

The Implementation of the Richness and the Subtleties of Islamic Principles in Video Games

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Abstract

How would one go about creating a video game using the narrative of religion to make a personal, spiritual experience for the player? As someone who is a devout believer in Islam and an avid video game player, I would like to experience a game that could resonate with me personally and spiritually. However, current games that incorporate Islam are not focused on the personal experience of a Muslim. I want to highlight why this is important using myself as a subjective viewpoint for a personal and spiritual experience. As both Islam and video games are expansive in scope, I aim to use research by design to create a Resonant Game to learn how to narrow down my options. I do this by choosing which of the richness and intricacies of Islamic principles to portray a subtle narrative and gameplay. This project aims to reach two specific goals: 1) To further the understanding of these rich but nuanced Islamic principles through game development and 2) To learn about the medium of video games as an experience that can be used to portray a personal and spiritual experience for the player. By looking into other religious video games as well as current portrayals of Islam in the video game medium, this project aims to achieve all these goals by creating two versions of the video game “*Salaam in the Afterlife*”, using the platforms Twine and Unity 2D to create a video game that implements the richness and the subtleties of certain Islamic principles for a personal, spiritual experience. Hopefully, through this project, I am unlocking new insights into game development; this method of research can be used by others to pursue a similar journey of incorporating Islamic and/or religious principles into delivering a specific experience through video games.

Keywords: Digital Game Studies, Islam, Islamic Principles, Research by Design, Resonant Game, Video Games, Video Game Design

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1. Introduction

One night during the holy month of Ramadhan, I had just returned home from praying my night prayers in the local mosque. Congregational prayers have maximized rewards for a Muslim, especially in Ramadhan, so I tried my best to go to the mosque almost every night after I break my fast. After I returned home, I boot up my computer to do my favorite pastime – playing video games. After all, my day’s responsibilities were over, so I wanted to spend the rest of the night relaxing.

I boot up the game *Bioshock: Infinite* (Irrational Games, 2013) for the first time. The story starts with a man ascending a lighthouse, and occasionally, you see words framed on the wall that is very obviously a Christian allegory (“Of Thy Sins, Shall I Wash Thee”). After a few puzzles, you ascend to the skies in a bathysphere, where you’re greeted with a stunning view of a city in the sky, reminiscent of Heaven itself. You land in a room filled with candlelight, pews, and water up to your ankles, and people around you are surrounded in white prayer robes. You quickly realize that to gain passage into this beautiful city, you must be baptized; the priest promptly submerges you in water before the screen fades to black and you reemerge with a view of the blue skies and a park filled with flowers, right outside the church of the city in the sky.

While this sudden, very evangelical Christian experience comes as a jarring contrast to me considering I just finished praying in a mosque, the game does a good job of easing the player into the religious narrative. Since *Bioshock: Infinite* is a first-person shooter genre, the player never sees the character they are controlling, aside from vague reflections on the window and water. This first-person view allowed me to fully be immersed in the baptism, underwater and all. As a Muslim, I didn’t feel like this experience violated my beliefs – on the contrary, the game’s opening minutes made quite a religious impression on me, and I fully understood the Christian allegories despite the lack of obvious acknowledgments in-game towards it; “show, don’t tell”. At the same time, I was still very aware of my faith as a Muslim, knowing that this is a game, it is not real, and I am merely a spectator to the story with the best seat in the house.

This then got me thinking: if a video game can elicit that kind of emotion within someone who isn’t Christian, who says the same cannot be done for Islam? At the time of this writing, I have yet to encounter a video game with Islamic religious themes that compels the story forward like *BioShock: Infinite* did in its opening minutes of the game. Then I got curious: why don’t I try to do it myself? As an avid video game player with a deeply held belief in Islam since birth, and

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with previous game coding knowledge, I would love to see my faith represented in a video game. Now, the question is, how would I go about it? What kind of narrative do I want to tell? What principles of Islam would I use to achieve this? Do I know enough of these principles to even begin telling a story based on them? What type of video game genre and gameplay would achieve the effect that I want to elicit in this medium? Has a similar game been done for other religions? If this kind of game has already been done for Islam, what kinds of stories did these games show, and are they compelling for the narrative I am looking for? And, more importantly, if existing video games with Islamic narratives aren't compelling enough for me, how can I create a video game that will? These questions lay the groundwork for my motivations behind this project.

This project focuses on the method of research by design, where I will try to answer the myriad of questions above condensed to two specific goals: 1) To further the understanding of these rich but nuanced Islamic principles through game development, and 2) To learn about the medium of video games to portray a personal and spiritual experience for the player by using these principles. This way, as I am doing research by design, I am learning about my religion by proxy of learning how to make such a video game. By doing such research, others can use this method to pursue a similar journey of incorporating Islamic and/or religious principles into delivering a specific experience through video games.

