

ARAB GAMERS

AN IDENTITY INCLUSIVITY STUDY

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Gamers are not immune to the sociopolitical realities of today's world, and this is reflected within video game narrative and design. Minorities who regularly face adversity may not relate to their core or sub-identities in their favorite video games—and that is if those identities are represented to begin with. There is an issue of game developers relying on stereotypes and having little to no association with the identities they are stereotyping.¹ As the diversity of gamer culture proves the stereotype of the “typical gamer” to be inaccurate, developers should consider creating relatable content for these gamers, who are far more complex than various media make them out to be.

Arabs and their culture have a history of being misrepresented by non-Arabs in mainstream media, and video games are no exception. Non-Arab storytellers may not know everything about Arabs in great detail, but this lack of knowledge should not be an excuse to ignore the fact that the historically rich Arab world is home to twenty-two countries encompassing multiple racial and religious groups, and that Arabs are as diverse and complex as other ethnicities.² Hussein Ibrahim has summarized the issue, explaining that it leaves us with inaccurate, unrelatable portrayals, which are often apathetically accepted as evidence of the status quo. Nevertheless, this indifference has not erased the reality that Arabs are far more diverse than the stereotypes with which we are often bombarded.³

Ibrahim's research also demonstrates that gamers react differently to seeing their identities being mis- or underrepresented, hence it is of the utmost importance that these representations be judged from the perspective of those whose identities are being depicted. Therefore, I bring to this chapter my own perspective as a female Arab gamer, as well as the perspectives of 81 gamers who are either ethnically Arab or have some firsthand association with Arab culture, with whom I conducted interviews focused on collecting qualitative data between March and May 2016.

The goal of gathering this data is twofold: First, to show the diverse responses of individual gamers with opinions on this subject matter, thus proving that real-life Arabs seldom hold true to stereotypes or monolithic categorizations; and second, to provide documentation of an underrepresented group of gamers as a contribution to discussions of intersectionality in digital media. Whether interview participants were indifferent or outraged by the state of Arab representations in video games, their opinions play an integral role in reflecting how complex identities and sub-identities can be. The primary findings of interview data are as follows:

1. Ibrahim Hussein, “What It's Like to Always Play the Bad Guy: On the Portrayal of Arabs in Online Shooters,” in *The State of Play: Creators and Critics on Video Game Culture*, eds. Linus Larsson and Daniel Goldberg (Seven Stories Press, 2015).
2. B. Wingeld and M. Karaman, “Arab Stereotypes and American Educators,” in *Beyond Heroes and Holidays: A Practical Guide to K-12 Multicultural, Anti-Racist Education and Staff Organization*, eds. Enid Lee, Deborah Menkart and Margo Okazawa-Ray (Teaching for Change, 2002).
3. Vit Šisler, “Digital Arabs: Representation in video games,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 11.2 (2008): 203-220.

1. Arab players overwhelmingly report that Arabs are either underrepresented or misrepresented in video games.
2. Arab participants of more privileged gender or sexual orientation expressed restrictions on what constitutes acceptable representation in video games, in particular expressing trepidation regarding what they consider to be morally questionable content in video games.
3. Participants were largely in favor of non-Arab game developers collaborating with Arab developers and consultants.

To maintain anonymity, each participant is identified by their initials or an alias of their choice throughout this chapter. The first question participants were asked was how strongly they identified with their Arab background, on a scale from 1 to 10; this question did not require any explanation beyond the numerical value, but a few did briefly explicate that they identify as a full 10 simply for having Arab ancestry, or answered with lower numbers for reasons not related to biological or ethnic factors.

One of the most frequent responses to Arab representations was that of indifference. A Saudi participant under the pseudonym Quillcannon said that he “barely” identified as Arab despite being born and raised in his home country, and that seeing accurate balanced portrayals of Arabs in video games was of no importance to him. He cited games such as *Dying Light* (Warner Bros., 2015) and *Sly Cooper: Thieves in Time* (Sony, 2013), suggesting that the former represents Arabs positively while the latter does so negatively, but ultimately concluded that the representations in both games simply “amused” him:

Arabs are represented in games [...] just as inaccurately as any other ethnic group or culture [...] This is to be expected when any individual [...] tries to encapsulate the experience of another background with which they are not familiar. Make no mistake: I am absolutely fine with inaccurate representation of Arabs in videogames, because it means people get to express themselves however they please. It also means I get to enjoy seeing my culture from [...] different viewpoints; something that could never happen if every developer [...] followed an exact recipe to accurate Arab representation.⁴

