The *Muslim Mali* Video Game

Revisiting the Religious-Security-Postcolonial Nexus in Popular Culture

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In 2013, a video game called *Muslim Mali* appeared on the Internet. The gamer's avatar was a black aircraft whose mission was to fly over the desert and shoot down as many French jets as possible and dodge fire from them before, inevitably, dying. Then, a game-over text would praise the dead player as a martyr to jihad. This game did not make much noise in offline Mali, but did attract widespread online commentary by some Western global media, including mocking commentary. *Muslim Mali* has opened up a discursive digital space containing suspicions, insinuations, rumors, accusations, skeptical interpretations, and conspiracy theories, which offers an original interpretative junction for the understanding of the current armed conflict and power assemblage in postcolonial Mali. Given that these manifestations are characterized by constant processes of encoding and decoding messages and meanings in negotiations of power relations, they are typical expressions of cryptopolitics (see Bernal, Pype, and Rodima-Taylor in the introduction to this book). Online controversies centered on how to decrypt and interpret the video game, its narrative, and its gameplay, and took place in a number of forums, ranging from those involving reportage by US journalists to a blog posted on a forum for gamers and its online comments. *Muslim Mali* was set in a real-world geopolitical hotspot and seems to have been a virtual response to Operation Serval, the French intervention against jihadist groups on the Malian battlefield, which had begun earlier in 2013. *Muslim Mali* was, thus, synchronically virtualizing the conflict in Mali and participating in the constitution of its sociopolitical interpretations. Those interpretations were, and remain, embedded in various local, regional, and global power assemblages that interrogate racism, imperialism, and colonial legacy.

In this chapter, we explore the original cryptopolitical practices and narratives that frame, through digital media, the interpretative junction offered by *Muslim Mali*. For us, this video game contains multiple layers of encryption within its gameplay, narrative, and computational structure. The same is true of the online controversies it aroused. We argue that both the game and its controversies ambivalently reveal the tensions and emotions embedded in popular culture about the former French colonizer and the West. First, this video game has digital cryptopolitics of its own, deeply inscribed in its computational structure, the internal coding and algorithms of the game that shape the way players interact with it. By portraying France, Mali's former colonizer, as the invader, *Muslim Mali* shifts perspectives on world politics and subverts the dominant narrative of the Malian war by blurring moral lines within the postcolonial and conflict-affected setting. Then, we address the cryptopolitics involved in the way racism and imperialism are embedded and naturalized in the US reportage on this video game. US media reporting, which was relayed by global media, echoed the racial stereotypes and representations encrypted in the Global War on Terror's narrative. In doing so, global media contributed to multiple layers of encryption that obscure diverse and complex sociohistorical settings, hide various interests and agendas, and silence local subjectivities. The controversies surrounding this video game opened a digital space for explicit political commentaries and contestations around the Malian conflict, albeit through the mobilization of conspiracy theories involving the former colonizing power. We approach conspiracy theories not to confirm or disprove them but to consider them seriously as sets of representations having a powerful impact on the way people come to their basic assumptions about global politics and through which they express a strong critique of perceived oppressive sociopolitical structures, entangled with unseen powers and remote global hierarchies. These conspiracy theories should be viewed, first, as attempts to unmask racist and imperialist cryptopolitics. These representations echo and amplify discourse we have encountered in postcolonial conversations on Malian streets, discourse visible in (for example) demonstrations in the country's capital, Bamako, which demanded the withdrawal of French forces from the country.[1]

The first section of this chapter provides an overview of scholarship on video games in popular culture, and their entanglement with global politics. Video games such as *Muslim Mali*, like the digital space their controversies have opened up, are part of the broader category of social media. The second section outlines the use of military video games for

propaganda and political activism in times of armed conflict and war, which often depicts the "enemy" with negative and degrading stereotypes. The third section contextualizes the Malian armed conflict and the role played in it by France. To explore the digital cryptopolitics of the game, our fourth section turns to public statements some US journalists made about *Muslim Mali*, statements that reproduced racist and imperialist cryptopolitics online. Our final section examines how these media-decontextualized statements, and the game's digital cryptopolitics, were discussed and contested on a gamers' website, where some commenters, like others offline, used conspiracies theories to recall the complexity of the current Malian conflict and its sociohistorical roots in French colonialism.

This chapter is inspired by Katrien Pype's method of "commenting on digital depth" (2018: 247). This is a methodological approach that captures the various layers of meaning encrypted in digital space by analyzing "any virtual text uploaded or posted by either researcher, research participants, or others" (Pype 2018: 248). While this methodological approach may be "fragmentary in its analysis," it corresponds well to the ephemerality of some digital texts, and is, therefore, Pype argues, "the only legitimate ethnographic form" with which to make discursive renditions of the digital space's opacity (2018: 248). Knowledge, experiences, and intertextualities all inform ways of interpreting and commenting on digital texts: digital texts are read and decrypted in interrelation with other texts (Weldes and Rowley 2015). Our commentaries in this chapter are, therefore, equally informed by our own interrelated readings of these digital texts, combined with our knowledge and experiences of the social dynamics we are studying (Pype 2018: 249).

Therefore, this chapter explores the virtual and intertextual networks of digital texts that have been produced at the junction of the *Muslim Mali* video game. Digital texts dating from 2013 and collected on the internet provide this chapter's basis: a YouTube video clip about the game, reports by several journalists, a blog posted by journalist Evan Narcisse on *Kotaku* (a website for gamers), and its commenters' posts. The digital world allows for additional hiding and anonymization, which can create difficulties for the ethnographer. Commenters on the *Kotaku* website employ numerous pseudonyms: the anonymity this provides makes it hard to accurately situate commenters' positionalities. However, their comments resonate with discussions Marie Deridder has had with her Malian interlocutors in the small northern town of Youwarou (Deridder 2012, 2013, 2019, 2021) and in Bamako[2] (Deridder, Laurent, and Konseiga 2021; Deridder and Pelckmans 2020; Deridder, Pelckmans, and Ward 2020).

Video Games at the Crossroad of Popular Culture and World Politics

Since the 1990s, there has been an increasing acknowledgment of the importance of popular culture for world politics[3] (Robinson 2015: 453). Video games, we argue here, are part of this phenomenon, and should be studied by considering this crucial aspect to understand the crypto-politics that video games embody through their technological opacity. As Kyle Grayson (2013: 380) has argued, "a popular artifact may reveal key dynamics underpinning contemporary politics that might not normally register popularly if expressed through the formal conventions of academic or political argumentation, even if it is complicit in reproducing them. The artifacts of popular culture offer an additional capacity to engage in political argument on terms and in a language that is more familiar to a given audience." In a transversal way, our case study corresponds to Iver Neumann and Daniel Nexon's fourfold typology of popular culture (2006: 10), which understands it, in globalized settings, as elements of global political processes or as motivated by political events; as empirical data allowing key insights into dominant norms, ideas, values, and representations about ongoing political process; as a mirror, a medium that brings us to reflect on our own assumptions about world politics; and as constitutive of politics and interacting with other representations of political life. Jutta Weldes and Christina Rowley (2015) stress a point vital to our discussion: that, while being constitutive of politics, popular culture is constructed intertextually. Its meanings depend on its texts being read in relation to the narrative and visual elements of others: world politics and popular culture are often read in inter-relation with one another. Through a layer of fictional representations, popular culture intersects thus with the study of world politics. Not only does it represent elements of sociopolitical life, but it also plays a crucial role in discursively constituting that life.