First, I'd like to elaborate on the reason why I chose the medium of video games and not other forms of media like books or movies. Aside from games being a hobby of mine, I also believe that the interactive experience of a game allows the medium to do a "show, don't tell" approach where uniquely, the player seemingly has the agency to experience the story on their terms rather than being told the story, like in books or movies. That way, when a religion like Islam is thrown into the narrative, the player can experience it rather than reading out facts or dos and don'ts. Also, there are plenty of books and movies that I have encountered that use Islam as part of their narrative, for better or worse; I have yet to encounter one significant enough in video games.

As the realm of both video games and Islam are extremely large in scope, to narrow it down, I will start by looking into other religions and how they use the medium of video games to convey their narrative. I will then look at existing video games that use Islam as either the narrative, part of their gameplay mechanic, or aesthetics. Once that is established, then I will

decide on certain Islamic principles that I learned growing up. I have chosen these specific Islamic principles to showcase how rich and intricate they are due to the myriad of meanings that are dependent on culture, interpretation, and faith; but also subtle in the fact that they are a constant part of a Muslim's daily life and core to the Muslim experience. Ideally, by researching these steps and making a video game, I can achieve my goals for this project and lay down a framework for others to do the same.

2. Video Games and Religion

2.1 Intersection of Religion and Video Games

There are different ways that religion can be inserted within the narrative of video games, and in Jason Anthony's "Dreidels to *Dante's Inferno*: Toward a Typology of Religious Games" (2014), he has helpfully defined some of the characteristic types of games using religion as inspiration for either the narrative or as a game mechanic. I will outline some interesting ones for my project.

The term "Didactic games" are games that teach the player through the medium of games. In the lens of religion, Anthony defines it as "games that instruct players about a religious doctrine or history... because they are an easy avenue for communicating with children and... because they inherently teach about larger societal rules and norms" (Anthony, 2014, pp. 29-30). While this is a great way to teach religion through a more 'modern' and popular medium such as video games, it also risks alienating the general audience with the 'on-the-nose' delivery within the narrative. These types of games tend to be for those who are either already familiar with the religion or are meant to teach those who are already interested. For those who are neither, these games are generally not played for fun. As Anthony elaborates, "Didactic religious games are also often distinguished by their limited ritual role. They generally focus on passing along rules and concepts, rather than offering a sacred experience" (p. 30). I'd like to define "sacred experience" here as a fun, engaging experience that most successful games often provide for their players. Of course, there may and can be exceptions, as I will try to argue below.

Another term is "Allomythic games", which means that the game offers a way to experience new religions, often mythical but derived from many real-life religions, within a gaming experience. As Anthony describes it, "... might also include games that borrow a religious cosmology from history, but that cannot be said to portray it in any faithful or didactic

way.” He also says, “Perhaps they can be said to explore the “divine as metaphor” – engaging religious ideas from entirely outside any existing traditions through new stories, characters, and symbols” (Anthony, 2014, p. 40). An example he gave was the *Mass Effect* series (BioWare, 2007), where the main character is an archetype of Jesus Christ, and where the setting includes galaxy-spanning civilizations with different peoples, cultures, and, indeed, fictional religions – which derives itself from many real-life examples. Here, I find the parallels interesting; while the hotpot of religious inspirations lends itself to a gripping narrative, the clear archetypes mean that the average player can make the connections if they are deep enough into the lore, which adds another layer to the engaging narrative.

Aside from that, I’d like to focus on the “Theoptic games”, where the player is, instead, playing the “role of an all-seeing power” (Anthony, 2014, p. 42) that controls the game, be it narrative or gameplay. If the player assumes the role of an almighty god, what then are the implications of this for the religion it is representing? Having the “divine as avatar” (p. 43) within video games, as Anthony describes it, does offer an interesting perspective on how religious narratives can be represented within such video games, but it does risk a level of blasphemy, as I will discuss below. While this is not always the case if it is represented in gameplay (Anthony mentions Real-Time Strategy games as an example), it needs to be approached carefully if done narratively.