While I intentionally used open-ended terms such as “positive,” “negative” and “accurate” in the interviews, a few participants delved more deeply into the semantics while explaining their answers. Algerian gamer HK (who identified as a 5/10 on the scale), explained that, to him, “accurate images of Arabs” can mean one of two things, and his response to each case is different: “Is it important to me that Arabs aren’t portrayed as backwards and uneducated people? Yes, absolutely it is. Is it important to me that video games try to capture Arab culture? No, not really.”⁵ HK cited *Civilization IV* (Firaxis Games, 2005) as a game that portrays Arabs positively, highlighting the historical accuracy of its narrative and crediting the developers for their recognition of “the impact that our history had on modern math and science, and that definitely made me happy and gave me a rare (and short-lived) sense of pride of our people.”⁶ HK stated multiple times that the relatively limited scope of representations of Arabs in games makes it difficult to construct a valid opinion, but even brief encounters with positive or balanced representations can have an impact on gamers, invoking a sense of pride even when if their affinity to their culture is not that strong to begin with.

Thus, even when participants are indifferent to representations of Arab culture in games, the few positive representations they do encounter reinforce and remind them of the positive qualities of

4. Quillcannon, email interview, 2016.

5. HK, email interview, 2016.

6. Ibid.

their backgrounds. On the other hand, it comes as no surprise that some participants would not take strong offense to the lacking or stereotypical depictions of Arabs in games. Research by Adrienne Shaw on underrepresented groups in video games has shown that it is possible for a person belonging to a minority group to enjoy a game regardless of how inaccurately that aspect of their identity is portrayed in that game—however, for many players whose identities are under- or misrepresented in the games they play, encountering a positive portrayal is still “nice when it happens.”⁷

While the previous participants were indifferent to Arab representation in games, others felt stronger feelings of discontent and concern. Algerian game developer AG, who introduced himself as very well-informed in how games are produced, traced his frustration at lacking Arab representations to mainstream developers:

They make me feel sad. Mainly sad from the side of game designers being all about money, or the project manager...to be like we need to make money! “Yes, we will make an FPS game...and it’s obvious that it has to involve Arabs. You know, everybody hates Arabs, so why not make the enemy an Arab, shoot them down... Shoot thousands of them!” It makes me feel sad. It makes me feel like they have such a bad imagination, trying to come up with a storyline that doesn’t involve...portraying any of the stereotypes as a bad race.⁸

Possessing direct knowledge on game development, his frustration comes from knowing how feasible it is to create non-stereotypical content, yet financial concerns seem to matter more to producers. This brings us to an important notion that Anna Anthropy has tackled in her work: the mainstream game industry settling for creative stagnation in order to comfortably target a mainstream audience for profit rather than take a more innovative approach to representation in games.⁹

LH, a Lebanese game designer based in Spain, shared her experience working on a project designing a scene that took place in the room of a young girl from China. It was important for her to make the room as authentic as possible, by researching what a young Chinese girl’s room might look like. With her professional and ethnic background in mind, she elaborated further on what makes Arab stereotypes in games problematic:

No one is going to feel good about the negative representations, you know? I mean, even for example, like in *Uncharted* [Naughty Dog, 2011], you know the antagonist is like...he wasn’t bad, he was Egyptian, it was really funny, like the things that he said, you know? But when...that is the only representation that you see, like a bad person and they’re always the antagonist or the terrorist or whatever, you get bored of it [...] Like [...] that pushes the whole stereotype and stuff, and it’s just like come on, *laughs* we are more than that.¹⁰

The data also shows that the effects stereotypes have on gamers are in online environments quite notable. Emirati gamer FY said that she limits her gaming to offline games because “online people who are playing sometimes ruin the experience.”¹¹ While she does not mention being personally targeted in an online game, she recounted a time when she was playing *Call of Duty* (Activision, 2003-) and witnessed a fellow Arab being harassed by other players:

I stopped playing online They called another player names, and abused him emotionally [it] was *Call of Duty* [...] and players first did not know he was an arab until he spoke or something and then they started to call

7. Adrienne Shaw. *Identity, Identification, and Media Representation in Video Game Play: An Audience Reception Study*, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania (2010): 191.

8. AG, Google Hangouts interview, 2016.

9. Anna Anthropy, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Dropouts, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back An Art Form* (Seven Stories Press, 2012): 5-8.

