global asymmetries of power and representation.

Finally, the Popular Culture and World Politics (PCWP) subfield underscores that cultural production is not external to global politics but central to its everyday enactment (Grayson et al., 2009; Nexon & Neumann, 2006; Stahl, 2010). Through PCWP, DEM is understood as an active site where geopolitical imaginaries are formed, where state and non-state actors are symbolically constituted, and where audiences are interpellated into roles of passive witness, active participant, or moral adjudicator. These media artifacts do not merely entertain—they educate, discipline, and persuade, functioning as informal yet influential instruments of soft power.

This theoretical framework foregrounds the convergence of cultural ideology, discursive power, digital mediation, and global politics in shaping how DEM articulates the guardian/threat binary. Hall elucidates how representations carry ideological meaning; Foucault reveals how these meanings are embedded in power relations and disciplinary mechanisms; Ingvarsson shows how digital platforms encode epistemic structures; Said traces the colonial genealogy of the representations in question; and IR theories—Constructivism, CSS, and PCWP—clarify how these cultural narratives sustain global hierarchies and legitimize militarized intervention. Together, these perspectives allow for a critical examination of DEM not merely as entertainment, but as a technologically mediated, epistemically charged, and politically consequential system of representation.

2.7 Objectives of the Present Study

This study applies the *backend/frontend* analogy to analyse how DEM, including cinematic narratives and video games, function as epistemological laboratories (Author et al., 2023; Machin & Van Leeuwen, 2005). We aim to explore how knowledge blocks are constructed and disseminated in these mediums. From a digital epistemological standpoint, we propose that the DEM's objective is to enhance communicative efficacy, rooted in the epistemic power wielded by cultural groups owning them (Puar & Rai, 2002; Author et al., 2023). This study posits that DEM have framed Americans and Arabs as *binary constructs*, marking a significant shift in cultural representation and intercultural communication. Our research aims to: (1) identify patterns in the portrayal of guardianship and threat traits, (2) understand the intentions of film and video game producers, (3) uncover propaganda and bias in digital media, and (4) examine differences in communication between movies and video games. To achieve these aims, we conducted a quantitative content analysis, along with auto-ethnographic and paratextual examinations of 14 digital war-themed games and 15 military-themed movies released between 2001 and 2021.

3. Method

This study investigates the guardian/threat binary logic within the military entertainment complex using a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative techniques to capture the complexity of reality (Mirrlees & Ibaid, 2021; Krippendorff, 2004; Coe & Scacco, 2017). The analysis encompasses a sample of 14 war-themed video games and 15 war-centric movies, using auto-ethnographic analysis, quantitative content analysis, and para-textual investigation. Auto-ethnography considers researchers' personal experiences with the media, providing introspective insights into how these narratives shape perceptions (Ellis et al., 2015; Mirrlees & Ibaid, 2021; Puar & Rai, 2002). Para-textual analysis examines supplementary materials like marketing and reviews to contextualize the sociocultural influences on the content (Macnamara, 2018). Quantitative content analysis systematically

quantifies the media's manifest content, offering methodological rigor through reliable and generalizable findings (Krippendorff, 1980; Macnamara, 2018).

3.1 Sampling and Inclusion Criteria

For this work, I referred to five main websites—Rotten Tomatoes, Metacritic, IMDb, IGN, and Gamespot—known for their depth of content and influence in the entertainment industry. These sites offer a comprehensive mix of critic and user reviews, providing a well-rounded view of movies and video games. The sample of war video games (*N*=14) included *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down (2003)*, *Conflict: Desert Storm* (2002), *Conflict: Desert Storm II: Back to Baghdad* (2003), *SOCOM U.S. Navy SEALs* (2002), *Full Spectrum Warrior* (2004), *Conflict: Global Terror* (2005; also called *Conflict: Global Storm*) *Close Combat: First to Fight* (2005), *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007), *Army of Two* (2008), *Medal of Honor* (2010), *Battlefield 3* (2011), *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* (2012), *Insurgency: Sandstorm* (2018), *Six Days in Fallujah* (2023).

The sample of war movies (*N*=15) included *Black Hawk Down* (2001), *Jarhead* (2005), *The Kingdom* (2007), *The Hurt Locker* (2008), *Body of Lies* (2008), *Green Zone* (2010), *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), *Lone*

Survivor (2013), *American Sniper* (2014), *Thirteen Hours (*2016), *Sand Castle* (2017), *The Wall* (2017), *12 Strong* (2018), *The Kill Team* (2019), *The Outpost* (2020).

The selection criteria were, partly following Mirrlees and Ibaid (2021): (a) release time (2001- 2021, (b) belonging to the war genre (Clearwater, 2010), (c) focusing on the U.S. war in the Middle East and North Africa (Aguayo, 2009; Darley, 2000), and (d) popularity according to the aforementioned review sites.

3.2 Coding Protocol

To investigate the incidence of the guardian/threat binary, I developed a coding protocol for quantitative content analysis, grounded in a theoretically and technically sound design (Coe & Scacco, 2017). Following Coe and Scacco's (2017) guidelines, the researchers created a detailed "codebook" that coder adhered to rigorously (p. 4). To reduce "coder variance," I recruited three volunteer coders with specific competencies and who received comprehensive training. Numerical codes were assigned to categories, sub-categories, and sub-sub-categories using Whimsical, as shown in Figure 1.
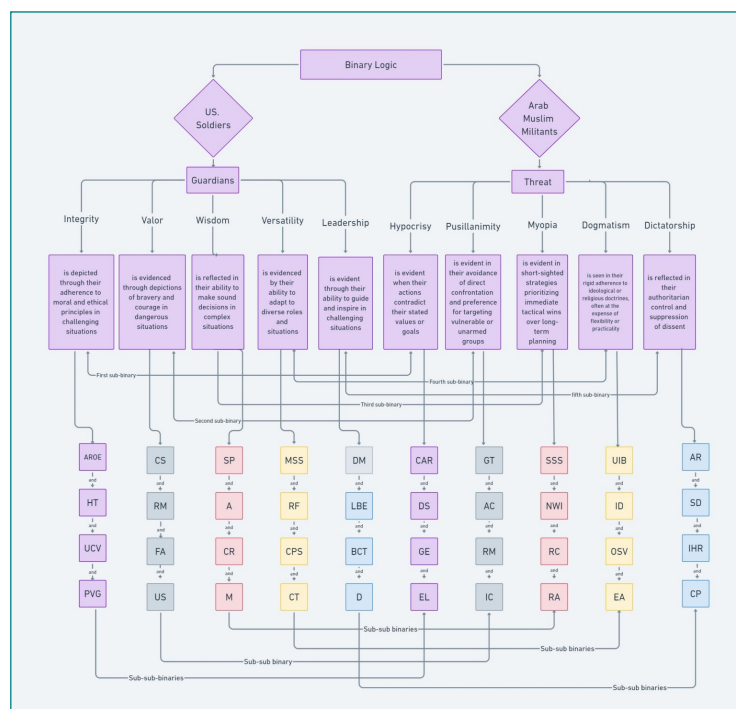