The study of popular culture can help move the understanding of world politics beyond the narratives, statements, and analyses of political elites. Popular culture is especially significant because people are immersed in its discourses in their daily lives (Weldes and Rowley 2015). For many of them, it provides diffuse knowledge they can use to grasp political issues, shape their moralities, and produce and transform their identities (Neumann and Nexon 2006: 6, 18). It is by use of popular culture that "effective analogies and narratives are constructed and altered" (2006: 6). Popular culture, therefore, has a powerful impact on the way audiences come to their assumptions about the world (2006: 19).

Artifacts used to study popular culture have ranged from books, comics, novels, and painting to sport, music, songs, dance, films, theaters, TV programs, and merchandise produced for popular consumption. Video games, which are considered commercial products rather than cultural achievements, have been neglected (Seiffert and Nothhaft 2015: 256). The study of video games has suffered from its perception as a trivial and meaningless activity, a form of computer-mediated escapism for immature youth. Video games have not been seen as a persuasive and expressive medium able at the same time to inform, entertain, distract, express, persuade, and shape public opinion (Bogost 2006a; Seiffert and Nothhaft 2015). Video games, however, have one major peculiarity other artifacts of popular culture lack: their interactivity. This offers players interactive content, narratives, and virtual spaces to explore and is what creates what Ian Bogost (2006a) calls the "procedural rhetoric" of video games, which we consider a central part of their digital cryptopolitics. Video games embody and encrypt representations, ideologies, and norms in their computational structure (their internal coding and algorithmic patterns). Depending on their narratives, they may also theorize and produce knowledge about (and, at the same time, "gamify") historical and political events.

When experiencing the interactive narratives, rules, and encrypted theoretical knowledge of video games and the emotions they provoke, players are able to form novel judgments and expectations, which they can communicate to others. Even if, as Bogost (2006a) argues, video games are not explicitly persuasive, their informational content and the affordances and limitations of their particular gameplay still shape players' experiences and the meanings they derive from them. Gamers can then more or less consciously transpose those experiences and meanings to their offline world in a performative (and more or less critical) way. Miron Lakomy (2019) argues that, compared to video games, no other online or offline medium has the same potential to engage players through enjoyment. In striking keys or clicking buttons as they play, players are "syncing physical action with intellectual and visual cues. Repeated play reinforces the connection between thought and action, between intent and implementation" (Brachman 2006: 158). Video games can also allow players to embody political positions and engage in political actions many will never have previously experienced (Bogost 2006a). Therefore, as an interactive entertainment, video games easily allow for both the appropriation and the experimentation of political activism and radical rhetoric (Bogost 2006a). The unique procedural rhetoric of video games thus adds another quality of persuasion: it

allows players to experience the meaning of the argument mounted by the game (Seiffert and Nothhaft 2015: 261).

Finally, as we will empirically demonstrate in the latter sections, video games are part of the broader framework of social media. Generally, as Jens Seiffert and Howard Nothhaft (2015) point out, video games and social media are distinguished by their (assumed) different social functions. While social media sites such as Facebook or Twitter are used to share content, information, and engagement with "real" people, video games should be seen as mere entertainment. However, this distinction by social function is less obvious than it seems. It is misleading to one-sidedly emphasize agency, creativity, and sociality on social media, without acknowledging that gamers not only play video games, but also play with, and exchange views with, other gamers (Seiffert and Nothhaft 2015: 256). Video games can thus play a key role in communication and socialization (Perraton, Fusaro, and Bonenfant 2011), and the formation of players' communities of practice.[4] Such communities can have a strong impact on learning, knowing, communicating, socializing, and understanding the way people think about the world (Zagal 2010). Such communities constitute new social spaces in and around video games, allowing communications, exchanges, and interactions. That constitution occurs through the unique social junction offered by video games, with their interactivity and intrinsic intertextuality, and it occurs even in times of armed conflict and war.

Video Games, War on Terror, and Cyberjihad

Military video games, like other artifacts of popular culture, can be used for wartime propaganda and political activism, and the negative and degrading stereotyping of military "enemies." In this context, it is not surprising to see jihadist organizations and their sympathizers using not only the Internet but also video games. The jihadist online presence that results, should not, we argue, be studied mainly through the prism of radicalization. This approach often suffers from normative and Eurocentric biases that contribute to multiple layers of encryption and obscure diverse complex sociohistorical settings, various interests and agendas, as well as silencing local subjectivities.

Jihadist groups are not the only actors who use the internet for these purposes. The US Army, for example, has used military video games like *America's Army*[5] as recruiting tools.[6] Several of these video games[7] portray the United States as an innocent victim of violence continuously

threatened by a hostile world, justifying a military response unbound by international norms and law, as argued for by the Bush administration after the 11 September attacks (Robinson 2015).

Military video games tend to employ rhetoric consistent with that deployed by the War on Terror, which reclassifies prohibited acts like torture and extrajudicial killings as unproblematic, even standard, behaviors (Clarke, Rouffaer, and Sénéchaud 2012; Stahl 2006). In video games, war is coded as an object of consumption that effaces the discursive boundary between soldier and citizen (Stahl 2006). This gives birth to what Stahl calls the "virtual citizen-soldier," reflecting the militarization of society and politics. Existing literature[8] on military video games, which depicts conflicts from the Western point of view, suggests that these games portray representations and stereotypes "based on Orientalism, with the Middle East depicted as backward, violent and resistant to civil order" (Robinson 2015: 452). They present US military intervention and the use of force as the only viable option to liberate oppressed populations and restore a sense of legal and moral order, a view rooted in perceptions of US superiority regarding the rest of the world (Robinson 2012). When these video games stage the War on Terror from a Western point of view, they problematically recast complex geopolitical issues as simplistic conflicts demarcated by a Manichean moral divide between "good guys" and "bad guys," and in which there are known winners and known enemies.

The era since 11 September 2001 has coincided with a significant breakthrough by video games into the world of politics and activism, and their introduction of counternarratives to dominant narratives disseminated by the Western entertainment industry. Bogost (2006a, 2006b) notes that video games are increasingly becoming a forum for artistic endeavor and even for sociopolitical expression that allows resistance to perceived oppressions (Servais 2020). Many of these video games take the form of "mods," electronic game modifications that alter existing commercial games to express political opinions and social critiques (Bogost 2006a, 2006b; Robinson 2012).

In the meantime, jihadist organizations and their sympathizers have also oriented to the Internet, drawing the attention of scholars working on terrorism and counterterrorism. This mushrooming literature[9] problematizes "cyberjihad," including video games like *Muslim Mali*, from a global/macro overview and a top-down approach: it focuses on the Internet web forums, websites, social media, and encrypted virtual spaces used by "terrorists" for routine conversations, exchange of tactics, socialization, recruitment, propaganda, the radicalization of web

users, information storage, and the dissemination of training material (Torres-Soriano 2014; Younas 2014; Zelin 2013). Anne Stenersen (2008: 216), however, reminds us that this is not unprecedented. If we look at the paramilitary literature and "explosives cookbooks" that have been circulating online for years or at the US right-wing extremist pages that host forums dedicated to weaponry and weapons training, we see that use of the Internet to spread illegal literature or to prepare criminal or terrorist acts is not a new phenomenon.