Lastly, we also have what Anthony has defined as “Praxic games”; this is “an outright engagement with the sacred, win or lose” (p. 32). What this means is that playing the game itself counts as a part of the religion, much like what the act of praying is – or, at the very least, playing the game feels like a religiously sacred experience. While Anthony provides examples of *Sumo* and *Go* for this category of games, notably he also mentions the game *Okami* (Clover Studio, 2006) with the Shinto religion myth as a good example of a Praxic game. *Okami* is a particularly good example since all its narrative and every aspect of gameplay relates to the Shinto religious theme of harmony; “This kind of meditation on balance and nature plays into traditional Shinto worship, and it is a jarring departure from the button mashing typical of the genre” (Anthony, 2014, p. 38). I feel like there needs to be a delicate balance in a game with blatant sacred imagery and principles to strike that sweet spot of a good representation of religious narrative in video games that is enjoyable to play by the average gamer.

Overall, these definitions of religious themes in video games are what I would like to focus on in my project moving forward. They will help situate my project in a way that explains the reasoning as to why these kinds of narratives are important and worth developing further. I will start with notable examples of video games with religious representations, which type of game I believe them to be from the definitions above, and what challenges they face due to this. Then, I will argue that this can be delved into deeper with Islam and some of its principles. Hopefully, this will show the kinds of Islamic principles that can be experienced within a video game, and what kinds of pitfalls I can avoid making when dealing with this kind of narrative. This will also help unlock new insights into game development regarding incorporating similar elements of religious themes into delivering a specific experience through video games.

2.1.1 Notable Video Games with Representations of Various Religions

To preface, I'd like to iterate that due to the sensitive nature of the topic, it is natural to find concerns among the critics and players of these religiously themed video games. As mentioned by Xenia Zeiler in "The Global Mediatization of Hinduism through Digital Games" (2014) through which paper we will discuss the video game with ties to Hinduism below, "Religious narratives, concepts, or symbols in video games are regularly contested... such public debates often carry complex subtext of implicit negotiations, ... around religious authority, identity, or community" (p. 81). It highlights the impact of video games as a sociocultural phenomenon where cultural encountering takes place among its players and observers, as mentioned by Šisler (2014, p. 110). But then – how does the narrative impact representational politics, especially concerning the developers, and their subjective religious and sociocultural backgrounds? Understanding this is crucial to how I can proceed with my project.

In this section, I have decided to separate these types of religious games according to the major representations of religion I could find within video games and sorted them accordingly. I also specifically chose these religions due to that most of these religions are the most practiced religions around the world (Deshmukh, Eason, Schell, & Kostandi, 2022), aside from Islam. Each of these video games below applies to at least one of the definitions that we have discussed above, though each religion is not explicitly tied to the type of game; it just so happened that the game and the type matched with these corresponding religions. I will also highlight the concerns, discussions, and controversies of these religiously themed video games. In doing so, I also hope to highlight what makes them work within the narrative and/or gameplay, and how this can help

me do the same within my project of using Islamic principles in video game narratives and give further insights into my research's contribution to game development.

Judaism and Didactic Games.

In “Locating the Pixelated Jew” by Isamar Carrillo Masso and Nathan Abrams (2014), they discuss the image of the Jewish identity in popular media formats. In this case, they focus on the video game *The Shivah* (Gilbert, 2006), where a Rabbi, who is a Jewish scholar and teacher, gets entangled in a murder mystery and uses the tenets of Judaism to solve it – specifically, by questioning. To paraphrase the creator of the game, David Gilbert, “Unlike other games, which rely on violence to solve problems, “questioning is the rabbi’s power”” (Carrillo Masso & Abrams, 2014, p. 48), which is concerning the Talmudic style where a Rabbi always answers a question with another question. Even the name of the game is referring to the seven-day mourning period in Judaism after someone dies, which is an apt name for a murder mystery game. Masso and Abrams argue that *The Shivah* “explores Jewish faith through gameplay, as well as a Jewish identity that is not based on Othering stereotypes” (p. 48). “Othering,” in this case, means projecting certain qualities/features/behaviors on a group of people based on their religious sociocultural backgrounds. They do this by unpacking not only the specific religious aspects of Judaism but also the Jewish identity. *The Shivah* does this in many ways; the main character, Rabbi Russell Stone, is a devout believer but the declining attendance in his synagogue embitters him and shows him struggling with his faith. This especially shows when he deals with another, less rigid Rabbi at a richer synagogue, as he ponders about the differences between them while simultaneously showing the different denominational affiliations of the Jewish faith. As the player plays through the game and discovers the backstory and motivations of Russell Stone and his connection to the murdered man, Jack Lauder, they can also recognize that the gameplay format of *The Shivah* is a fitting one for this noir-like, detective story; the 2D point-and-click gameplay allows the player to empathize with Stone, but not become him. He is his character and not only made up of the choices the player makes for him. There is a distinct difference. This allows us more insight into him not only as a rabbi of the Jewish faith, but also as a Jewish man’s ethnicity, upbringing, and culture. As Masso and Abrams highlight, “In this way, *The Shivah* ponders issues of how to portray faith through gameplay itself, as well as “the nature of ethics in the post-religious age”” (p. 57). I argue that this game is classified as a Didactic game precisely for this reason. Every aspect of the game, from the story, characters,

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and gameplay, is meant to teach contemporary players (Jewish or not) about the faith and the culture and every kind of denominational affiliations in between.