Figure 1. *The guardian/threat binary logic in the 15 selected war movies and 14 war videogames*

Note: the sub-sub binaries of the guardian/threat dichotomy are ten. **Guardianship**: **1**. *Integrity*: **ARE** (Adherence to Rules of Engagement), **HT** (Honesty and Transparency), UV (Upholding Values), **PVG** (Protecting Vulnerable Groups). **2**. *Valor*: **CS** (Combat Situations), **RM** (Rescue Missions), **FA** (Facing Adversity), S (Sacrifice). **3**. *Wisdom*: **SP** (Strategic Planning), **A** (Adaptability), **CR** (Conflict Resolution), **MG** (Mentorship and Guidance). **4**. *Versatility*: **MSS** (Multifaceted Skill Sets), **RF** (Role Flexibility), **CPS** (Creative Problem-Solving), **CT** (Creative Training). **5**. *Leadership*: **DM** (Decision-Making), **LBE** (Leading by Example), **BCT** (Building Cohesive Teams), **D** (Delegation).
Threat: **1**. *Hypocrisy*: **CAR** (Contradictory Actions vs. Rhetoric), DS (Double Standards), **GE** (Grievances Exploitation), EL (Exploitative Leadership). **2**. *Pusillanimity*: **GT** (Guerrilla Tactics), **AC** (Attacking Civilians), **RM** (Risk Minimization), **IC** (Intimidation and Coercion). **3**. *Myopia*: **SSS** (Short-Sighted Strategies), **NWI** (Neglecting Wider Impact), **RC** (Resistance to Compromise), **AR** (Resistance to Adaptability). **4**. *Dogmatism*: **UIB** (Unyielding Ideological Beliefs), **ID** (Intolerance for Dissent), **OSV** (Overemphasis on Symbolic Victories), **EA** (Extremist Actions). **5**. *Dictatorship*: **AR** (Authoritarian Rule), **SD** (Suppression of Dissent), **IHR** (Imposition of Harsh Rules), **CP** (Centralized Power).

Coders evaluated the incidence of the guardian construct, encompassing subcategories such as *integrity, valour, wisdom, versatility, and leadership*, along with their respective sub-sub-categories (*n*=20), within pre-recorded data pertaining to U.S. soldiers. For Arab Muslim militants, the threat concept was coded for traits such as *hypocrisy, pusillanimity, myopia, dogmatism, and dictatorship*, as well as their sub-sub-categories (*n*=20). This coding framework was consistently applied across both auto-ethnographic and para-textual analyses, ensuring a uniform approach. The complete coding scheme is detailed in Figure 1.

3.3 Procedures

In the quantitative study, three key procedures were rigorously implemented. First, each movie was watched, and each game was played to apply the threshold method (Macnamara, 2018). Second, original data was preserved, and coding schemes were meticulously documented (Krippendorff, 1980), focusing on counting characteristics of characters in movies and video games. Third, coding accuracy was verified by repeating the process with three independent coders (Krippendorff, 1980). Initial codes and themes were derived from existing literature, and a flowchart was created using Whimsical (https://whimsical.com/ai) to visualize these themes. A Canva group was used for data sharing among coders (Coe & Scacco, 2017). Coders assessed the presence of guardian and threat traits on a 1 to 5 scale—1 for absent, 2 for slight presence, 3 for moderate presence, 4 for considerable presence, and 5 for extreme presence. They coded independently at first and then collaborated to compile data into a grid. Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS version 27 and Python.

The qualitative study utilized auto-ethnography by completing the story mode of fourteen games and analysing fifteen films. Personal notes and visual records were collected using OBS Studio for customizable screen recording. Paratextual data, including promotional trailers, reviews, and walkthroughs (Mirrlees & Ibaid, 2021), were compiled to provide additional context, such as developer details, sales, review scores, and storylines. Data collected by the five coders were shared through the Canva group to ensure consistency and comprehensive analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

To test H_1 and H_2, a one-sample t-test was conducted to evaluate whether the mean scores assigned by the five coders significantly differed from the test value of 0 (Table 2). The t-test results (*t* [22.31–38.61]; *md* [3.65–4.13]; *SD* [.58–.89]; *M* [3.66–4.14]; *p* < .001) demonstrate that the coders consistently identified significant patterns in the data, supporting the presence and salience of guardianship and threat themes in the DEM analysed (Coe & Scacco, 2017).

The analysis revealed that the traits of *integrity, valour, wisdom, versatility, and leadership* are strongly associated with the concept of guardianship in the portrayal of American soldiers (*p* < .001) (Puar & Rai, 2002). Similarly, the traits of *hypocrisy, pusillanimity, myopia, dogmatism, and dictatorship* are significantly linked to the notion of threat in the representation of Arab/Muslim militants (*p* < .001) (Mirrlees & Ibaid, 2021). The consistent and statistically significant positive mean differences across all coders affirm the robustness of these findings (Macnamara, 2018).

Reliability was evaluated using Krippendorff's Alpha, which yielded a high value (α = .96), indicating robust inter-rater agreement, with a confidence interval ranging from .92 to .98. The probability (*q*) of failing to achieve an alpha value of .90 or lower was effectively zero, reinforcing the reliability of the coding process (Coe & Scacco, 2017). Additionally, Cronbach's alpha scores for the binary poles of guardianship (α = .91) and threat (α = .94) demonstrated strong internal consistency, further validating the stability and accuracy of the sub-trait coding (Macnamara, 2018).