10. LH, Skype Interview, 2016.

11. FY, email interview, 2016.

him names like “Camel F***er” or “Go F*** your sister and mother” It was just horrible I don’t remember details as I just logged off and felt sorry for such closed minded people.¹²

Sometimes, simply being recognized as Arab in an online game is enough to trigger others to begin harassing that player. American-born Syrian gamer FH explained that the stereotypes in games and media are so prevalent, they influence players of games that do not even contain Arab references. He shared the story of one such instance on the browser-based, unofficial fan game *Pokémon Showdown* (Guangcong Luo, 2011):

I was matched with a player who had a Forretress [a species of Pokemon] with the nickname “Allahu Akbar” [“God is great” in Arabic], but with the actual Arabic text [...] Forretress sometimes is able to learn the move “Explosion,” which knocks out the Pokemon that uses it but does a lot of damage to the opposing Pokemon as well... because I was able to read the text, I figured that based on stereotypes, this player probably did have the move on his Forretress. And unfortunately, I was correct [...] I pointed this out to the player after the move occurred in the chat, and I think he responded with “lol” or something similar... even though I won, I thought that it was pretty dumb that I was able to do so by essentially predicting someone else to be racist. I wanted to type in the chat “Dude not cool” or something like that. Nothing too accusatory [...] I just wanted to point out that it wasn’t funny to me.¹³

The few non-Arabs in our pool of participants also showed dismay to the repetitive stereotypes of Arabs in video games, including Musti, a Pakistani who grew up in the United Arab Emirates:

I hate to see it. It is unfair and crude the way they are portrayed. It is one thing to get the clothing and the character design right, but what is the point when that character is acting in a negative manner or follows the same stereotype that we are sick of. Too many times have I found myself saying “Oh look, an Arab terrorist looking character how original...” Can I please have an Arab looking Counter-Terrorist for once? How much more stereotypical do you have to be with the sunglasses, cigarette pack in the front pocket and Arab headdress around your neck.¹⁴

Compare this with an observation from a Kuwaiti gamer and developer:

Mrs.Q8GEEK: I simply haven’t encountered enough Arab characters in games, and often when I do, I think of them the same way I think of Disney’s *Aladdin* [1992]: it’s just a fantasy world constructed to suit the views of the writers, producers, or designers.

Mrs.Q8GEEK is not necessarily critical of the developers, as she attributes their intentions to game design decisions, however she does state that the representations have failed to meet her expectations by being limited to stereotypes with which she does not associate. Perhaps such flat depictions cause less direct harm than those of menacing terrorists, but they are rooted in the same pigeonholing of Arabs through an Orientalist lens.¹⁵

Very few participants referred to Orientalism¹⁶ by name in their interviews when describing how they believe the mainstream developers perceive Arabs. Among them was Saudi gamer Echo, who sees a lack of interest or research on the mainstream developers’ side as the root of a lack of depth in cultural depictions, asking, “Should we go back to the idea of orientalism? [...] We Arabs have a direct experience with our own culture. Mainstream game developers however, do not. They [...] do not care, and/or don’t have reliable sources to gather info.”¹⁷

12. Ibid.

13. FH, email interview, 2016.

14. Musti, email interview, 2016.

15. Mrs.Q8GEEK, email interview, 2016.

16. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Vintage Books, 1994).

For identity group experiencing microaggressions, it is not uncommon for individuals to have more lenient reactions. Nevertheless, this does not invalidate responses that demonstrate discontent with the depictions in question.

Some participants said that the relative influence of news and films is arguably more powerful than video games, and would blame the preexisting notions of Arabs by non-Arab gamers and developers on non-game media. Kuwaiti gamer AWN shared online gaming scenarios where non-Arab gamers would express surprise at his ethnicity. He took offense that their expectations of an Arab would be so different from themselves:

When I ask them why were they surprised, the answers are more or less similar “because you think and speak like us.” Some give a slightly offensive but understandable answer such as “I didn’t expect someone from your side of the world to have such a Western way of thinking,” which is offensive because they affiliated progress, development and growth to the west and nowhere else, which is the media’s fault, frankly speaking.¹⁴

To have others give backhanded compliments, classifying Arabs as progressive by Western standards, seems to link to the larger picture of what the Western media has satirized as Arab, as opposed to the sophisticated Western hero.

Another finding from the data gathered for this chapter is that the more marginalized Arab gamers are, the more likely they are to be harmed by the current state of affairs in the gaming world. For example, AK is an Egyptian developer who identifies as gay. He emphasizes how important it is to him to see diversely accurate representations of Arabs in games and other media, as the current stereotypes in Hollywood of aggressive heterosexual Arab men have a personal effect on his identity and what people expect from him as a male, as an Arab and as an Arab male:

I think [accurate portrayals are] important as a gay and as Arabian. For example when I arrived at US, all people expect me straight (can’t be gay) because games and movies show arabs as these [...] tough people. Even in gay community they profile me as the strong alpha male [...] I got harassed from someone yesterday and he used that (the idea about me being arabian and being terrorist).¹⁸

This serves as another reminder that the more intertwined a minority identity is, the more likely they are to be discriminated against.