The focus here is on online mechanisms of radicalization and their role in terrorism and counterterrorism strategies, as well as their general value for political activism. The aim is to investigate the perception of terrorism in the electronic entertainment industry: scholars were at first reluctant to engage with military video games that look at conflict from a non-Western perspective[10] (Lakomy 2019; Robinson 2012). Counterterrorism scholars have been the exception here: they analyze these games through their security lens and are mainly concerned with the potential for radicalization and recruitment that these games bear in their procedural mechanics. Jarret Brachman (2006: 157) underlines that "while players may understand that such games are based on fiction, the act of playing them arguably increases their propensity to accept ideologies that consist of extreme goals"—this turns video games and gaming into a security issue.

This existing literature, however, suffers from a normative bias and proposes disembodied analyses that fail to consider the intertextuality of popular culture, as well as the local settings and micro-realities that frame online and offline contexts and battlefields. In doing so, these analysts contribute to multiple layers of encryption that obscure diverse and complex sociohistorical settings, hide interests and agendas, and silence local subjectivities. Weldes and Rowley (2015) rightly point out that examination of the everyday phenomena of popular culture reveals the centrality of the many "margins, silences and bottom rungs" of world politics, which is the ambition of this chapter. Indeed, interestingly, video games like *Muslim Mali* reverse the usual gaze by adopting a non-Western point of view and allowing their players to fight against the West. Through their procedural mechanics, these video games offer their players an alternative version of historical and political events. By designating the West as the enemy, these video games challenge the dominant, dividing moral line between the "good" Western side and the "bad" non-Western side. Thanks to their intrinsic intertextuality (characteristic of popular culture in general and video games in particular), these games thus contribute to the replaying and reshaping

of past political events, imposing on them other significations that demand scholarly investigation. This is the argument that we empirically explore in the following sections of this chapter.

The Beginning of the Offline War in Mali

Until 2012, in West Africa, Mali was a "donor darling" (Bergamaschi 2014; Siméant 2014), a "poster child for electoral democracy in West Africa,"[11] that had successfully completed both an "economic adjustment" and a "democratic transition" (Bertrand 1992, 1999). Presidential, parliamentary, and communal elections occurred regularly, and without bloodshed or violence. The old rebel movements were now confined to the northern part of the country. In the first decade of the 2000s, when Marie Deridder was conducting fieldwork in Mali's Inner Niger Delta, it was difficult to imagine the turmoil that Mali would experience after 2011. Many scholars have stressed the unexpected character and complexity of the historical moment that began that year (Andersson 2019; Hagberg and Körling 2012; Lecocq et al. 2013; Siméant 2014).

Two months before a new presidential election, in March 2012, a mutiny broke out in the Kati military camp, and then grew, quickly, into a coup d'état. While international institutions unanimously condemned the coup, popular reactions to the event were divided. Driven by the rejection of elites and the political class, this coup d'état revealed a growing social unrest coupled with the revival of insurgent claims in northern Mali and the aftershocks of the Gaddafi regime's collapse in Libya in late 2011. The contested presidential management of this "Northern crisis," the arrival from Libya of ex-combatants and returnees,[12] the rise of insurgent claims in the north and then in central Mali, the spread of jihadist groups, suspicions of collusion between the central government in Bamako and drug traffickers active in the Sahelo-Saharan regions, and the displacement of several hundred thousand people all contributed to Mali's instability (Gavelle, Siméant, and Traoré 2013; Gary-Tounkara 2013).

Amplifying the disorganization of the Malian army, the coup d'état of 2012 indirectly contributed to the crisis of the north or Azawad as the rebel MNLA (Mouvement de Libération de l'Azawad) calls the region. One month after the coup, the MNLA unilaterally proclaimed Azawad's independence. Mali was divided in two, bringing the country's territorial integrity into question, and strongly evoking the example of Southern Sudan. Tensions emerged, also, between rival insurgent

groups themselves. These events have reactivated clichéd images of chronic crisis and lawlessness, which have made Mali "a zone of insecurity at the epicenter of the global margins of our new world disorder" (Andersson 2019).

In addition to insurgent groups, the presence of active jihadist groups in this zone has led Western media, along with experts in security and geopolitics, to take the line that this crisis is different from previous postcolonial Tuareg rebellions. Henceforth, what was, and is, happening in northern Mali was connected to the globalized fears and threats felt since the attacks of 11 September 2001 in New York City. In 2012, the destruction of Sufi manuscripts and mausoleums in Timbuktu, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, caused scandal and outrage in the West and elicited comparisons with the Taliban's destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan in 2001. Western media such as BBC and CNN reported also on how jihadists had imposed sharia, chopped off the hands of presumed thieves, performed floggings, and stoned presumed adulterous couples. Mali was propelled into the fight against global jihadism.

Yet some media and security experts started referring to a new "catchy" angle of analysis for the Malian situation: the issue was to prevent the fall of West Africa, at whose heart Mali stands, into "Afghanization," "Talibanization," "Balkanization," "Somalization" (see, for example, Solomon 2013). The international community and neighboring countries feared the extension of Malian insurgent and jihadist movements outside Malian borders and the consequent explosion of the region. These terrorist threats definitively internationalized the Malian situation, which was translated into a military issue, as part of the American "Global War on Terror" launched by the George W. Bush administration after the 11 September attacks. Northern and central Mali were now included in the "arc of crisis" that united the Saharan and Sahelian regions.

In a questionable manner, experts in security and geopolitics have, for many years now, depicted northern Mali as uncontrolled and uncontrollable (Brachet 2013). Such depictions construct Mali and other sub-Saharan Africa countries around categories like "weak," "fragile," "failed," or "collapsed" that stereotype and hierarchize African states (Gruffydd Jones 2008). Such discourses of "state failure" legitimize intervention by identifying lack, inferiority, and incapacity, thus reconnecting with the colonial legacy of an imperialism that distinguished colonized societies and states from both the imperial powers themselves and each other (Gruffydd Jones 2008: 197–98). In late 2012, with the support of France, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) deployed the African-led International Support Mission in

Mali (AFISMA).[13] This offensive operation was authorized by the United Nations Security Council's Resolution 2085 (2012).[14]

France was at first reluctant to intervene militarily in Mali. Then, in early 2013, jihadist groups took the small town of Konna along the Niger River—the first step toward Bamako and the last before the military camp at Sévaré. The battle at Konna lasted several days, and the outcome never seemed certain. Then, at the request of the Malian interim government and with the support of the UN Security Council, France deployed its forces, including Gazelle helicopters and Mirage-D fighter-bombers to Konna: after several bombing runs, the French fighter-bombers routed the armed groups. This battle marked the beginning of the French army's intervention in Mali, with the launch of Operation Serval. Supported by air raids, the French military intervention gradually deployed several thousands of soldiers to Mali. The official objectives of the former colonial power were to stop the progress of jihadist groups and to start the long-awaited reconquest of the north. This was to be led by the Malian army and the support of the ECOWAS intervention forces, which consisted of several thousand soldiers from Nigeria, Niger, Burkina Faso, Togo, Senegal, Benin, Guinea, Chad, and Ghana. Mali became a new material and imaginary battlefield of the African continent, where the majority of non-Western victims of conflict are ignored.