Table 1. *One-Sample statistics and One-Sample Test of the five Coders*

	N	Mean	SD	SEM	t	df	P(2-tailed)	md	95% CI	
									Lower	*Upper*
Coder1	29	3.72	.882	.164	22.732	28	<.001	3.724	3.39	4.06
Coder2	29	4.14	.581	.108	38.361	28	<.001	4.138	3.92	4.36
Coder3	29	3.69	.891	.165	22.311	28	<.001	3.690	3.35	4.03
Coder4	29	3.69	.660	.123	30.093	28	<.001	3.690	3.44	3.94
Coder5	29	3.66	.721	.134	27.304	28	<.001	3.655	3.38	3.93

The distribution of guardianship and threat sub-traits was analysed using histograms. Figure 2a shows the distribution of "guardianship," which is approximately normal (*M* = 75.97; *SD* = 5.864), indicating that this construct is consistently represented in the media (Macnamara, 2018). Figure 2b illustrates the threat

variable, which is right-skewed ($M = 70.66$; $SD = 8.735$), indicating that some media (videogames) because they focus on the playing character rather than

AI characters) do not clearly depict all subcategories of the threat concept (Leonard, 2004).
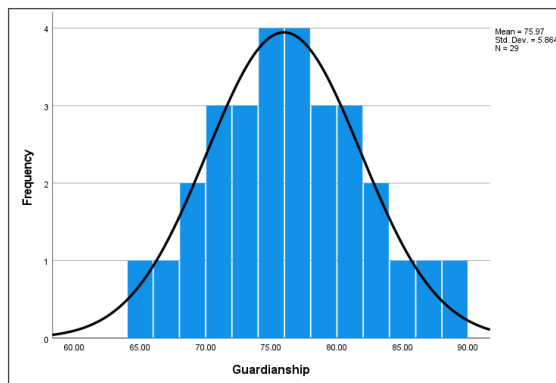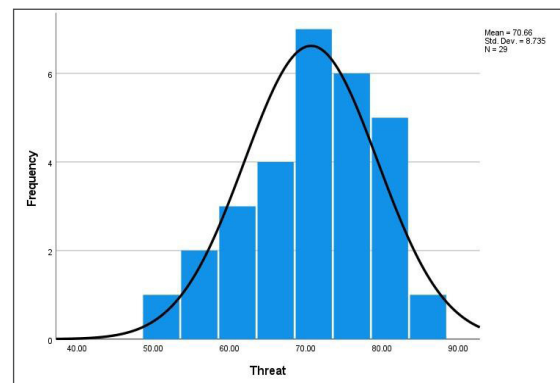

Figure (2a)

Figure (2b)

Figure 2. *The frequency of guardianship and threat trends*

Our analysis also revealed a distinct dichotomy in the portrayal of U.S. soldiers and Arab Muslims (H_3) (Schulzke, 2013). A linear regression analysis examined the relationship between guardianship and threat, revealing a moderately strong positive correlation ($r = 0.645$, $p < 0.001$). The mean scores for guardianship and threat across the 29 media productions were 74.07 ($SD = 7.704$) and 75.24 ($SD = 9.760$), respectively. ANOVA results confirmed that the regression model, with threat as the predictor, was statistically significant ($f = 19.212$, $p < 0.001$) in explaining the variance in guardianship. These findings indicate that threat is a significant predictor of guardianship.

Confirming H_3, our analysis indicates that the impact of guardianship and threat representations is not primarily determined by the quantity of movies or games produced but rather by the effectiveness of the narrative construction (see Figure 1). As expected, our findings revealed notably high average scores for both guardianship (4.2) and threat (4.25) ($r=0.99$; $p<0.001$) during the 2012-2016 period. This is particularly striking given that, as shown in Table 1, only 17.2% of the total sample—comprising one game and four movies—was produced during this time frame.
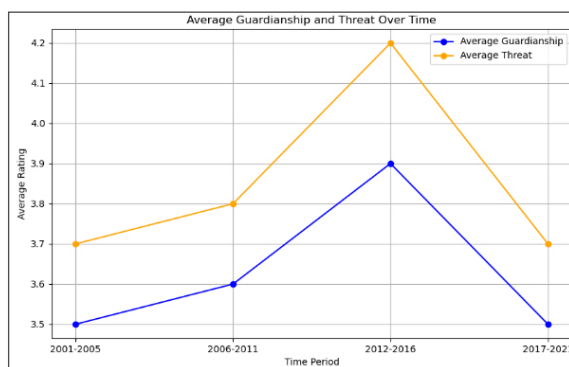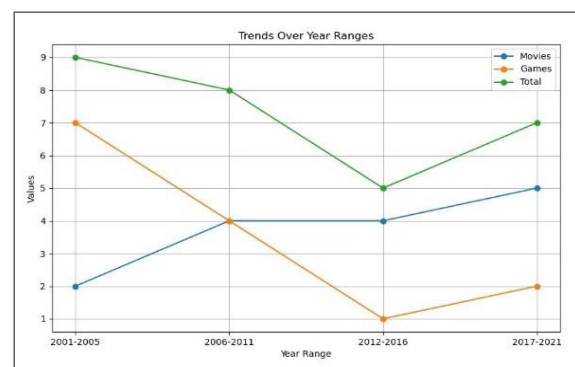

Figure (3a)

Figure (3b)

Figure 3. *(a) Trends in guardianship and threat traits over time for the 15 selected war movies and 14 war video games. (b) Production trends for movies and video games over time.*

Note: *r=0.99; P-value: 0.001*

To assess H_4, we conducted a two-factor ANOVA without replication, revealing robust support for the hypothesis. The analysis shows significant differences in how guardianship and threat traits are communicated across movies and video games ($MS = 6.44$; $f = 18.33$; $p < .0001$). Additionally, the interaction effect between media types—how various movies and games portray these traits—was significant ($MS = 8.29$; $f = 23.58$;

$p < .0001$). This indicates considerable variation in the portrayal of these traits based on the medium used. These findings are consistent with previous qualitative research (Höglund, 2008; Höglund & Willander, 2018; Machin & Suleiman, 2006; Machin & Van Leeuwen, 2005; Power, 2007), emphasizing the medium's critical role in shaping the depiction of guardianship and threat.

We hypothesized [H_5] The representation of the binary guardian-threat dynamic will correlate strongly with the popularity of the games and movies. To test this, we performed a bivariate correlation analysis using Pearson's r to assess the relationship between IMDb ratings and the subcategories of guardianship and threat themes. The results revealed significant positive correlations between IMDb ratings (the oldest and widest platform) and several guardianship sub-subcategories: honesty and transparency ($r = .33$, $p < .05$), protecting vulnerable groups ($r = .46$, $p < .001$), combat situations ($r = .43$, $p < .05$), sacrifice ($r = .40$, $p < .05$), mentorship and guidance ($r = .40$, $p < .05$), multifaceted skill sets ($r = .33$, $p < .05$), and role flexibility ($r = .30$, $p = .05$). In contrast, no significant correlations were found between IMDb ratings and threat subcategories. These findings partially confirm our hypothesis, highlighting that DEM's popularity, as indicated by IMDb ratings, is more strongly linked to the portrayal of guardianship traits than to threat characteristics. This underscores the media's appeal for narratives centred on valour, sacrifice, and versatility.