To some participants, there was a belief that Arabs are to blame for the lack of creative narratives in media, thus did not point the blame entirely on non-Arab game developers. Emirati developer Asatiir expressed that Arabs do not export enough narratives that would appeal to people beyond the Arab region:

I think Arabs are unexplored enough, we’ve yet to have our culture or folklore portrayed in a light similar to, say, Victorian England, Feudal Japan or Norse Viking or even Medieval Europe. Arab culture is as rich a story-telling setting as the mentioned settings... Who can you blame for this lack of attention though? Most of the folklore in the region is fragmented, historians only cover the Arab golden age of enlightenment, and anything older is just clumped together as pre-islamic dark ages ... without any documentation to fall back on.¹⁹

Participants have different perspectives on what is stereotypical, and their genre preferences naturally

17. AWN, email interview, 2016.

18. AK, email interview, 2016.

19. Asatiir, WhatsApp interview, 2016.

influence the kind of exposure they see of Arabs in video games. Characters such as Rashid from *Street Fighter* (Capcom, 2016) and Altaïr from *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft, 2007) were frequently cited by participants as positive Arab representations.

Jordanian gamer Lovidore plays a variety of genres, and cited the entire *Call of Duty* franchise as one that depicts Arabs negatively, as well as *Counter Strike: Condition Zero* (Valve, 2004) and *Battlefield 3* (EA, 2011). When asked how he felt about the portrayals in those games, Lovidore replied, "Sad. Sad and mad. Seriously." However, he was pleased with representations in other games, such as Rashid from *Street Fighter V*. He shared his thoughts on why he considers Rashid to be a positive portrayal:

Well, he's actually a strong character in *Street Fighter V*. People actually like playing him, and I like that ... They took the traditional style of Arab dress and merged it with futuristic gadgets to make for a nice, dare I say, steam punk-esque look? It's nice for a change rather than having himself blow up because of his disgruntled view of western foreign politics.²⁰

Lovidore is not the only one with a critical view of the gaming world's embrace of Arab cultures. AS is an Egyptian gamer who mostly plays online games, and finds that the personalities of Arab players on those platforms often gives non-Arab gamers a bad impression of them, which also connects to the common sentiment among interview participants of "Arabs blaming Arabs":

This is kind of [...] disastrous, but yeah [...] the majority of online gamers [...] in a game called Conquest [...] is swarmed with Arabs. And the majority of these Arabs are Egyptians. Cool? Yeah. And they are the most famous scammers on this game [...] When I'm training with someone and he'd be like "ah nice raid. Where are you from?" From Egypt. "Oh my God. An Arab. I'm out."²¹

While he shared this anecdote in a humorous tone, he was certainly frustrated that enough online Arab gamers have brought negative attention to themselves.

It is important to look at the role privilege plays in the Arab gamer community across different identity groups. Systemic privilege exists in the Arab world and works similarly to Western or white privilege, where cisgendered, heterosexual, able-bodied males have the most straightforward access to first-class treatment. For the purpose of this study, I have narrowed the definition of "Arab privilege" to heterosexual, male, religious Arabs. While many male participants stated their support for seeing more representations of women in games, others provided indifferent responses. As for Arab LGBTQ representation, we received an array of opinions ranging from enthusiasm to indifference to absolute disapproval, from straight male and female participants alike. With intersectionality and privilege in mind, it is worth considering how Elisabeth Hayes describes the prioritization of male and female gamer perspectives: "To better understand women's and men's orientations toward gaming, we need to take into account the complexity of people's identities, not just gender alone, but its interplay with and enactment in combination with personal histories and cultural factors that play out different in individuals' lives."²² This intersectional perspective is helpful for understanding the diverse responses of different Arab gamers.

Near the end of their interviews, participants were asked for their opinions on the representations of Arab men, women and LGBTQ characters, respectively, and then answered a hypothetical question asking how to present Arabs in a diverse way. DW, a Saudi male, could not recall a single Arab LGBTQ representation in any games. When asked if he believed this identity group should have

20. Lovidore, email interview, 2016.

21. AS, Skype interview, 2016.

22. Elisabeth Hayes, "Gendered Identity at Play: Case Studies of Two Women Playing *Morrowind*," *Games and Culture* 2.1 (2007): 23-48.

representation, he replied, “That is a powder keg. If you an Arab gamer you probably wouldn’t care if a game is developed by non-arabs if it had any LGBT content. The censors might care if it got through their channels but these guys hate fun. It could go catastrophic if media, public opinion or clergy paid attention to it.”²³ DW highlights the difficult dilemmas faced by game developers and publishers in the Arab world.