France's entry into the Global War on Terror in Mali briefly drew the Western media spotlight. On several occasions, the media broadcasted images of victorious French troops marching through the streets of reclaimed cities in northern Mali and receiving the acclamation of anonymous crowds. The same media relayed the testimonies of relief and gratitude expressed by local populations following their "release from the terrorist threat." At first, it seemed easy for the international military force to take over the three main cities in the north: but then the situation in the north and the center of the country changed and changed adversely. The intervention troops found themselves quickly bogged down in a strategic environment that favored banditry and guerrilla attacks. At the time of writing, armed conflict in Mali remains a serious problem for that country, and the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali is still one of the deadliest in recent years. Over the span of a decade, the northern and central regions of the country have found themselves transformed into "red zones" (Anderson 2019), a kind of nebula where different armed groups are active. Local communities have been confronted with a context of violence, where feelings of abandonment by the Malian state coincide with growing mistrust between individuals and groups (Benjaminsen and Ba 2019; Pelckmans 2015).

The Subversive Digital Cryptopolitics of the *Muslim Mali* Video Game

In 2013, just after the engagement of the French military intervention in Mali, the website Ansar al-Mujahideen Arabic Forum (AMAF)[15] released an online single-player video game titled *Muslim Mali.*[16] In this section, we turn to the video game *Muslim Mali* itself, to its narrative and visual components, and to the scope of the gameplay options available to its players, which are coded and encoded into the game. While publishing content in Arabic, English, and German, the AMAF occupied a prominent place among globally networked pro-jihadist websites (Torres-Soriano 2014: 737). According to the literature on cyberjihad, these kinds of internet forums are one of the most important manifestations of the jihadist presence on the Internet. Scholars remain divided on the nature of the connection between such forums and terrorist organizations. Stenersen (2008: 216) insists that they are the work of "self-radicalized sympathizers," rather than that of formally enrolled members of terrorist organizations. Manuel R. Torres-Soriano (2014: 736) explains that even if these forums claim to be the independent initiatives of unaffiliated sympathizers, they are mostly embedded with such organizations. Their divergent understandings of jihadists' online presence notwithstanding, these authors agree that the Internet provides an interactive environment where people are able to interact in virtual and transnational communities of practice, while also producing content through their discussions and their exchanges about personal experiences.

The video game *Muslim Mali* seemed to feature the aerial combat of the "battle of Konna," which had happened a few months before in Mali. The home page of the video game displayed the Arabic words "Muslim Mali" (*Mālī al-muslima^{tu}*),[17] immediately locating the game geographically, religiously, and politically. Then, the opening message put the gamer into the picture, addressing him in explicitly jihadist terms: "My Muslim brother, fight off the French invasion from Muslim Mali" (*Akhī al-Muslim qum biṣaḍdi al-ghazwi al-faransiyyi ʿan Mālī al-muslima^{ti}*). Simulating an aerial dogfight, *Muslim Mali* contained no humanizing dimension and was not immersive. The player was thus not able to impersonate a "terrorist" but was playing with a plane as an avatar. At its conclusion, a game-over message would appear on the screen praising the dead player as a martyr to jihad and glorifying such martyrdom: "Our congratulations. You were martyred" (*tahānīna laqad ʾstushidta*).

Muslim Mali was a scrolling shooting game designed in 2D. Its aesthetic was quite similar to games such as *Space Invaders,*[18] popular in the

West from the late 1970s to the 1990s, which highlighted the idea of invasion. Shooting games are categorized by their viewpoint and the restrictions they impose on the player's movements. In the case of *Muslim Mali*, the player views the action from above as the screen scrolls downward. The game restricts the player and the enemies to a single screen and makes them move long one single axis of motion. While the aircraft move, the background remains stationary: the planes appear to be flying over a desert area recalling northern Mali. In this game, as in other vertical shooting games, the player is under constant attack and must contend with a large number of enemies descending from the top of the screen at a constantly increasing speed. Here, the enemies are the French aircraft, easily identified by their blue, white, and red French flags. The French jets try to destroy the gamer's plane by firing missiles at it. The player's avatar, an aircraft draped in a black Al-Qaeda flag, tries to shoot down this procession of French jets while dodging their fire. To present French military aircraft as a foreign enemy is an act that pushes players to enact military opposition to French forces. Facing the threat, the player must rely primarily on reaction times to succeed. The score is indicated in English. The number of lives available to the gamer decreases each time he is hit by a French missile. The player's aircraft can take ten hits before destruction, while the French planes do not survive even one. When the player has zero lives remaining, the game ends. A deadly laser is also available if the player presses a black button in the bottom-left corner of the screen: its use destroys both the player's avatar and the French enemies. *Muslim Mali*'s gameplay is based on repetition: the procedural mechanics of the game trap the player in a no-win scenario.

The design of *Muslim Mali* appeared to Western critics as old-fashioned, outdated, or "retro," especially in comparison with the much more elaborate and sophisticated designs exhibited by other experimental propaganda games of Al-Qaeda.[19] However, in a very surprising way, while these Western critics commented on the archaic design of the game, they also highlighted the fact that the game used HTML5, a language used for structuring and presenting content on the Web. Games coded in HTML5 are easy to promote because the language allows cross-platform mobile applications by including features designed with low-powered devices such as smartphones. This means that the designers of the game were not excluding any audience. *Muslim Mali* was available to potential players on both the European and African continents and all over the world.

In a context where the official narratives of the Malian state and the Western international community were presenting the French military

intervention as timely and positive, this game inverted the moral contrast between "the good guys" and "the bad guys": the French forces were the invaders and the black Al-Qaeda aircraft represented the resistance. Many scholars have criticized video games that stage the War on Terror for their general strong pro-American bias and promotion of ongoing War on Terror operations (Allen 2011; Galloway 2004; Nieborg 2006, 2010; Schulzke 2013a, 2013b; Shaw 2010). Jihadist activists are thus not the only actors using online games for propaganda purposes. Lakomy reminds us that, in contrast to the perspectives of pro-American video games, "*jihad* in games is frequently portrayed as a regular, military-like activity, usually undertaken in defense of the imperiled Muslim communities and religion. This simple manipulation allows audiences that are generally critical toward Western activities in the Middle East and in Africa to be reached" (2019: 399). This reversed perspective may be inspirational for many members of the games' target audience, as it allows them to unload emotions while visualizing their political aspirations in a virtual environment[20] (Lakomy 2019: 399). This leads us to the question of how audiences have decrypted *Muslim Mali* by performing intertextuality.

US Global Media: Mocking and Stereotyping

If popular culture is constitutive of world politics then its meanings depend on how it is read intertextually, in interrelation to and with other narratives. While cultural artifacts may carry latent meanings and constructions in them, discursive labor is required to realize those meanings (Weldes and Rowley 2015). We have, in fact, seen this in relation to *Muslim Mali* and its own digital cryptopolitics. Popular cultural artifacts are consumed in diverse ways: they create discursive junctions for diverse readings to be articulated or contested. Their consumption, therefore, is inextricably linked to the production and reproduction of meanings through which people comprehend their place in the world (Weldes and Rowley 2015). Viewing popular artifacts through the prism of intertextuality makes the off/online distinction less obvious, especially when we are interested in a video game that virtualizes the offline Malian battlefield. In this section, we thus investigate the public statements made by some US global media about *Muslim Mali*. We must, therefore, unpack the narratives and tropes through which these journalists have constituted meanings, to show how these reportages are embedded into a racist and imperialist cryptopolitics with roots within

US and Western "coloniality of power" (Quijano 2000) embodied into in/security narratives.