Why is this important in terms of portrayals of religions in video games? Masso and Abrams make a point that they are exploring this game through the lens of the representation of Jewish and Judaism both as an ethnicity and as a religion, respectively. They say that "... in general, representations of race and ethnicity in video games are relatively unexplored and thus undertheorized. Furthermore, given the volume of research dedicated to analyzing the Jewish contribution to American visual culture, ... it is surprising to note that comparatively little work has been done on Judaism as a distinctive set of religious practices, behaviors, beliefs, and values" (p. 47). This is important because religion is not always portrayed in a single block of representation; multiple different kinds of cultures practice the same religion, and thus, there are bound to be cultural differences. The key is acknowledging those differences and allowing those representations to thrive. In this way, they believe that *The Shivah* has done its job; "In the final analysis *The Shivah* leaves us with a form of Judaism that has been normalized rather than subjected to complete hagiography, on the one hand, or demonization, on the other" (p. 61). I argue that for this reason, *The Shivah* can be classified as a successful Didactic game that focuses on its myriad of representations of the Jewish identity and religion, thus providing the player with sufficient understanding of the nuances and intricacies in the practice and application of the same religion across/along different cultures. Only a Didactic-type of religious game would be able to portray this deliberately, and hence equipping the player with this experience provides a good example for my research project.

Christianity and Allomythic Games.

In this section, the game I will discuss has the motif of Christianity or archetypes of it. I have specifically chosen this game due to the critique and discourse that it invites depending on how these archetypes of Christianity are depicted in the game. I'd like to preface this with the caveat that these depictions and interpretations of them are by no means the only way Allomythic games are intended to be, but the thematic elements and the discussions surrounding it are, I believe, a good starting point in delving further into my research project and how Allomythic games can be used in this way.

In "Critique with Limits – The Construction of American Religion in *BioShock: Infinite*" by Jan Wysocki (2018), he argues that while the Christian archetypes are seemingly obvious

through the story and gameplay, there is a line that was not crossed to make these archetypes explicit. The video game mentioned in my introduction, *BioShock: Infinite* (Irrational Games, 2013) is a first-person shooter following a man named Booker DeWitt, who travels to a floating city in search of a girl named Elizabeth to clear his debts. The floating city he arrives in is called Columbia, which is rife with evangelical Christianity without using explicit symbolism from the religion itself, like Jesus Christ, the Bible, and the cross. Instead, evangelism has its roots in American history, where the founding fathers of the United States of America are revered as saints. The reason for this is simple; Columbia prides itself on being a utopia, but only for its all-white upper/middle class – their exploited lower class consists of Asians, Irish, and black working population. “This apartheid state rests on religious commandments, focusing on the will of a prophet as well as to the exceptional role of the United States” (Wysocki, 2018, p. 67). By doing this, the game developers can critique certain religious movements and make a social commentary on racism and exploitation because of dystopian rule without alienating a huge potential audience for their product. In this way, *BioShock: Infinite* does an interesting take on the Allomythic game genre.

How does *BioShock: Infinite* do this? For starters, Wysocki notes that “*Infinite*’s game work is built upon aesthetics which can be associated with specific, identifiable symbols of American Christianity” (p. 68), which, as he notes, includes a cult leader that is revered as a prophet called Father Zachary Hale Comstock (who also serves as the game’s main villain). Up until the end of the game, the player encounters Comstock not in person, but in how people in Columbia describe him as their savior, leader, and salvation. There are often statues, pictures, and altars dedicated to Comstock that evoke the prophet Moses as he is shown in the movie *The Ten Commandments* (Wysocki, 2018, p. 69), and many kneel in his image. Comstock also maintains this cult power through claims of prophetic visions; the most important one being the apocalypse that will destroy “the lands below the flying city” (Wysocki, 2018, p. 71). Both are, as Wysocki notes, evocative of cult leaders claiming their legitimacy through divine revelation, as well as the idea of Judgement Day in many religions, including Christianity. “The intersecting elements of angelic visions, prophetism, and Comstock as a charismatic leader emphasize to the player that she, as well as her avatar Booker, are faced with a non-conventional religious movement, one that is quickly framed as a non-conventional cult with many identifiable Christian elements” (p. 71). This Allomythic game thus is categorized as such due to borrowing

archetypes from evangelical Christianity but not being explicit about it, and instead takes American cults to its extreme, allowing the player to experience the worst-case scenario should such racist ideologies come to pass. The gameplay as a first-person shooter emphasizes this viewpoint and works well with the critique the game is trying to deliver; the gameplay only allows a one-sided view of ‘the enemy you need to shoot’ versus ‘the avatar you play as that cannot be seen’.