Syrian gamer Doom is among many participants who noticed a decline in Arab representations based on gender and sexuality. Throughout his interview, he exhibited an apathetic and mostly cynical attitude toward the current state of Arab representations: “Usually [an Arab man is represented as] either a terrorist or someone with a backwards way of thinking [...] I do not recall seeing an Arab Woman in a video game [...] Have not run into [Arab LGBTQ representations] either... video game companies want what sells, I want Arabs to be portrayed the way they are, normal.”²⁴ For Doom and many other players, “normalcy” is defined as representing Arabs as diversely as possible without any question of their ethnicity. This emerged as many participants stated that having “normal” Arabs in a video game is an ideal means of presenting diversity. Despite his cynicism, Doom ended his interview commenting that he believes there has been some improvement in the representations of Arabs in video games recently, although still thinks that the game industry has a long way to go before it achieves accurate portrayals of Arabs.

LAZ from Oman made similar observations of how representations decline based on gender identity and sexual orientation. She expressed how important it is for Arab characters to be “normal,” and said she would like to see greater diversity in the representation of Arab identity in games, noting that Arab men are represented as:

War criminals, enemies, and terrorists. If they’re in AAA games. It’s hard to determine what Arabs should be presented as in games, as race shouldn’t equate to better or worse treatment. Having an Arab as an important protagonist would be really cool if the protag was well-thought out and studied for... I’ve yet to come across Arab women in games. I don’t think I’ve ever seen or heard of Arab LGBTQ characters in video games. That is upsetting, I would like to see a character like that.²⁵

While representations of Arab women are scarcer than their male counterparts, some gamers have encountered them. Most participants confirmed that Arab women are portrayed—as Sudanese-Austrian participant MESB succinctly describes it—either blatantly sexualized or rendered as passive beings. Simply put, Arab women are often exoticized in video games. He offered heavily critical analyses of representations of Arabs in games and other media, many of which trace back to Orientalism, explaining that the representation of Arab women in games follows “mostly one of two orientalist tropes: oversexualised in belly dancer outfits, or as hapless background props with no agency.”²⁶ MESB’s comment confirms not only the ethnic stereotypes to which Arab women are subjected, but the gender-related ones as well. The representation of women is focused almost entirely on their sexuality and physical appearance, coupled with their dependency on the presumably male protagonist. The representations of Arab women have fallen victim to this trend overall, in addition to their ethnicity becoming a plot device. In the data on existing representations of Arab women, I found the ironic burqa-clad versus belly-dancer trope to be a recurring theme among participants, where the belly-dancer trope seemed to outnumber the fully covered Muslim-Arab woman.²⁷

23. DW, email interview, 2016.

24. Doom, email interview, 2016.

25. LAZ, email interview, 2016.

26. MESB, email interview, 2016.

27. Šisler, “Digital Arabs.”

Badoor, who has written critical analyses on Arab character representation in online forums, shared his thoughts on how he has seen Arab women depicted in games:

Arab Women representation tends to come hand in hand with a sexualization aspect... There are quite a few belly-dancer tropes whenever an Arab woman is represented, because it's a very convenient representation that both shows that she's "Arab" and also get her to show some skin because she's a woman and women tend to get objectified in media.²⁸

The concept of designing Arab women as belly-dancers to appeal to the male gaze does not appeal to all men. Iblis, who identifies as a pansexual Arab, said he was unhappy with the female Arab belly-dancer trope.

[Arabs] are represented as strangely alien or as if we came out of the *A Thousand and One Nights* stories, where the women are all clad in belly-dancer or [sex] slave outfits. The game [*Subway Surfers: Arabia* (Kiloo Games, 2012)] showed a very stereotypical image of the Arab world, as if it were something out of the *Aladdin* movie. Not to mention that the game presented a horrible character named Amira; she was depicted in...clothes that indicate her being an Oriental belly-dancer.²⁹

Sylvia Chan-Malik illustrates the problem with these repetitive stereotypes of exotic Asian women: "On the one hand, it might seem like it might be a tongue-in-cheek portrayal of those types of images, but on the other hand you have to be in on the joke. My question is: Are we all in on the joke, and are we all laughing?"³⁰ This response addresses both racial and gender concerns when it comes to portraying minority groups in popular culture, specifically in American media that reach audiences overseas as well as within the United States. The rhetorical question "are we all laughing?" is applicable to portrayals of Arab women through an Orientalist lens, a misguided perspective through which many women in the Asian continent have been viewed.³¹