Quickly after the release of *Muslim Mali*, US media was quick to criticize the video game in reports that were soon relayed by international online media such as *France 24* or *The World*.[21] International US expert journalists in security issues mocked *Muslim Mali* and described it as an archaic game that was thirty years out of date. For John Hudson[22] of *Foreign Policy*, a US magazine, this game was "primitive."[23] The same goes for the US journalist Michael Peck[24] who wrote an article for the US business magazine *Forbes*, where he openly mocked the game with the headline "Al-Qaeda's Goofy Video Game Provokes Laughter, Not Terror" and who identified "something pathetic" about the game.[25] In his article, he wrote:

> If Osama Bin Laden hadn't been killed by Navy SEALs, he would have died of embarrassment at his group's latest exploit. Al-Qaeda militants in the African nation of Mali are tired of being blasted by French jets. But instead of defeating the French in a real war, they've done the next best thing. They're wiping out the French Air Force in an online video game . . . Despite looting arms when Gaddafi's regime fell in Libya, they can't destroy real French aircraft, so they reassured themselves by shooting down virtual ones. . . . But there is something pathetic about this game, to the point where you wonder if they really believe it is a magical talisman, a poor man's substitute for anti-aircraft weapons that will protect from French Mirage jets, Gazelle helicopters, and laser-guided missiles. . . . Oh, and one more thing. Vive la France!

Such public statements about *Muslim Mali* reflect a liberal conception of in/security issues, one that is underpinned by an evolutionary myth (Rowley and Weldes 2012: 514). This evolutionary myth is constructed on the idea of "security" as a desirable outcome that can be achieved via a coherent and linear process with a beginning, a middle, and an end state. In/security is perceived through the prism of threat, technological advance, and military capabilities. In this liberal conception, technology is the embodiment of modernity, its inevitable progress, and its promise of wealth and peace. These journalists considered *Muslim Mali* to be "primitive" because of its unsophisticated design. While mocking the game, they stressed, also, the military inadequacy of African jihadists before the French forces, despite their access to Libyan arms after Gaddafi's fall.[26] Significantly, Michael Peck referred to *Muslim Mali* as being, for its creators and players, "a magical talisman, a poor man's

substitute for anti-aircraft weapons." He thus reaffirmed the implicit unequal binary opposition between witchcraft/tradition and technology/modernity, evoking once again an evolutionary understanding of these issues, one in which some societies are less evolved than others.

These media reports partly reproduced an old and unsettled story of racialized African Otherness, replaying the guiding trope of "us" versus "them," and glossing the "African them" as inferior. They continue to convey and establish in the international media landscape the images of a primitive and backward "Africa" characterized by witchcraft and superstitions (Sanders 2003). This is an Africa that is lagging behind the West but unable to seize the technology at its disposal, in this case following the fall of Gaddafi. If Western media generally portray terrorists as intrinsically evil enemies and monsters undeserving of respect (Schulzke 2013a), they also underline, as in this case, the miserable inferiority of African jihadists unable to destroy the French jets. This must indirectly discourage audiences from playing such a "backward" video game: who would wish to embody inferiority in a game? This implied evolutionary narrative underpinning in/security issues from a Western perspective denies the contemporaneity of African countries and explicitly reaffirms the imagined superiority of the West and the former colonial powers in general, with France, in particular, seen as a savior.

This racist and imperialist cryptopolitics provides the interpretative frame used by these US expert journalists on security issues to discuss the Malian war. As Jacinthe Mazzocchetti (2012) rightly points out, these media narratives actively contribute to the confinement of sub-Saharan people within simplistic and deeply biased representations, reducing complex realities to an irreducible racialized Otherness, or at least to their reified and negatively connoted cultural traits. This Western media engagement with *Muslim Mali* led to the production and reproduction of a particular imagery of "Malians," "Mali," and "Africa" in general, including the idea that "Africa and Africans can be meaningfully discussed in the singular" by Western media (Sanders 2003: 53). Such homogenizing assumptions underpin the idea that "African Islam," "African wars," and "African technological gap" are purportedly meaningful categories quickly articulated through the lens of barbarianism and backwardness. As Todd Sanders underlines (2003: 62), "such images, though novel in their specifics, hardly spring from thin air: they draw on a lengthy Western history of demonized Others, and are refracted through specific contemporary constellations of power." They resonate strongly with certain historical patterns of colonial rule; those whereby humanitarian and developmental terminology played a key ideological role in

justifying paternalistic protection based on a monopoly of violence and a permanent breach of local sovereignties (Deridder et al. 2020).

In doing so, these Western media deny the sociohistorical complexity of the Malian situation, the imagined and real roles played by France, and the main issues and concrete consequences of the ongoing deadly conflict. They contribute to multiple layers of encryption that obscure diverse interests and agendas, as well as silencing local subjectivities. Behind the alibi of the fight against terrorism, these criticisms reaffirm imperialist relations that structure on a global scale racial asymmetries between, on the one hand, European countries and the United States and, on the other hand, African countries, in a context where Western hegemony is wavering. This reveals the "infopolitics" (Bernal 2014) of asymmetric power relations that lie concealed behind technologies, discourses, and debates between the former metropolis and its former colony.

The online articles of these Western global media were not open to any comments by the audiences. However, a blog on *Muslim Mali* written by Narcisse Evan on *Kotaku*, a website dedicated to gaming and popular culture, opened the digital floor to audiences seeking to engage with and comment on both the game and its various interpretations.

Counternarratives in the Digital Space of Gaming

While some US media outlets were publishing their articles on *Muslim Mali*, the blogger Evan Narcisse, a forty-year-old writer, journalist, and consultant in video games, comic books, and TV was also publishing a piece on this game (under the headline "Islamic Extremists Made This Video Game"[27]) on the website *Kotak.* This is a website and blog launched in 2004 as part of the Gawker Media network based in New York.[28] A native New Yorker and African American, Evan Narcisse has 1,265 followers on *Kotaku*: in his writing, he seeks, among other things, to understand the intersection of blackness and popular culture and to critique the representation of blackness in video games. He argues that black characters, if not invisibilized, are all too often reduced to outdated and negative stereotypes portraying devastated black lives.[29] In its presentation section, *Kotaku* claims to be "an inclusive site for gamers of any ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation," and presents itself as "a news and opinion site about games and things serious gamers care about."[30] The site is dedicated to gaming and popular culture: it covers new games and offers gaming reviews, blog opinions, interviews, news,

tips, and opportunities to debate. Its audience of 5 million readers per month includes both gamers and "people who don't play games but are curious about them."[31]

In his blog, Evan Narcisse described the game without resorting to patronizing superiority: "It's a rudimentary HTML5 browser game where you control an al-Qaeda fighter jet shooting down and dodging fire from French fighter planes. Islamic Mali virtualizes the very real conflict in Mali, where local rebel forces have been fighting jihadi soldiers with help from the French military." He identified the game's creators as "Islamic extremists" and underlined the fact that this game joined "the ranks of other explicitly political titles from other countries" that are "a testament to how fervently their creators want their particular ideologies to permeate every aspect of people's lives." Narcisse also stressed that "while the claim can be made that political mindsets and cultural biases seep into those video games [American video games like *Call of Duty*, *Battlefield*, and *Medal of Honor* series], they're not explicitly made to froth up ideological allegiances." His blog entry received 329 comments, ranking it as one of his most commented-upon publications on *Kotaku*. Within these comments, three main issues deserve attention: propaganda and its racial dimension, jihad and religion, and France's engagement in the Malian offline conflict.