4.1 The Binary Logic Analysis

Our qualitative and quantitative analyses uncovered eight key themes within the guardian/threat binary that permeate digital entertainment media (DEM). On the side of guardianship, we identified: (1) Romanticizing war and soldiering, (2) Honouring survival, (3) Celebrating both solo and collective valour, and (4) Framing war as a means of safeguarding legitimate truth. On the threat side, the themes are: (1) Idealizing pre-emptive war, (2) Portraying the militant Arab as a silent, ever-present danger, (3) Demonizing Arab resistance, and (4) Casting Arabs as villains of truth. These themes are crafted to embed a powerful narrative in the American psyche—that through war, the U.S. is the protector of global peace, warding off an omnipresent threat.

4.2 Peace by Force: Romanticizing War and Soldiering

A binary rationale juxtaposes perceived virtues with vices, creating a simplified moral dichotomy that often permeates Digital Entertainment Media (DEM). Within this context, the narrative tends to romanticize soldiering and war, framing them as moral contests against perceived malevolence (Aguayo, 2009; Boggs & Pollard, 2006; Guterman, 2013). This narrative strategy, as we suggest, not only cultivates admiration for so-called heroes and intensifies animosity toward designated villains but

also glosses over the harrowing realities of warfare, thereby distorting public perception (Hoodbhoy, 2005; Rezk & Zamoum, 2021). Our findings resonate with prior research (e.g., Aguayo, 2009; Schulzke, 2013; Puar & Rai, 2002), revealing a persistent portrayal of American soldiers as peacekeepers (H_1) and Arab Muslims as embodiments of threat (H_2) (Clearwater, 2010; Dodds, 2008). These findings present a stark contrast to Mueller's (1990) assertion that war is in decline due to its growing perception as "disgusting, ridiculous, and unwise" (p. 321).

While Mueller contends that major wars are becoming obsolete, our research, aligned with existing scholarship (Puar & Rai, 2002), argues that the U.S. remains engaged in what Baudrillard (1995) termed the "dead war"—a conflict perpetuated not by immediate threats but by its continual adaptation within DEM, which constructs a specific epistemology where the global war on terror is depicted as a noble and necessary endeavour (Aguayo, 2009; Schulzke, 2013; Guterman, 2013). This portrayal capitalizes on the geographical and psychological distance of these conflicts from Western audiences, distinguishing them from the visceral, direct threats of WWII. By framing the war on terror as a heroic crusade in 97% of the analysed war movies and games, DEM seeks to rekindle public fascination with war, presenting it not merely as a necessary evil but as a virtuous mission that upholds global peace and security (Guterman, 2013). Films such as *Black Hawk Down* (2001), *Lone Survivor* (2013), *American Sniper* (2014), Thirteen Hours (2016), The Wall (2017), and 12 Strong (2018) dramatize real-world military operations to valorise the soldier's sacrifice and frame war as a noble endeavour, often through emotionally charged narratives and character-driven storytelling that emphasize personal courage, loss, and duty. Scenes from *Black Hawk Down* the film such as the extraction under heavy fire and the soldiers carrying wounded comrades through hostile streets underline themes of brotherhood, heroism, and sacrifice. In *Lone Survivor*, depicting Operation Red Wings in Afghanistan, the film follows a Navy SEAL team ambushed by Taliban fighters. The narrative heavily focuses on the endurance and resilience of Marcus Luttrell, the only surviving SEAL. Graphic combat sequences and personal flashbacks humanize the soldiers, emphasizing their bravery and loyalty. Chronicling the life of Chris Kyle, a U.S. Navy SEAL sniper, American Sniper epitomizes how war and soldiering are romanticized under the guise of safeguarding peace. Kyle's lethal precision is framed not as an act of aggression, but as a reluctant, noble necessity to

protect American troops and, by extension, global stability. His kills, often depicted as saving comrades from imminent death, are not shown as mere violence but as the embodiment of heroic self-sacrifice in the service of peace. *12 Strong* dramatizes the first U.S. Special Forces team deployed to Afghanistan after 9/11, framing their mission as a heroic crusade to restore peace through force. The soldiers, depicted as courageous, adaptable, and unwaveringly committed, willingly plunge into an unfamiliar and hostile terrain to combat terrorism. Their horseback assaults across Afghanistan's rugged mountains are romanticized as the actions of modern-day knights, reinforcing the myth of the noble warrior fighting for freedom. The narrative idealizes their alliance with local warlords as a selfless endeavour to liberate the Afghan people. *The Wall* (2017) encapsulates the romanticized narrative of soldiering as an embodiment of resilience and moral endurance amidst adversity. Set during the Iraq War, the film portrays the two trapped American soldiers as vulnerable yet resolute, embody courage and resourcefulness as they navigate the unseen enemy's manipulation. The crumbling wall, their sole protection, becomes a potent symbol of their isolation and vulnerability, reinforcing the image of the American soldier as a beleaguered yet righteous figure standing firm in the face of relentless threat.

In contrast, video games inspired by similar conflicts—such as Delta Force: Black Hawk Down (2003) or Six Days in Fallujah (2021)—extend this glorification through interactive gameplay, where the player actively embodies the role of the heroic soldier. Through mechanisms like mission objectives, player rewards, and immersive first-person perspectives, these games reinforce the same ideological narrative, yet do so by granting players direct agency in enacting pre-emptive violence, thus transforming passive spectatorship into active participation in the constructed myth of just and honourable warfare (Höglund & Willander, 2018).

In agreement with Clever (2020) and Höglund and Willander (2018), our results confirm that the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network (MIME-Net) often shifts the focus away from the complex historical and geopolitical roots of conflict, emphasizing instead the spectacle and sensationalism of war. Like prior studies (e.g., Power, 2007; Höglund and Willander, 2018), we highlight how MIME-Net's vested interests skew representation by prioritizing the aestheticization of combat, the fetishization of military technology, and the glorification of heroism. Our results suggest that this approach not only amplifies

the dramatic allure of warfare but also risks obscuring its broader political and ethical implications, thereby reinforcing a romanticized narrative that distorts the true nature of conflict (Ingvarsson, 2020).

Moreover, our analysis uncovers a divergence in how this binary rationale is represented in films versus video games (Mirrlees & Ibaid, 2021). In films, directors typically endow Arab Muslim characters with specific traits designed to enhance the valour of American soldiers (e.g., Rezk & Zamoum, 2021; Aguayo, 2009). In contrast, video games often reduce villains—especially non-playable characters—to algorithmically determined stereotypes, resulting in a more impersonal and mechanistic portrayal (e.g., Schulzke, 2013; Höglund & Willander, 2018). This distinction underscores how different media platforms employ unique strategies to shape the portrayal of binary oppositions in digital narratives, ultimately influencing how audiences internalize these dichotomies (Power, 2007).