In the same way representations of non-privileged Arabs in video games tend to be less frequent, enthusiasm for the representation of minority Arabs was somewhat uneven. There were 13 female participants and 68 male ones, for all of whom it was optional to disclose their sexual orientation before commencing the interview; one identified as pansexual, two identified as gay, a few identified as straight and the rest did not provide an answer. While being a straight Arab male does not make someone homophobic by default, there were heterosexual participants who were not supportive of representations of Arab LGBTQ groups in video games. For example, Hamada, a male Saudi gamer, left the interview sections about female Arab and LGBTQ characters in games blank, and did not provide answers until I followed up with him. He then explained: "I have never played a game that has Arab women in it. I am not opposed to women characters being in games, but if it's an Arab woman then she must be represented in a respectful way. Although, representing Arab characters in a positive way should be focused on boys only, because the presence of girls isn't that important anyway."³²

Hamada's statement that the presence of girls in these games is of little importance demonstrates that his notion of a good game is limited to what an adult male audience wants. While his was the only response that excluded women gamers as audience members, and though a few other male participants held relatively more progressive views regarding the portrayal of Arab women,

28. Badoor, email interview, 2016.

29. Iblis, email interview (translated from Arabic), 2016.

30. Sylvia Chan-Malik, "Cultural and Literary Production of Muslim America," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam*, eds. Juliane Hammer and Omid Safi (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

31. *Slaying the Dragon: Reloaded*, directed by Elaine H. Kim (2011).

32. Hamada, email interview (translated from Arabic), 2016.

they all shared some notion that Arab women are, by default, practicing Muslims who would dress modestly—a standard these specific participants seem to have for Arab women. While it is debatable how and when designing modest or immodest attire for women in games matters, the perspective of these male gamers comes off as chauvinistic, and fails to recognize that games are as important to female gamers as they are to male ones.

Furthermore, Hamada, along with several others, drew the line at the prospect of LGBTQ representations in games. A common trend among male participants was that they “did not mind” seeing representations of Arab women. They also did not always dictate that the women be dressed a certain way. Presumably Muslim participants would often bring up the *hijab* (the headscarf worn by some Muslim women) and say that it did not have to be worn by an Arab woman in order for her to be an accurate representation of an Arab female. However, the *hijab* was a common indicator that the woman in question would be Muslim. Whether these men fully supported or “did not mind” seeing Arab women, the latter frequently tended to be less favorable when it came to representations of Arab LGBTQ groups.

Female participants who had not seen representations of their gender were all in favor of those representations. However, not all of these participants were supportive of LGBTQ representations, and gave their reasons as conservatively religious ones. For instance, Saudi gamer SMH says that Arab women are not represented fairly in video games, but rather are depicted:

like they dont have a personality and have zero value and scared and like she cant do anything without a male [...] Yes they should [be represented differently] because Arab women are smart and courageous and caring and are nothing like the way [the developers] they show them.³³

After SMH sent in her responses and left the question on Arab LGBTQ representations blank, I followed up, asking if she intentionally did not answer the question, and added that I would like to learn her stance on seeing representations of LGBTQ Arabs:

I didn't answer [...] because i don't remember playing a game that included arab LGBTQ characters ... Well im against it and i hope there wont be any LGBTQ arabs and the reason is because its *haram* [Arabic word for *sin* or *forbidden*] and its not acceptable in the society and if there was a game trust me most of the arabs wont buy it and it wont be allowed to be sold in the markets.³⁴

While supportive of seeing more female representations, she did not wish the same for non-heteronormative depictions. This brings us back to the concept of the privileged Arab who does not wish nor bother to use their status to uplift less privileged groups within their community.