First, regarding the racial issue, a commenter questions the moral classification suggested by Evan Narcisse that implied that *Muslim Mali* would be a more explicit propaganda tool than other Western military video games. This commenter raises the racialized implicit dimension underpinning these Western video games and their hierarchization with *Muslim Mali* (all punctuation and capitalization are as in the original):

> I fail to see how this is worse than Call of Duty and its endless "KILL BROWN PEOPLE TO SAVE THE WORLD FROM TERROR!!!!" campaign. It's foolish to claim that the War on Terror is any different from a Jihad.

This post points out that terrorism and the ongoing War on Terror are common themes in video games that morally characterize terrorists as evil threatening enemies and contribute to the definition of what terrorism is and who the terrorists are (in this case, they are those with dark skin color). They do this by disseminating a range of problematic racialized stereotypes of the targeted groups (Saleem and Anderson 2013; Schulzke 2013a). However, another commenter published a post in response to the first one establishing similarities between jihad and the War on Terror:

A Jihad is a religiously motivated war. Terrorism is a tactic whereby you target civilians in order to exert internal pressure on an enemy. The War on Terror is a response to Jihadic terrorism. You aren't stupid enough to not see a difference here, are you? The coalition forces in Afghanistan and Iraq explicitly try to avoid killing civilians. Terrorists explicitly aim to kill civilians. The US military has the power to kill every last person in the middle east but does not desire to do so. Al Qaeda has the desire to kill every person in America but lacks the power. If all the US military had wanted to do was kill civilians, these wars would have been over 10 years ago.

These contrasting replies show how, within a community of practice around gaming, a controversial discussion produces knowledge that impacts participants' understanding and decryption of both offline world politics and armed conflicts, in this case, the differences and similarities between jihad, terrorism, and the War on Terror.

The second issue concerns the religious dimension of the game and the tensions surrounding Islam and jihad (tensions that the authors of this chapter also encountered in Mali). Several commenters expressed the view that the Muslim faith could be lived differently from the one conveyed through the "radical" video game:

Let me make this clear now, the affiliation between the usage of Qur'anic verses and ideologies of Islamic extremists, are NOT glorified within the Muslim society. The terms jihad and martyr are very very misused, in the society outside of Islam. I'm very disappointed to see a game like this out there, because as a Muslim, I'd ask, where are the positive vibe games that teach education, morals, determination, and humanistic qualities that Islam really teaches?

Another commenter added:

I would just like to clarify something many people seem to misunderstand, al Qaida is not a proper representative of Islam, as a matter of fact they do not represent it at all, they use the name of the religion to justify their ideas that have nothing to do with Islam.

This is also the reason why, when these issues are discussed in everyday life, most of our Malian interlocutors established distance between themselves and the jihadists by underlining the "radicalization" of these "extremist" fighters, their supposed religious beliefs, and the violence associated with them. As Mazzocchetti (2012) noticed, since the 11

September attacks and the responses of Western media and world political leaders to that event, Muslims have had to "constantly defend themselves against the link established between their religion and extremist practices or terrorist acts." The political and media coverage of this event, and of the terrorist attacks that followed it, further strengthened negative and aggressive perceptions, attitudes, and affect toward people perceived to be Muslims. A strong associative link was made between terrorism, violence, and Islam, one that used schematized stereotypic attributes (e.g., turbans, dark skin color, facial hair, AK-47s, deserts, and camels) to perpetuate the image of Muslims as terrorists (Saleem and Anderson 2013). Stereotypes of this kind have significant implications for representations of the self, the world, and intergroup relations, and for the performative engagement of cognition, affect, and behavior.

Finally, in his blog, Evan Narcisse highlighted the agency of local combatants: "Islamic Mali virtualizes the very real conflict in Mali, where local rebel forces have been fighting jihadi soldiers with help from the French military." This statement affirms that the Malian desert cannot be reduced to a battlefield between jihadist groups and France, a reduction that would convey a Western-centric imagination that portrays the West as the only bulwark against terrorism. Here, Evan Narcisse asserts that "local rebel forces" are fighting jihadist groups, a part of the complexity we observe on the Malian offline battlefield. However, this last point opened up the debate on the current conflicts in Mali and the multitude of armed groups whose alliances and loyalties are shifting and not always clear as several commenters noticed: "'where local rebel forces have been fighting jihadi soldiers with help from the French military' That looks like I mistake, or am I reading it wrong? The jihadists are the rebels, the French are helping the government fight the rebels." Another blogger added: "I was going to point out the same thing. The Malian army along with African allies and the French are fighting islamists and tuareg rebels."

These posts reassert the complexity of the Malian situation and produce a new theoretical bifurcation, that of the conspiracy theories circulating within and around that situation. In current popular debates in Mali, people are asking sharp questions about links between the French and the Malian governments, the various armed groups in the northern and the central parts of the country (including the "rebels"), and the obscure financial interests at stake with regard to mining prospects. Mali is debating, in other words, about who is manipulating whom and for what purpose. The reconquest of Kidal by French intervention forces alone, without the support of the Malian forces, fed widespread rumors of an alliance between France and the separatist

movement and increased suspicions of French motives in northern Mali where France was accused of seeking a monopoly on the region's energy resources (see also Boilley 2005, 2011). Such rumors are part of the complex political landscape of insurgency in post-2011 Mali. The older rebel groups have been joined by new, largely Islamist, rivals: the relationships between the Malian army, non-state actors, and foreign intervention forces have not always been comfortable, or even clear. It has been alleged that when French troops took the town of Kidal, without the aid of Malian army personnel, they subsequently allowed the MNLA to not only remain in the town, but also patrolled with them and with Chadian troops (Rudolph 2015: 386). Such episodes create suspicions of proximity between various players that are officially opposed to each other: this is fertile ground for conspiracy theories.

Moreover, different posts refer to conspiracy theories by discussing the manufacture, origin, and model of the jet with the Al-Qaeda flag: "So they fly around in what looks like United states Lockheed F-117 Nighthawk stealth bombers?" Another poster added: "Well, in their defense, al-qaeda doesn't produce any fighter jets, so they had to buy one from an allied nation…HEY WAITAMINUTE!!!!" Another one commented: "I also learnt that France uses the Su-47!"[32] In discussing France's intervention in Mali, some commenters accused others of taking the French side, by saying that Evan Narcisse's blog "is propaganda as well, because it justifies the French invasion of Mali." This drew the derisive comment, "[y]es . . . France's invasion . . . that's [definitely] what just happened in Mali." A commenter responded more seriously that "Propaganda is defined as 'ideas, facts, or allegations spread deliberately to further one's cause or to damage an opposing cause' Do you honestly think Evan is trying to gain support for France's invasion?"