Hinduism and Theoptic Games.

As defined earlier, Theoptic games are a sub-category of a genre of religious games wherein the player plays the role of an “all-seeing power”; essentially, as the Top God and deity Himself. I raised the question that if the player assumes the role of an almighty god, what then are the implications of this for the religion it is representing? Is it blasphemous, sacrilege? This is the discussion that surrounded the video game *Hanuman, Boy Warrior* (Aurora Technologies, 2009) as highlighted by Xenia Zeiler in “The Global Mediatization of Hinduism through Digital Games” (2014). In the action-adventure game *Hanuman: Boy Warrior*, the player plays as the god Hanuman as he tries to free the sun god and kills as many demons as possible. The narrative closely follows Hindu mythology, and more specifically, the *Ramayana* epic in which Hanuman first gained significance in the religion in the second century BCE. There is a clear target audience for the game here, which is India’s Hindu religious youth. As the game was developed in India, this made sense; however, it was distributed by Sony Entertainment, which is a game industry giant. As the story of *Hanuman: Boy Warrior* spread on the PlayStation 2, more attention was garnered towards it, and, of course, the negative reception that followed, which mostly concerned itself with the portrayal of one of Hinduism’s most important deities.

However, Zeiler notes that this isn’t the first time that Hanuman has been portrayed in modern media. The deity is popular due to his mythology being full of adventure stories, alongside his likable characteristics. “Hanuman’s true-to-life depiction in the texts and his attributed warm but powerful character are probably the main reasons for the deity’s extraordinary popularity. His manifold mythological adventures have been firmly incorporated into Hindu religions and culture for about two thousand years and they are extensively retold in texts as well as restaged beyond texts, for instance in theatrical performances” (Zeiler, 2014, p. 72). This, of course, includes media such as film, TV, and comics. Why, then, when Hanuman’s story is depicted in a third-person action-adventure game, the controversy soon followed? This is

most likely due to the medium. In TV, films, and comics, you are simply watching or reading a tale of Lord Hanuman, but in a video game, you are playing *as him*; the interactivity of the medium ignites the debate of whether this is acceptable to play as a revered deity. Zeiler notes that “*Hanuman: Boy Warrior* was massively attacked by several Hindu groups and organizations, mainly based in the United States and Australia, demanding the withdrawal of the game. The debate ... accused the game of trivializing the Hindu deity Hanuman. ... The spokesman for the Universal Society of Hinduism, Rajan Zed, argued that players would control the destiny of Hanuman in the game while in reality, believers put their destinies in the deity’s hands” (p. 74). To be able to control and manipulate a deity is the focus of the debate here, which is only possible through the medium of video games. The simulation aspect that video games allow changes tack when a religious figure or deity is involved. Zeiler puts an interesting conclusion to this whole debate in her paper; she notes that “the potential of digital games is not to tell a story, but to create an environment for experimentation” (p. 76). This posed a threat to Hindu organizations, and specifically the diaspora, as there was barely a precedent for such a game in Hinduism. (Local Hindu Indians seemed to have embraced the game warmly, as far as Zeiler is concerned.) Since the diaspora is concerned with its identity most of all, being a minority in their state, this backlash is expected. However, given the pervasiveness of game development technologies allowing more indie game and/or individual developers to create these environments for experimentation (Beck, 2019), the more these experimental game projects will emerge on Theoptic games. This will naturally lead to more debate and theoretical critique of this type of religious game.

Other Notable Religions and Praxic Games.

Before, I mentioned that Praxic games serve as an “engagement with the divine”; meaning that playing the game itself is akin to a religious experience. What, then, makes this so? I previously highlighted *Okami* as an example of a Praxic game since all its elements – story and gameplay – stay true to Shinto mythology ideals. Here, I’d like to highlight a genre that works well with Praxic games and how it allows the player to go through a religious experience. I am talking about the horror genre, and more specifically, transcendental horror, as Brenda S. Gardenour Walter noted in “*Silent Hill and Fatal Frame: Finding Transcendent Horror in and Beyond the Haunted Magic Circle*” (2014).