4.3 The Honor of Survival

Wartime narratives have traditionally honoured the fallen, casting them as the ultimate bearers of sacrifice. However, our analysis reveals a nuanced shift in this portrayal: while both the fallen and the living are venerated, there is a marked preference for glorifying survivors. This shift suggests that, particularly in the video games we examined, the act of survival is increasingly associated with heroism and glory, overshadowing the honour once reserved for those who died in battle. Klien (2005) observed this narrative evolution in films like *Black Hawk Down* (2001), *The Hurt Locker* (2008), *American Sniper* (2014), and *Thirteen Hours* (2016), where the spotlight falls on the resilience and bravery of those who survive rather than on the ultimate sacrifice of the deceased (Power, 2007). This emphasis on survival over sacrifice reflects a broader trend in media, reinforcing the notion that returning home, intact and victorious, is now celebrated as the pinnacle of heroism (Klien, 2005).

This trend is further illuminated by a professional movie reviewer's comments on *The Hurt Locker*:

> The movie's singular focus on Americans is also in the tradition. The Iraqis here are hostile faces outside the Humvee, staring down from rooftops or from a shop window. […] The movie isn't about Iraqis, and doesn't want to be about Iraqis. (Movie reviewer, Rotten Tomatoes)

This observation points to a deliberate narrative strategy: by minimizing the presence and voices of

Iraqi soldiers, the film emphasizes a Western cultural valorisation of life over death. Western narratives increasingly frame survival as a triumph of the human spirit, while subtly denigrating martyrdom—a concept often associated with Islamic culture—not as an act of bravery but as a marker of defeat (Aguayo, 2009; Boggs & Pollard, 2006). By rendering the Iraqi perspective nearly invisible, these portrayals reinforce a cultural distinction in which Western ideals are aligned with the preservation of life, while the concept of martyrdom is recast as futile and misguided. This narrative manipulation not only elevates survival as the ultimate virtue but also subtly undermines the perceived nobility of those who choose to die for their cause, framing their sacrifice as less significant, even counterproductive, within the broader context of the war on terror.

4.4 Heroism: A Dual Symphony of Solo and Collective Valor

In conformity with previous research (e.g., Klien, 2005) our analysis unveils a complex portrayal of American heroism, blending individual and collective ideals, which aligns with the popularity of these narratives (J. A. Brown, 2016). All the products examined emphasize the valour of American soldiers, with the sub-categories related to this trait receiving high scores from the coders (Fig. 1). Films like *American Sniper* glorify solitary heroism and wisdom, with Clint Eastwood presenting Chris Kyle as a paragon of American exceptionalism, patriotism and solitary valour (Puar & Rai, 2002). This 'silent guardian' theme is also evident in The Wall, where the protagonist's dedication to protecting potable water for Iraqi villagers underscores the critical trait of integrity (Boggs & Pollard, 2006). The theme is also and is vividly echoed in first-person shooter games like *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007) and *Medal of Honor* (2010) which immerse players in the exploits of individual heroes, with *Medal of Honor* particularly highlighting the elite sacrifices of Tier 1 operatives during covert missions. As movie reviewer commented in 2009, in *The Hurt Locker* (2008), Staff Sergeant William James "has already disarmed over 700 bombs and seems to care nothing about his own safety." This emphasis on solitary bravery as in *Lone Survivor* and *The Wall* and most of the studied videogames especially First Person Shooter_combat situation, rescue missions, and creative problem solving_, complements the broader trend of celebrating survival and personal courage, reinforcing the dual portrayal of heroism identified in our research.

This contrast between individual and collective heroism is evident in both films and video games. While *The Wall* highlights individual valour, works like *Lone Survivor* (2013), *12 Strong* (2018), *13 Hours* (2016), and games such as *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down* (2003), *SOCOM U.S. Navy SEALs* (2002), *Battlefield 3* (2011), and *Insurgency: Sandstorm* (2018) emphasize collective heroism. As our investigation shows, the focus on collective action is particularly evident in the reception of films like *The Outpost* (2020), where Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone* notes the film's success in portraying heroism as a collective endeavour. Both mediums, as revealed by our autoethnographic and paratextual analyses, underscore the importance of teamwork, depicting success as the result of coordinated efforts and shared courage (Power, 2007).

Particularly in video games, which are oriented toward young Americans, this focus on collective heroism serves to bolster nationalism and support for military action (Power, 2007; Bogost, 2008). Games like *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield* reinforce American nationalism by valorising teamwork, unity, and leadership—core military values. By mirroring real military operations, these games normalize and legitimize warfare, framing it as a necessary collective endeavour for the greater good (Power, 2007). This narrative aligns military action with patriotic ideals, strengthening public support (Puar & Rai, 2002).

Our qualitative analysis also indicates that critics often find the portrayal of American soldiers lacking in complexity. Soldiers are frequently depicted as "generic symbols of American strength and bravery," with their personal identities overshadowed by their collective roles as embodiments of national resilience and heroism, as noted by an IMDb reviewer. Another IMDb critic similarly argues that these characters often function more as "anonymous slabs of American fortitude" than as fully developed individuals with distinct identities. This critique highlights a narrative tendency to prioritize broad themes of heroism over nuanced character portrayals.

4.5 War: An Unyielding Guardian of Truth

Our autoethnographic analysis, validating H_4, reveals that American soldiers are constructed as wise and unwavering guardians of truth, a depiction consistent with the literature (e.g., Schulzke, 2013). This wisdom is evident in their relentless struggle against both outgroup terrorists and corrupt ingroup American politicians. Our quantitative findings support this, showing that digital entertainment media (DEM)

emphasize integrity and wisdom as defining traits of American soldiers, as vividly illustrated in *The Hurt Locker* (2008), *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), *Lone Survivor* (2013), *American Sniper* (2014), and *Thirteen Hours* (2016). These films accentuate soldiers' moral and ethical struggles, highlighting their unwavering dedication to their missions and country, even amidst insurmountable dangers and moral dilemmas.

In contrast, war games like *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007) depict political authorities with suspicion, often portraying them as corrupt or incompetent, a blunter approach compared to the nuanced portrayal in *Zero Dark Thirty*. This aligns with existing literature (e.g., Höglund & Willander, 2018; Machin & Suleiman, 2006; Machin & Van Leeuwen, 2005; Power, 2007), which highlights a more distrustful narrative of military and political figures in media. The stark depiction of these authorities in Call of Duty underscores a simplistic, yet pervasive, distrust that contrasts with the complex moral landscapes portrayed in films.