A pattern of responses showed that there is a dichotomization of Arab LGBTQ representations among some participants, such as those who were against LGBTQ representations were those who seemed to refuse to believe that LGBTQ groups even exist within Arab nations and culture. Jordanian gamer Maverick said he was in favor of seeing varied representations of women “because not every Arab woman is veiled.” However, his stance on LGBTQ Arab representations was quite different: “I have a bit of an unapologetic opinion regarding the LGBTQ community so I would definitely be upset if there's such reference, especially to an Arab as the whole deviation from the human nature isn't

33. SMH, email interview (translated from Arabic), 2016.

34. Ibid.

really something Arabs were ever known for.”³⁵ MS shared Maverick’s opposition to prospects of Arab LGBTQ representations:

I think that’s one of the most important problems that we will face in their [Western] games. They develop to make this new standard, this new Arabian standards [...] When we play their game, after this period of time, we will face a problem. Also, when our kids plays these games, maybe they know or they practice some things we are not [...] we do not need this.³⁶

Likewise, XxIGamerGirlxX expressed a similarly prohibitive stance with regard to the representation of LGBTQ Arabs in games:

Naturally I am against it. We wouldn’t accept it from non-Arabs, let alone from Arabs. I am opposed to this because first of all, it is known that most Arabs are Muslims, and Islam forbids this kind of thing. I can’t imagine any Arab country that would promote games with homosexual representations of Arabs.³⁷

Using pronouns such as “we” and “us” to claim that Arabs are, by default, heteronormative, led me to the conclusion that these opinions come from privileged and conservative gamers. Emphasizing this theme is important because it shows us mutual issues shared by underrepresented gamer groups with more “mainstream” ones. In this case, privileged straight Arab gamers are alienating people from their same ethnic background because they do not accept their sexual orientation—ironic, given that the former group often craves acceptance from non-Arab groups in general.

While the Muslim-Arab gamers who showed disapproval of LGBTQ representations did not consider the possibility of other Arabs who might identify as gay, whether coming from a religious background or not, lack of LGBTQ inclusivity within the Arab world does not go unnoticed by gamers who are allies to this group. Generalizing that “most Arabs are Muslim” also excludes Arabs who follow religions other than Islam or simply do not subscribe to any faith. Joe, a Christian Lebanese-Canadian developer, pointed out that the intolerance toward homosexuality and other sexual orientations is the product of generational and educational gaps within certain Arab communities, rather than the product of conservative religious practices alone:

[Homosexuality is] not an accepted idea over there, and usually not by the young generation, just by the older generation... The young generation really doesn’t care. And I think also it depends on the young generation, where they actually studied... So... usually educated people probably won’t have that much of an issue with them.³⁸

He did, however, show some concern when asked if he believed there should be transparency in portraying Arab LGBTQ groups in games, explaining, “I don’t think any company wants to start the first storm... I’ve played a lot of games where the characters are gays, or in movies for example, if a character is gay. I really don’t care about it.”³⁹ This brings us back to DW’s quote earlier in this section, where he predicted the ramifications of Arab developers hoping to integrate LGBTQ Arabs in their games: “And if you are an Arab Dev... You are just playing with fire. Though I have to say a lot of artists and game Devs are impressionable... And don’t really notice or even think about it that they are making characters with LGBT traits that are subtle.”⁴⁰ While a significant number of participants were torn between opposition and apathy when it came to representing Arab LGBTQ characters in

35. Maverick, email interview, 2016.

36. MS, Skype interview, 2016.

37. XxIGamerGirlxX, email interview (translated from Arabic), 2016.

38. Joe, Skype interview, 2016.

39. Ibid.

40. DW, email interview, 2016.

games, others were very supportive of the concept. Privileged or not, they mostly believed that Arab diversity cannot be achieved by annihilating unprivileged identities, even if many other Arabs are less than receptive to these depictions.

One of the most supportive and inclusive responses to the prospect of Arab LGBTQ and women characters came from Sharifa, a straight Egyptian-American gamer. She was among the few participants who were aware of an upcoming game by an Arab game company, titled *Saudi Girls Revolution* (NA3AM, not yet released):

DUDE! [...] I'm really glad that you're asking this. This game is going to be about eight Arab women [...] One of them is gay! I am so excited to see this character revealed [...] and I like cannot wait for the lesbian character. Her name is Hessa, I think? [...]. Having any character that is not cis-gendered and is also Arab or Muslim, I think it's great! Because it shows that we're the same! Like your struggles are our struggles, and our struggles are your struggles, and our struggles are not different! IT'S SO EXCITING.⁴¹

To exude such eagerness to seeing multiple Arab women in a game, including a lesbian character, shows that intersecting identities are indeed scarce. Throughout her interview, Sharifa emphasized how important it is to have varied and diverse representations of Arabs in games.