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Horror is a genre well-defined in many modern media, but I believe it has a special place when put into a video game done well. Walter chose to focus on the two games *Silent Hill* (Team Silent, 1999) and *Fatal Frame* (Tecmo, 2001) for her point of ‘transcendental horror’, and this is because of the way the horror aspect is played within these games; both have the player play a protagonist that goes through a horrific site of religious cult rituals that did not end well for those who traveled here before them. The player, and thus the protagonist thrust into the middle of this cult horror story, begins to unpack the story of the bloody and terrifying rituals that they find themselves in. And a lot of this is rooted in religious zeal, including the imagery and the artifacts involved.

In Sean T. Collins’ article in *The Outline*, he defined Transcendental Horror as “stories that climax with the protagonist entering a state of ecstatic enlightened union with the source of the horror they’ve experienced” (Collins, 2020). This seems to be in line with what the protagonist goes through in *Silent Hill* and *Fatal Frame*. To briefly summarize, in *Silent Hill*, the titular town is home to a cult that sacrifices children, believing that the pain will bring God to Earth in a perfect vessel. The town is constantly shrouded by a supernatural fog and is devoid of any humans, and the protagonist is forced to go through the town to find his lost daughter. In *Fatal Frame*, the protagonist searches to find her lost brother in a haunted mansion filled with vengeful ghosts and remnants of deadly rituals only armed with a camera to light her way and fight. Eventually, she finds that she must close the Hellgate beneath the mansion – a result of the cult’s mistake in the ritual sacrifice – to let these ghosts move on to the afterlife. By the end of these games, the protagonists – and by extension, the player – is left with a sense of deep loss accompanied by a haunted sense of liberation, as they do, to varying degrees, achieve the goal they set out to do in the beginning, but the knowledge of what they had to do and what horrors they’ve seen follows them even after the events of the game.

This narrative structure of transcendental horror in video games proves incredibly popular, as both games are followed by several sequels, which revisit the characters from the first games in some capacity. However, markedly, *Silent Hill* draws its inspirations from Western religion “embedded in a strict pseudo-Christian hierarchical model”, whilst *Fatal Frame* derives from Eastern religions “constructed from signifiers drawn primarily from Japanese Shintoism and Buddhism” (Gardenour Walter, 2014, p. 89). Walter makes an interesting comparison between the two; despite both being created by Japanese developers, the inspirations for the

transcendental horror and the impact it had on both Eastern and Western audiences prove to be a success, albeit for different reasons. For the Eastern audience, *Silent Hill* represents fundamentalist Christianity that says, “only one path to truth beyond which lies heresy and damnation”, which is foreign and antithetical to Japanese religious culture (p. 91). It forces the Eastern audience to be the “dreaded Christian Other” which echoes the history of Japan during American occupation. In *Fatal Frame*, the Eastern audience explores Japan’s alienated religious past, which demands the performance of violent and forgotten rituals (p. 91). For the Western audience, the reception is somewhat reversed; *Silent Hill* reveals the horrors of the self and the Western obsession with hierarchy and orthodoxy, while *Fatal Frame* fuels a fascination with the exotic and the non-Christian Other and a fear of foreign supernatural beings (p. 91).

These examples show that Praxic games can be narratively successful and explore a potential development in this category of religious games. At the same time, I believe it should be noted that it might be due to the genre of horror that this kind of Praxic game works, as well as the religions being represented. This assumption still needs to be explored in other genres and religions of video games, but as with the case of *Okami*, there is a precedent that invites promising development.

2.1.2 Key Findings of Religion and Video Games

So far, I have examined the different categories of religious video games as defined by Jason Anthony (Anthony, 2014) and provided examples of the ones I found relevant to my project at hand, which happened to coincide with the world’s major religions. Now, I will highlight the key findings from each type of game and the religious concerns that come with it.

First, I examined Didactic games and explored *The Shivah* as an example of a game that focuses on passing along rules and concepts rather than offering a sacred experience, in this case, Judaism. The game tries, with varying degrees of success, to show Judaism not only as a faith but as a culture with every kind of denominational affiliation in between, and they try to do this with a Didactic-type of game to portray this representation of Judaism faithfully using a character, the Rabbi, with his agency and values that we then get to play as.

Secondly, I examined Allomythic games, and how it borrows real-life religions and traditions to create new stories, characters, and symbols within a video game narrative and/or gameplay. Within the game *BioShock: Infinite*, this category of religious video games is instead being used to criticize different aspects of Christianity represented within these games. Many

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Christian motifs are used, but any explicit religious characters and symbols are not mentioned, possibly due to the risk of alienating a huge audience, but the social commentary is clear. The use of Allomythic elements to create a strong and impactful social commentary allows for an almost visceral yet indirect examination of some of the more negative aspects of Christianity and American cult ideologies by having the players directly experience fresh narratives, devoid of any direct religious bias.