In *Body of Lies* (2008), CIA officer Roger Ferris (Leonardo DiCaprio) grapples with deep ethical conflicts amidst covert operations in the Middle East, striving to uphold his moral integrity despite manipulative tactics and political intricacies. Similarly, in *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), Maya (Jessica Chastain) demonstrates unwavering commitment to ethics while navigating the morally ambiguous realm of CIA interrogation techniques in her pursuit of Osama bin Laden.

In *The Kill Team* (2019), Andrew Briggman confronts and exposes unethical behavior within his unit during the Afghanistan War, maintaining his moral convictions despite immense pressure. This theme intensifies in *Green Zone* (2010), where Warrant Officer Miller, initially tasked with locating Saddam's WMDs, discovers the flawed and deceptive intelligence from his superiors. Defying military orders, Miller embarks on a quest for truth, aiming to restore the U.S. military's credibility and critique the Bush administration's 2003 invasion of Iraq.

The film reconfigures the narrative, casting American soldiers as tireless truth-seekers whose integrity starkly contrasts with the surrounding corruption and deceit. This depiction resonates with the Army University Press's ethos: "Do what's right—legally and morally." Films such as *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) and *The Hurt Locker* (2008) exemplify this principle, portraying characters grappling with moral and ethical quandaries. Our quantitative analysis underscores

this portrayal, with high integrity scores reflecting the US Army's image as resolute guardians of moral truth under duress. Similarly, *The Kingdom* (2007) showcases FBI agent Ronald Fleury (Jamie Foxx), who, amid political pressure, steadfastly adheres to ethical standards in his pursuit of justice.

Our qualitative analysis of *Black Hawk Down* the movie as well as the game reveals Sergeant Matt Eversmann (Josh Hartnett) and his team displaying unwavering ethical commitment during the perilous Mogadishu conflict (Machin and Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 119). Yet, this portrayal raises questions about the real-world adherence of the US Army to these values. Evidence from the 1993 Somali intervention suggests a dissonance. Recchia (2018) critiques the prevailing narrative of the 1992 Operation Restore Hope as a purely humanitarian mission under President George H. W. Bush. Contrary to this image, academic research suggests the operation was a strategic display, with Colin Powell characterizing it as a "paid political advertisement" (Machin and Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 122).

4.6 Preventing Threat: The Art of Idealizing Pre-emptive War

The United States, shaped by the enduring trauma of the World Wars and driven by an ambition to preclude future existential crises, has firmly institutionalized the doctrine of "pre-emptive war"—an approach that extends beyond military strategy into the cultural and epistemological fabric of American society (Dodds, 2008; Der Derian, 2009; Neocleous, 2014; Stockdale, 2013). Far from being confined to the realm of formal defense policy, this logic has permeated popular culture, political discourse, and everyday representations of security, particularly through the interconnected Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Complex (Der Derian, 2009; Robinson, 2014). As Neocleous (2014) argues, pre-emptive war operates as both a geopolitical tactic and a domestic governing logic, reinforcing a perpetual state of vigilance rooted in fear and suspicion. This cultural normalization is vividly evident in U.S. entertainment media, where movies and video games consistently dramatize the necessity of pre-emptive strikes to counter elusive threats, thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of interventionist policies (Boggs & Pollard, 2006; Hammond, 2019; Robinson, 2014). Consequently, pre-emption is no longer depicted as an exceptional military response but as a moral imperative embedded within both statecraft and the collective American imaginary (Chomsky, 2007). This logic of striking first, neutralizing threats before they mature, finds powerful expression in both

cinematic and digital entertainment media (DEM), where it becomes not merely policy but a legitimized moral imperative.

Public reactions to Black Hawk Down (2001) reveal the extent to which the film reinforces anxieties over unchecked power in conflict zones. As one viewer remarked in an online review, "It is beyond comprehension how an individual like Mohamed Aidid could wield such substantial power and influence. The notion that such malevolence could be permitted to ascend to a position of authority is, to me, utterly unfathomable" (Andres S., user review, IMDb, 23 December 2021). His reflection encapsulates a broader societal fear—one cultivated and amplified by media that dramatizes the consequences of inaction, portraying the unchecked rise of perceived adversaries as a harbinger of inevitable global chaos (Boggs & Pollard, 2006; Puar & Rai, 2002).

This fear-driven logic is intricately woven into the narratives of films and video games alike, yet crucial distinctions emerge when one considers not only the narrative architecture but also the interactive affordances unique to digital media. As Bogost (2007) asserts, video games possess procedural rhetoric—an ability to convey ideological messages through rules, gameplay mechanics, and player interaction, rather than through narrative alone. This distinction is pivotal when examining how both forms of media contribute to idealizing pre-emptive war.

For example, Zero Dark Thirty (2012) depicts the relentless hunt for Osama bin Laden, framing the mission as an ethically sanctioned pre-emptive strike, essential to averting future catastrophe. Through Maya's unwavering pursuit, the film constructs an emotional, linear narrative of vigilant intervention, aligned with the cultural script that glorifies neutralizing threats before they metastasize.

Similarly, Green Zone (2010) dramatizes U.S. Army Officer Roy Miller's quest to uncover the flawed intelligence underpinning the Iraq invasion, portraying pre-emptive action as both necessary and morally corrective—not only in confronting external threats but in exposing internal lapses that compromise national security (Power, 2007).

However, where films offer a fixed, spectator-driven perspective on pre-emptive logic, video games operationalize this ideology at a procedural level, embedding it into the player's lived experience. Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare (2007) does not merely tell a story of imminent terrorist plots orchestrated by Middle Eastern adversaries—it immerses players in scenarios where the act of pre-emptive intervention becomes a condition for survival. The player's agency, decision-making, and spatial navigation embody the necessity of early, decisive action, reinforcing the doctrine of pre-emptive war as not only desirable but inevitable (Šisler, 2008; Schulzke, 2013).

Thus, both media forms propagate the cultural logic of pre-emption, but games, through their ludic structures, elevate this logic from narrative to experience. As Bogost (2007) argues, the procedural nature of games enables them to "make arguments about how things work"—in this case, embedding the belief that vigilance, aggression, and pre-emptive strikes are rational, even virtuous responses to an omnipresent threat.