The comments quoted here evoke the ways conspiracy "theories" work, via the drawing of connections and comparisons within an atmosphere of suspicion. It is within this backdrop of renewed mistrust that each French move in Mali is observed and decrypted, and how France's motives in carrying out this intervention in Mali are interrogated. The suspicions aroused by such interrogations are neither frivolous nor facetious. Pierre Boilley (2005) reminds us that from Malian independence to today, the recurrent concept of a French conspiracy in Saharan regions has resurfaced at every point when violent events have involved Saharan populations, and pastoralist populations especially. Control of northern Mali would provide access to energy resources and rent-seeking opportunities: the military and diplomatic presence of rival powers such as France, the United States, Algeria, China, or Russia,

gives rise to suspicions that their presence is best explained by reference to those resources and opportunities. When large private extractive companies investigate these areas, their activities remain opaque but perceptible to local Malian populations. For instance, in December 2017, when it was officially almost impossible for Western travelers to travel to northern Mali without a military escort (and when even trips under such escorts were heavily controlled), convoys of trucks owned by an Australian mineral company were regularly making the journey to the north. Despite the conflict, Malian citizens still suspected that this company was carrying on its prospecting activities on Malian soil with the assistance of national elites. A convoy of French trucks was also observed heading to the north, causing one of Deridder's interlocutors, who was working for a local NGO in Bamako, to comment: "We should not be taken for fools. We know that this is not humanitarian or military equipment. These discreet activities reinforce our feeling of country's exploitation by France in a context of high precariousness."

The French military intervention thus activated a set of imaginaries among Malian citizens, one focused on the historical exploitation of Malian resources by France, with the complicity of national and ruling elites. This set of imaginaries brought together narratives of the legacy of the colonial, and then the postcolonial state, and issues of energy resources, and used them to form a conspiracy theory. In the Malian case, we argue, conspiracy theories are ideological formations embedded in recurrent social experiences of power, violence, and injustice that have taken root in traumatic memories of various historical settings.

For decades, people in northern and central Mali have grown up with the idea that in case of need, the state would not be there to protect them, an idea confirmed by their concrete experiences of state power. Seen as a potential threat, the state is strongly associated with prebendary dynamics, especially among nomadic/transhumant pastoralists, who share this perception that the state has neglected and marginalized them since the time of Malian independence. This relation to the postcolonial state is marked by different forms of asymmetric power relationships, rumors, suspicions, and violence, in thrall to the specter of a French former colonial power grounded in the history of colonial exploitation. These are the many ingredients that feed mistrust, insurgency, and conspiracy theories, and they continue to play a major role in political dynamics today in the areas north of the Niger River. In Youwarou in early 2012, for example, all the municipality's civil servants evacuated the area because of the fear the presence of armed groups in the area provoked in them. The vacuum created by this retreat of state personnel left the population feeling alone and abandoned.

For people in search of sense or sometimes senselessness, this apprehension of the world in terms of conspiracy theories provides a way to grasp events and make them coherent. It allows them to escape from the position of victimhood by becoming creators of meaning (Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999; Mazzocchetti 2012). By doing so, believers in conspiracy theories place their concerns within a wider sociocultural and historical framework, one that enables them to expose the hidden forces that they believe animate their world by revealing and refracting the concealed logic of power (West and Sanders 2003). These are attempts to decode the cryptopolitics made of various global, regional, and local assemblages in a conflict-affected country like Mali. Drawing on the works of Marina Abalakina-Paap and colleagues (1999), West and Sanders (2003) thus deconstruct the common assertion that conspiracy theories provide simplified explanations of complex events. They underline the fact that, through their discursive imaginings, conspiracy theories make "the world more complex by calling attention to hidden and contradictory logics, by proposing alternative ways of understanding and engaging it" (West and Sanders 2003: 17).

As we have seen above in the Malian case, Western media too often neglect these elements when they reaffirm, explicitly or implicitly, simplistic and binary asymmetries that dangerously disqualify some subjectivities and political agencies. In doing so, they justify the French engagement in Mali, which is often locally understood as another expansion of the "racialized capitalism" (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018) experienced under French colonization. Concerning the controversies about *Muslim Mali* on the *Kotaku* website, it is therefore not surprising to observe in the same impetus both a denunciation of the negatively stereotyped analyses broadcast by Western media and a mobilization of elements that stem from both conspiracy theories and real historical settings overshadowed by French colonial power. This mobilization is put into motion to illustrate the messiness of everyday in/security discourse.

Conclusion

A primary goal of this chapter was to understand video games as popular artifacts with a specific particularity—their interactivity—that is constitutive of world politics. Gamers not only play video games but play with others and communicate about games with others. By playing and communicating within and about video games, they form communities of practice, which have a strong impact on learning, knowing, communicating, and socializing. Not only do these communities shape their

members' understandings of the world (Zagal 2010) they may, by talking about the intersection of video games and world politics, elicit the interest of broader audiences like journalists. Therefore, we have argued, video games are part of the broader category of social media and should be studied to understand the cryptopolitics they embody and the meanings they produce when read in interrelation to other texts. We have thus looked at how intertextuality was performed and by whom to constitute meaning about *Muslim Mali*. We have unpacked some layers of encryption constitutive of the discursive digital network of which *Muslim Mali* is an interpretative junction.

This game has opened up a discursive digital space containing narratives, counternarratives, and several layers of encryption. The first layer of encryption concerns the video game itself, its narrative, its gameplay, and the digital space of affordances and limitations shaped by its procedural mechanics. While the French military intervention on the Malian battlefield was presented as timely and positive, this game reversed the moral line between "the good guys" and "the bad guys": the French forces were the invaders, and the player's avatar represented the resistance. *Muslim Mali* proposed a subversive digital cryptopolitics about a non-fictional conflict, one that inverted the dominant narrative employed by most of the Western commercial software staging the War on Terror. These latter video games usually present jihadists from a Western perspective as "bad guys" to be shot. The second layer of encryption we have identified concerned some US reports mocking the game, which were relayed in global media outlets. We have shown that these reportages are embedded into a racist and imperialist cryptopolitics embodied into in/security narratives, and whose roots lie within US and Western "coloniality of power" (Quijano 2000). They underscore some images of African Otherness that have serious implications for how Western media communicate information, feed social imagination, and encrypt local subjectivities, aspirations, nuances, and complexity. Finally, the digital space opened up by *Muslim Mali* has also allowed the emergence of counternarratives about the game: these resonate with arguments that are already frequent in Mali. Those arguments illustrate the messiness of everyday in/security discourses and denounce the negative stereotypes of Western media and do so by a mobilization of elements drawn from both conspiracy theories and the historical facts of colonialism.

In conclusion, looking to popular artifacts through intertextuality makes the off/online distinction less obvious. Knowledge produced online is performatively refracting understandings of Mali's current armed conflict. Instead of a simplistic opposition to the West, our chapter

reveals complex power assemblages whose geopolitical interests define conflict-affected countries like Mali and enable us to situate *Muslim Mali* as one node among others in a network of diverse cryptopolitics that thereby transcends both on- and offline battlefields. However, digital media offer new forms of cryptopolitics through its technological opacity and globalized political imagination and inspires innovative ways of contesting its multiple layers of encryption. We conclude that this video game, *Muslim Mali,* is therefore part of ongoing postcolonial conversations that intersect with the current Malian armed conflict.