Thirdly, I examined Theoptic games, where the player plays as an “all-seeing power” or the equivalent of a God from a religion, using the “divine as avatar”, using *Hanuman: Boy Warrior* as an example representing Hinduism. While the story of Hanuman is often told in other media, the medium of video games brings the discourse about whether it is permissible to control and manipulate a sacred deity, since in religion, believers should put their destinies in the deity’s hands rather than the other way around. The gameplay here is what brings this Theoptic game under fire, which brings an interesting consideration/finding for religious video games.

Lastly, I examined Praxic games, where playing the game itself feels like a religiously sacred experience. Here, I focus on a specific genre that reflects this category, transcendental horror within *Silent Hill* and *Fatal Frame*. Transcendental horror means that the protagonist enters a state of ecstatic enlightened union with the source of the horror they’ve experienced, akin to a religious awakening. The genre and its religious inspirations impact the Western and Eastern audiences differently, and yet the same; the fear of the foreign religious Other for the Western audiences, and the obsession of (in this case, deadly) religious rituals for the Eastern audiences. We can also deduce that these experiences are further augmented because the genre of transcendental horror operates on a paradox of compassion and fear vis-à-vis the supernatural and/or divine, a core theme of almost all religions.

Overall, seeing these examples lending itself to interesting narratives for each category of religious games allows me to explore how they can be used within Islam and what considerations and concerns could pop up when Islamic principles are applied within the development of Islamic video games and their narratives. However, I would like to look at current examples of Islam in religious video games and how it is portrayed and represented to fully have an idea before finalizing the genre of my project.

2.2 Intersection of Islam and Video Games

In this section, I'd like to highlight some discussions and comparisons of Islam and video games, as Vít Šisler mentions in "Representations of Islam in Arab and American Video Games" (2014). He discusses how modern media constructs viral representations of Islam and Muslims, how this is communicated to its audience, and how effective is the communication of Islamic moral and ethical values (p. 110). To address the elephant in the room, the dominant mode of Muslim representation within modern Western media has the majority painting them negatively (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017). This is unfair, a gross overgeneralization, and marginalizes the representation of "ordinary Muslims" (Šisler, 2014, p. 111). Due to this, many Muslims feel the need to assert their identities, justify their religion, and educate others about what Islam is. One way to do this in the general consciousness is to use modern digital technologies such as films, TV, and of course video games. I'd like to mention here that while this could be a great reason why I am undertaking my project, it is not the primary reason; thankfully, this Islamophobic representation that has permeated the media has been highly criticized and many clamor to rectify that, Muslim or no. Some examples that Šisler highlights show some attempts at doing so, and my project will try its best to go in a positive representation of Islam in video game narratives. Below, I will discuss some such examples.

2.2.1 Notable Video Games with Islamic Representations

As written in the title of the article (Šisler, 2014), a lot of these games that represent Islam and/or Muslims will be American-developed video games and a comparison will be made with Arab-developed video games. Šisler makes an interesting angle for comparison, where he compares them by highlighting some of the layers which make up a video game – the audiovisual layer, the narrative layer, and the procedural layer. Just like other mediums, video games span many different genres, some of which are very specific to video games. Naturally, these genres vary in nature, and they usually do so by emphasizing one or more layers that make up a video game. In each layer, he gives an example of a video game genre that supposedly fits each design layer to highlight that certain genres fit a design layer better than other genres. The relationship between these layers and the genres they fall into will help formulate a more cohesive theoretical framework for understanding how the incorporation of Islam into these games can create certain experiences and/or perceptions within the players. However, depending on the design layer and its implementation in each genre, the narrative element of Islam is either

at the forefront or just an afterthought; the genres and the layers they emphasize can create certain limitations or shortcomings that may have a negative effect rather than a positive one, as I will explore below.

The audiovisual layer means the visuals and the sounds of the game. Šisler uses the first-person shooter genre for this due to the “gritty reality” that encompasses the genre; the First-Person Shooter (henceforth FPS) genre tends to emphasize visual realism to make them believable (p. 114). However, he also notes that because of the genre and the nature of its gameplay, it will always be an “us versus them” scenario within these games that obscures the realities, contexts, and consequences of war (p. 117). He highlights two games to make this point; one is *Kuma\War* (Kuma Reality Games, 2004), where the game allows players to “replay” missions from the US’s campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan (p. 109), and the other is *Special Force 2* (W3DTEK, 2007), where the game shows the player a retelling of the war between the Israel Defense Forces and Hezbollah (p. 117). While both seemingly have similar premises, the way Islam is depicted as a religion differs between the two games. *Kuma\War* presents Islam as a threat, and Muslims as the religious fanatical enemies. *Special Force 2*, however, portrays Islam and Muslims as the hero and the “legitimate defense of rights” (p. 119). Despite this, both “offer radicalized representations of enemies and schematize complex, real-world events into a bipolar frame” (p. 128). As mentioned earlier, due to the limitation of the FPS genre’s gameplay of “us versus them”, the representation of Islam within these games was simplified and rigid. There’s no other viewpoint except the faceless player that kills with a gun, which doesn’t allow for any other narrative exploration that can instill meaningful experiences.