4.7 The Silent Threat: The Militant Arab in the Shadows

Across the films and games analysed, a striking pattern emerges: American soldiers occupy the narrative foreground, their faces and inner conflicts illuminated with emotional depth, while Arab Muslim militants are relegated to the periphery—silent, shadowy figures whose presence, though visually subdued, saturates the narrative with latent threat. This cinematic device constructs an image of the Arab militant as both marginalized and omnipresent—a ghostlike adversary whose intentions remain concealed until their sudden eruption destabilizes the apparent calm.

Yet, this marginalization is not mere absence; it is a calculated narrative and representational strategy that serves to diminish the humanity and agency of Arab figures, reinforcing their symbolic reduction to a threat. As a Hurt Locker reviewer insightfully observed:

> "That's fairly typical of critically-acclaimed war films. The movie's singular focus on Americans is also in the tradition. The Iraqis here are hostile faces outside the Humvee, staring down from rooftops or from a shop window. Their words are not translated through subtitles, and you learn little to nothing about their hopes, fears or motivations... The movie isn't about Iraqis, and doesn't want to be about Iraqis. It's about American soldiers, and what war does to them." (Rotten Tomatoes)

Our autoethnographic and hermeneutic analyses echo this erasure, as films like Body of Lies (2008) depict Arab militants as silent, elusive manipulators orchestrating events from obscured spaces (Aguayo, 2009). Their silence symbolizes not passivity, but dangerous opacity—a refusal to be seen or known,

which feeds into the Western epistemology of suspicion (Machin & Van Leeuwen, 2005).

In video games, however, this representational strategy transcends narrative and becomes structurally embedded through gameplay mechanics and environmental design. In Six Days in Fallujah (2022), insurgents are not merely depicted as shadowy figures—they are experienced as an omnipresent, concealed threat within the interactive space. The urban battlefield operates as a complex, unpredictable environment, wherein enemies strike from hidden positions, exploiting the terrain's opacity to their advantage. The player, immersed in this hostile space, internalizes the notion of an ever-present, elusive adversary, perpetuating the narrative of Arab militants as spectral, intangible dangers.

Unlike films, which present Arab militants as static images of menace, games simulate their omnipresence through procedural design—unseen enemies, random encounters, and asymmetric warfare scenarios—all of which position the player in a perpetual state of uncertainty and vigilance. As Bogost (2007) emphasizes, it is through these procedural systems that games uniquely "model ideology," in this case, transforming the cultural logic of pre-emptive war and the construction of Arab militants as silent threats into lived, interactive experience.

Thus, both films and video games contribute to the demonization of the Arab militant, but games extend this demonization beyond representation, embedding it into the player's sensory, cognitive, and affective engagement with the digital environment. In doing so, they do not merely depict the silent threat—they make players feel its omnipresence, reinforcing the broader cultural narrative that frames pre-emptive violence as not only justified but essential for survival.

4.8 Demonizing Arab Resisters: Threat is Powerful and Ubiquitous

The acute nature of the threat in digital entertainment media (DEM) resides not merely in overt violence but in the insidious combination of silence, unpredictability, and ideological dissonance—a dynamic meticulously constructed through representations of hypocrisy, dogmatism, and authoritarianism across both war films and video games, as confirmed by the study's quantitative and qualitative analyses. Arab and Muslim militants are recurrently portrayed as embodying a profound disjunction between professed ideological convictions and their actual practices, a contradiction that intensifies their portrayal as untrustworthy and dangerous (Baudrillard, 1995).

In military-themed films such as American Sniper (2014), 12 Strong (2018), 13 Hours (2016), Lone Survivor (2013), and Zero Dark Thirty (2012), this ideological hypocrisy is foregrounded through emotionally charged, character-driven narratives. These films present militants who, while rhetorically committed to religious or nationalistic causes, engage in brutal, coercive, and morally inconsistent behaviors that directly undermine their purported values. For instance, Zero Dark Thirty starkly exposes this contradiction by juxtaposing the jihadist rhetoric of al-Qaeda members with their brutal tactics, particularly in the depiction of detainee torture and civilian casualties (Power, 2007). Through such scenes, the films frame Arab militants as not only ideologically extreme but morally bankrupt, thereby reinforcing their construction as existential threats defined by duplicity.

This narrative extends to the portrayal of cowardice, or what this study identifies as pusillanimity, a key trait of the constructed threat. In films such as American Sniper, 12 Strong, and The Kingdom (2007), militants are frequently depicted as resorting to guerrilla tactics, ambushes, and the deliberate targeting of civilians—actions that signal both strategic inferiority and moral degradation, in line with earlier scholarship (Aguayo, 2009). A particularly striking example from American Sniper features a child wielding a bazooka against an American Merkava tank, forcing sniper Chris Kyle to neutralize the child to protect his fellow soldiers. Such scenes heighten the sense of moral clarity for Western audiences by juxtaposing the disciplined, valorous U.S. soldier with the treacherous, morally compromised enemy.

In contrast, video games amplify these depictions through interactive, depersonalized mechanics that systematically reinforce the threat's elusiveness and unpredictability. Titles such as Call of Duty: Modern Warfare (2007) and Insurgency: Sandstorm (2018) eschew character development or ideological nuance in favour of AI-controlled opponents designed to embody cunning, duplicity, and strategic evasion. Militants in these games avoid direct confrontation, relying on ambushes, hidden explosives, and deceptive tactics that render them spectral, omnipresent threats within the interactive environment (Schulzke, 2013). Unlike films, where narrative exposition allows for some ideological framing, games operationalize threat primarily through gameplay mechanics, immersing players in environments where Arab/Muslim adversaries are defined entirely by their unpredictability and treachery.

Further reinforcing this menacing portrayal is the emphasis on dogmatism and authoritarianism. Films like The Kingdom (2007) underscore the rigid, intolerant belief systems of militant leaders, portraying them as ideologically inflexible and violently repressive—a narrative choice that highlights their incompatibility with Western values. In video games such as Six Days in Fallujah (2021), authoritarian control is rendered through environmental design and non-playable characters (NPCs) that depict insurgent leaders imposing strict, oppressive rule over civilian populations. The interactive nature of these games denies players the opportunity to engage with the ideological complexity of these figures, instead presenting them as static embodiments of tyranny and backwardness.

Collectively, these cinematic and digital representations construct a comprehensive, yet reductive, narrative of Arab/Muslim militants as omnipresent, duplicitous, and ideologically extreme threats. However, the mediums diverge in their execution: films deploy emotionally resonant narratives to evoke fear and moral opposition, while video games rely on depersonalized, immersive gameplay to render the threat immediate, spectral, and unrelenting. Through both modalities, the binary of guardianship and threat is reinforced, yet video games arguably produce a more rigid, dehumanized articulation of the Arab/Muslim adversary.