In the final part of the interview, participants were asked to imagine themselves as cultural consultants, and were asked how Arabs could be portrayed non-stereotypically in games. The response of Saudi gamer Rakatash summarized the feelings of many participants:

... Just get Arab screenwriters? Or...travel to some Arab country and really observe it from there, and then get the story from there... the whole region is quite huge. I mean, being Saudi... if there are Arabs in the game ... usually, the Arab equates Gulf. Which is either a Saudi or an Emirati or a Kuwaiti... someone wearing a *thobe* and a *shmagh*. Or an accent. If it's about war, it's probably Iraq. But you don't see Moroccans, you don't see Egyptians, you don't see Sudanese, you don't see Syrians, or Lebanese... so it's kind of a bit skewed...but if you want to accurately portray a region or an Arab character, you either zoom into that...spot, where it's not just an Arab.... I mean, if I were Moroccan, I would feel like I'm kind of left out.⁴²

Many respondents echoed these suggestions of travel, research and normalcy as ways to improve the depiction of Arab culture in video games.

Participants were also strongly in favor of having Arab developers and consultants on game design teams in order to improve representation. Moon, an Algerian-American, said he believes in the potential of implementing Arab folklore in order to create a game that presents Arabs in their diversity. When asked if this meant assigning the developers Arabic literature as part of the research for their games, he replied:

Oh God, no. I wouldn't actually tell them to do that. I would read the books; I would tell them what to do. They're not gonna read [...] they're too busy coding [...] I would obviously go back to folklore [...] A fantasy setting. If that wasn't the genre, then I would simply want Arabs in general to be portrayed in like a kind of fairer manner [...]⁴³

Responses that favored having a designated consultant seem to indicate a realization that not all developers have the capacity or motivation to conduct research beyond aesthetic and design purposes.

41. Sharifa, Skype interview, 2016.

42. Rakatash, Google Hangouts interview, 2016.

43. Moon, Skype interview, 2016.

It should do more good to a development team's status to have a professional consultant in the long run, rather than publish inaccurate content that harms their reputation and audiences in the long run.

The characters Shaheen from *Tekken 7* (Bandai Namco, 2017) and Rashid from *Street Fighter V* (Capcom, 2016) were frequently cited as positive examples of Arab characters in video games. Belonging to fairly recent video game releases, participants who cited them seemed mostly familiar with the process the developers took in involving their Arab fans in the character design process. In their responses on this final topic, many participants observed that the stereotypes of Arab people in video games may be on the decline.

Qatari gamer FAN is hopeful that more developers will continue to ditch stereotypical characterizations: "Luckily, the games we love show us appreciation from time to time. The *Tekken* dev team and *Street Fighter* dev team worked hard with the Saudi community to represent characters from their country well. Hopefully more of that will happen."⁴⁴ FAN had ranked his identity as an Arab as being an 8, and elaborated how he would have given a lower number had he been asked the question even two years ago. He also stated that, to him, seeing accurate representations of Arabs "slowly becomes more and more important every day."⁴⁵

Returning to the three primary findings of this research after interview analysis, we will see that a total of nine themes have manifested from the interviews:

1. The acknowledgement of lacking representation is independent of ethnic identity
 - Blame is distributed between game developers, mainstream media and Arabs blaming themselves
 - Different game genres and online communities influence exposure and perceptions of Arabs in video games
2. Arab privilege plays an important role in inclusivity
 - In video games, representations of Arabs decline starting from men to women to LBGQTQ groups
 - Arab gamers' advocacy toward non-privileged Arab representations is intermittent, often tracing back to a participant's awareness of their own privilege
3. Game developers can and should employ measures to improve Arab representations
 - Employing Arabs developers and consultants
 - Request for developers to familiarize Themselves with Arab identities

Despite many of the mixed responses that manifested from these interviews, it is noteworthy that one constant was the idea that portrayals of Arab culture in video games are gradually improving. Titles including *Overwatch* (Blizzard, 2016) and *Assassin's Creed Origins* (Ubisoft, 2017) have been positively received by Arab gamers on social media. I was also struck by the following message, sent to me by a participant as I was wrapping up my research: "It's super interesting how everyone thinks of

44. FAN, email interview, 2016.

45. Ibid.

themselves as victims. But can't be bothered to think of the others (whom are going through the same difficulties)."⁴⁶

I was not expecting participants to necessarily reevaluate their agenda throughout the course of the interviews, regardless, reflections such as the aforementioned one imply the importance of addressing these issues. It shows an innate tendency to neglect intersectional inclusivity, and that critical thinking is a positive step forward.

There are far too many nuances to cover within the scope of this chapter, which was always a given as I began this research conceding that everyone is a complex individual. I truly believe that the participants, no matter what their respective stances are in regards to gatekeeping representations, have reflected the complexity of Arab gamer identities. As with any industry, video games are bursting with as much potential as there exists capacity for improvement.

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46. AAM2, email, 2016.