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Acknowledgment

Notes

1. French troops were finally withdrawn from Mali early in 2022.
2. Her research in Youwarou focused on local politics. Her research in Bamako dealt with the migration-development-security nexus. She has, since then, kept in touch with some of her interlocutors on Facebook, a social media site.
3. See, for example, Jutta Weldes (1999); Kyle Grayson, Matt Davies, and Simon Philpott (2009); Anni Kangas (2009); Neumann and Nexon (2006).
4. According to Étienne Wenger (1998), a community of practice involves a collection of individuals who share a domain of interest for something they do, value their collective competence, and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly, even if they never know each other.
5. See US Army, "Army Career Match." Retrieved 15 January 2023 from www .americasarmy.com.
6. The United States has a history in this area: Tanfer Tunc (2007) explains how, in 1942, during the World War II, the famous film *Casablanca* was supported by the War Films division of the US Department of War. It presented a political and social propagandist commentary on World War II, one intended to counteract the US audiences' negative perception of the war.
7. See, for example, *Call of Duty Modern Warfare* series, *Call of Duty Black Ops* series, *Battlefield 3* and *4, Homefront,* which Nick Robinson (2015) studied as a lens to reveal key dynamics underpinning American exceptionalism in US foreign policy.

8. See, for example, Roger Stahl (2006); Johan Höglund (2008); Vit Sisler (2008); Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter (2009); Nina Huntemann and Matthew Thomas Payne (2009); Nick Robinson (2012, 2015); Muniba Saleem and Craig A. Anderson (2013); and Marcus Schulzke (2013a, 2013b).

9. See, for example, Gabriel Weimann (2006a: 123–129, 2006b); Hanna Rogan (2006); Brynjar Lia (2006).

10. See Miron Lakomy's article (2019) for a general review of these video games with a pro-jihadist inclination and a detailed description of their narratives and their gameplay.

11. See, for instance, David Lewis. "Analysis: Mali: From Democracy Poster Child to Broken State." *Reuters*, 24 April 2012. Retrieved 12 March 2021 from https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-idUSBRE83N09Q20120424.

12. The Malian government did not disarm the fighters coming back from Libya. Rumors said that the Algerian Red Crescent Society escorted these armed fighters to the Malian border. Once they had crossed this border, they would have been left to themselves.

13. In accordance with the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2100 of April 2013, the authority of the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA) was transferred to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).

14. Resolution 2085 adopted by the United Nations Security Council on 20 December 2012. Retrieved 11 September 2022 from http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/2085.

15. The Ansar al-Mujahideen website is an international forum promoting jihadist propaganda by broadcasting video, audio clips, and images related to jihad, as well as other jihad-related publications such as books, magazines, and more. This forum is also suspected of hiding sub-forums connecting jihadist groups with sympathizers around the world to carry out online jihadist activities. See, for instance, this press article connecting this forum to the organization of a thwarted terrorist attack in Brussels in 2010. "Deux opérations anti-terroristes en Belgique" [Two anti-terrorist operations in Belgium]. *Le Figaro*, 23 November 2010. Retrieved 9 September 2011 from https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2010/11/23/01003-20101123ARTFIG00514-dix-interpellations-autour-d-un-projet-d-attentat-en-belgique.php.

16. See "In Response to French Military Campaign in Mali, Jihadis Design Video Game that Simulates Air-to-Air Shooting Down French Aircraft." *Memri*, 12 March 2013. Retrieved 9 September 2021 from https://www.memri.org/cjlab/in-response-to-french-military-campaign-in-mali-jihadis-design-video-game-that-simulates-air-to-air-shooting-down-french-aircraft. A video clip of the game is posted online: Red Pikeman. "Muslim Mali." *YouTube*, uploaded 18 January 2014 from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K5f1iNNSqkM.

17. The game mainly used Arabic. This translation has been checked with the help of a colleague who possesses relevant linguistic knowledge.

18. *Space Invaders* is a 1978 shooting game from the first generation of video games featuring spacecraft. In *Space Invaders,* the player aimed to destroy all enemy spaceships that were trying to invade the planet Earth. There was no way to win this game, as the objective was to resist as long as possible and score as many points as possible, by destroying the highest possible number of invaders. Even the highest-scoring player of *Space Invaders* would inevitably end up losing.

19. Among other online interactive entertainment expressing anti-Western and pro-jihadist inclination as new means of online jihad, Lakomy (2019) mentions *Quest for Bush* (*QfB*) released online (and for free) in 2006 by the Global Islamic Media Front, *Iraqi Resistance* (published in 2006), *Lion of Fallujah* (from 2007), or 2014's *Salil al-Sawarim*, a modified version of *Grand Theft Auto 5 G* (or at least of its trailer). These video games are all modified versions of already existing popular software developed mainly for desktop computers.

20. This assumption remains to be empirically investigated, which is not the aim of this chapter. Following Lakomy's caveat regarding the potential reception of his own article on jihadist propaganda through electronic entertainment (Lakomy 2019: 384), we caution that this chapter does not provide any conclusion as to the efficacy of any video games used by jihadists in their attempts to radicalize player communities and motivate them to follow jihadist goals. This is an issue that remains in need of empirical inquiry.

21. Kristin Deasy. "New Jihadi-Made 'Muslim Mali' Video Game Pits Militants against French Forces." *Agence France-Press*, 14 March 2013. Retrieved 12 March 2021 from https://www.pri.org/stories/2013-03-14/new-jihadi-made-muslim-mali-video-game-pits-militants-against-french-forces.

22. From 2009 to 2013, John Hudson was a senior reporter at Foreign Policy magazine where he covered the US State Department and the National Security Council, writing about politics and global affairs. Since 2018, he has been a US national security reporter at the *Washington Post* covering the State Department and diplomacy. See "John Hudson." *Washington Post.* Retrieved 30 September 2021 from https://www.washingtonpost.com/people/john-hudson/.

23. John Hudson. "Jihadis Create Retro 2-D Shooter Video Game." *Foreign Policy,* 12 March 2013. Retrieved 12 March 2021 from https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/03/12/jihadis-create-retro-2-d-shooter-video-game/.

24. Michael Peck is a US writer and journalist presenting himself as specialized in defense and national security issues with an interest in wargaming. See Michael Peck. "About." *Michael Peck: Writer and Journalist.* Retrieved 12 March 2021 from https://mipeck.com/about/.

25. Michael Peck, "Al Qaeda's Goofy Video Game Provokes Laughter, Not Terror." *Forbes*, 13 March 2013. Retrieved 12 March 2021 from https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelpeck/2013/03/13/al-qaedas-goofy-new-video-game-provokes-laughter-instead-of-terror/?sh=c7841332734f.

26. However, contradictorily, this last point was an argument put forward by scholars to explain the jihadists' rapid progression and their seizure of northern Mali in 2012 (see section on The Beginning of the Offline War in Mali).

27. Evan Narcisse. "Islamic Extremists Made This Video Game." *Kotaku*, 13 March 2013. Retrieved 12 March 2021 from https://kotaku.com/islamic-extremists-made-this-video-game-5990392.

28. "About G/O Media." Retrieved 11 September 2022 from https://g-omedia.com/.

29. See, for instance, several blog posts written by Evan Narcisse on the theme of Blackness in the video games industry and published on the *Kotaku* website: "Video Games' Blackness Problem." *Kotaku*, 19 February 2015. Retrieved 15 January 2023 from https://kotaku.com/video-games-blackness-problem-1686694082; "Come On, Video Games, Let's See Some Black People I'm Not Embarrassed By." *Kotaku*, 29 March 2012. Retrieved 15 January 2023 from https://kotaku

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32. The Su-47, or Sukhoi-47, was an experimental Russian-made fighter aircraft with forward-swept wings. It never entered general production. The French fighter jets depicted in *Muslim Mali* resemble it somewhat, just as the Al-Qaeda jet in the game resembles the US Nighthawk stealth bomber.

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