4.9 Arabs: the Villains of Truth

As Foucault observed, every social group invests considerable resources in the construction and maintenance of its regime of truth—a framework that delineates legitimacy, threat, and moral authority. Within this architecture, the studied digital entertainment media (DEM) function as powerful ideological instruments, crafting Arabs and Muslims as enduring antagonists to the 'legitimate' truth claimed by Western powers (Arti, 2007). This manufactured opposition fuels what Dodds (2008) terms "geopolitical anxieties," wherein the East is rendered not merely different, but ideologically deviant and inherently threatening. The portrayal of Arabs and Muslims across these films and video games perpetuates this ideological fallacy, positioning them as existential threats to Western security and values (Mirrlees & Ibaid, 2021).

Fear, therefore, emerges as the emotional currency mediating East-West relations in these narratives—a fear not rooted in tangible realities but in carefully cultivated images that echo colonial legacies and Orientalist constructs dating back centuries (Said, 1979; Mirrlees & Ibaid, 2021). Aradau and Van Munster (2007) extend this analysis by revealing how contemporary security practices have evolved beyond responding to immediate, observable threats. Instead, they operate through risk management logics and pre-emptive interventions that construct Muslims and Arabs as perpetual sites of suspicion. Through this lens, racialized and gendered hierarchies are not merely reflected but actively reproduced within global security discourse—an ideological operation in which DEM plays a central, if often underacknowledged, role.

In *Black Hawk Down (movie/ game)*, for instance, which reimagine the 1993 Battle of Mogadishu, depicts the Arab Muslims as a coercive, ideological threats (Höglund & Willander, 2018). The film constructs the binary primarily through cinematic storytelling, visual framing, and character development. American soldiers are portrayed as morally upright, courageous, and reluctantly entangled guardians, operating under difficult circumstances to restore order. Somali fighters and civilians, by contrast, are often presented as faceless, chaotic, and irrational threats, reinforcing a narrative of the West as civilized and the 'Other' as primitive and dangerous. The film's reliance on visual stereotypes, selective focus on American suffering, and lack of Somali perspective simplifies complex geopolitics into a digestible moral binary: disciplined guardians versus disorderly threats. The video game intensifies this binary through its interactive, first-person perspective, placing the player directly in the role of the American soldier—the guardian. Unlike the film's limited emotional engagement with Somali identities, the game erases local subjectivity altogether, reducing Somalis to undifferentiated, dehumanized enemy targets. The gameplay mechanics emphasize combat efficiency, elimination of threats, and mission success, reinforcing the notion of the U.S. soldier as the active, righteous protector, while Somalis function solely as obstacles to peace and order.

Unlike military-themed films, which often rely on emotionally charged narratives, character development, and selective moral framing to construct the guardian/threat binary, video games such as Conflict: Global Terror (2005) and Medal of Honor: Warfighter (2012) operationalize this binary through interactive gameplay that positions Middle Eastern militants as depersonalized, algorithmically generated obstacles to global security. While films may occasionally gesture toward the complexities of war, games like SOCOM U.S. Navy SEALs (2002)

and Battlefield 3 (2011) strip away such nuance, immersing players in fast-paced, action-driven scenarios where Middle Eastern adversaries exist solely as hostile threats to be neutralized. This shift from narrative spectatorship to active participation intensifies the binary logic, transforming players into agents of militarized guardianship and reducing Arab identities to targets within an interactive battlefield. Through this interactivity, video games arguably offer a more rigid, depersonalized, and uncritical reproduction of the guardian/threat dichotomy than military films.

4. 10 Limitations and Future Research

Our research provides significant qualitative and quantitative insights into the threat/guardian binary portrayed in digital entertainment media; however, several limitations warrant attention. Although we utilized a mixed-method approach, our study is limited by the absence of user perspectives, a gap that future research should address (Dodds, 2008). This omission is particularly critical in light of the ongoing academic discourse concerning the relationship between war game content, exposure duration, and the development of militaristic views (Festl et al., 2013; Leonard, 2004).

Moreover, while our analysis heuristically explored the intentions behind game and movie production, a more systematic examination of the aesthetic techniques employed to articulate this binary would provide a deeper understanding. Additionally, although Pearson correlations between popularity ratings and guardianship traits are statistically significant, the relatively low correlation values indicate that these traits are not the predominant factors driving media popularity. Instead, elements such as narrative quality, actor performances, visual effects, and marketing strategies likely exert a more substantial influence on media ratings. This raises questions about whether filmmakers and game designers intentionally employ specific aesthetic choices to subtly convey propaganda, as suggested by Grant (2019) and Hammond (2019)

5. Conclusion

The mixed-method analysis of digital entertainment media (DEM) spanning from 2001 to 2021 has illuminated critical insights into the formation and dissemination of binary oppositions within this genre. Specifically, the study reveals an evolving binary framework wherein Americans are cast as guardians and Arab Muslims as threats, a paradigm that has emerged from, and supplanted, earlier binaries such as civilized/uncivilized, civilized/savage, and hero/

terrorist. This narrative framework not only serves to justify American actions but also delegitimizes Arab Muslims, signalling a disconcerting transition from past Western ideologies centred on "civilizing" to a more exclusionary stance aimed at elimination.

Such portrayals are not merely artistic constructs; they actively hinder intercultural dialogue and perpetuate damaging stereotypes that negatively impact the collective memory and perceptions of both cultural groups (Šisler, 2008). This underscores an urgent need for policymakers and media creators to adopt more ethical and nuanced approaches in their portrayal of cultural narratives within digital entertainment media.

Despite these valuable insights, there remain several areas for further exploration. Future research should focus on assessing the impact of the guardian-threat binary from the perspective of users, examining how this narrative framework influences American and global audiences' perceptions of Western and Arab Muslim cultures. Additionally, there is a pressing need to investigate the ways in which the popularity of war games and films contributes to the internalization of these stereotypical representations. Future studies should also delve into how aesthetic choices—beyond mere content—play a role in reinforcing these binary oppositions. Moreover, it is crucial to consider the implications of negative portrayals in DEM on the national identification of minority groups within the US itself, as indicated by Saleem et al. (2019).

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics Approval

This study adheres to the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki (1964) and its subsequent amendments.

Consent

Coders were fully informed about the study's purpose and background prior to the coding process. They provided written consent to participate, and their identities were anonymized, with names replaced by numbers. Quotes of movie reviewers ensure that individuals cannot be identified directly or indirectly.

Disclosure Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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