The narrative layer is self-explanatory – this means the story is at the forefront of the game, allowing the player the possibility to experience it in its entirety. Šisler highlights the real-time strategy (henceforth RTS) genre for this layer due to the genre’s ability to have elaborate and complex storylines through cutscenes and in-game scripts (p. 120). He compared the two games *Age of Empires 2* (Forgotten Empires, 2019) and *Quraish* (Afkar Media Ltd., 2005). In *Age of Empires 2*, there is a “Saladin Campaign” that depicts the Crusader knight protagonist imprisoned by the Saracen army, giving him a chance to “encounter” Islam and takes a liking to the Saracen culture and becomes friends with Saladin himself – only for it to all flip upon its head once the violence of the war increases (p. 121). In *Quraish*, the protagonist is a pagan Bedouin Arab who encounters Islam as it was still in its infancy; in the end, he and his tribe fully

embrace Islam (p. 122). Like the games compared in the audiovisual layer, these two RTS games in the narrative layer are opposite of each other in terms of representations of Islam. But, unlike the audiovisual layer, the genre of RTS here allows more ways for the game to present the story of Islam to the player. The application and implications of using various strategies and gameplay techniques can advance or even switch the narrative completely. There is also side content that is based on travelogues and prophetic literature that the player can access during gameplay, and on which the stories of the games are based (p. 123). The multifaceted ways the RTS genre expands on the story allows the narrative of Islam to thrive within this layer and therefore is a promising exemplary start for my project.

The procedural layer is how the game incorporates religion into its mechanics and game rules. Šisler uses the turn-based strategy (henceforth TBS) genre for this layer and uses the examples of Sid Meier's *Civilization IV* (Firaxis Games, 2005) and *Arabian Lords* (BreakAway Games, 2006). In *Civilization IV*, the player roleplays various civilizations as it establishes trade, diplomacy, and military campaigns with other civilizations throughout virtual history, and this fourth installment of the series uses seven religions, including Islam, equally represented as part of its gameplay mechanic where players try to exert a sort of religious influence on each other's civilizations (p. 124). In *Arabian Lords*, as it was inspired by the rise of Islam during the 7th to 13th centuries, the player is encouraged to expand the rule of Islam by building and managing resources, as typical of the genre (p. 126). However, while both incorporate the motivation of using certain Islamic values within the mechanics of the gameplay, the representation of the religion stops there, as mentioned by Šisler, "... beyond the system of advantages and bonuses, the developers abstained from a deeper integration of Islam and its ethics and moral values into the gameplay" (p. 128). The application of Islam is limited to small power-ups and status bonuses based on very general historical facts about Islam rather than being firmly grounded in subtle intricacies revolving around the experience of practicing Islam. This reduction of an entire religion and its lived reality into mere status bonuses and mechanics happened because the core focus of the game is not centered around triggering a nuanced experience of Islam, but rather roleplaying as a civilization that would have certain bonuses derived from an understanding of Islamic history. Therefore, the genre itself doesn't allow the developers to use the strength of the video game medium well in terms of portraying a compelling narrative, although it does give

Islam the due respect without risking any controversial takes and cultural sensitivities, which is what the developers intended.

After analyzing all this, on a theoretical level, it seems that a game's genre fundamentally determines the way Islam, or religion in general, is presented in the game (p. 128). This, if thinking about it carefully, makes sense – the structure of a video game's rule systems and story drastically changes between genres and the way a game's design layers are deployed, which alters the perception of the player's experience. (To make an easy example, playing *Solitaire* in a computer game versus an actual physical deck of cards will make the way you experience the game change completely.) Video games, as a relatively new medium of entertainment in terms of sophistication, borrows a lot from their media predecessors. For example, cutscenes are essentially small cinematics that serves as a representation of the audiovisual layer. This means that it also borrows a lot of how certain religions are represented, just carried over into a new medium. However, considering that each genre has the chance to portray both Islam in a positive and negative light (especially considering the developer's bias), then the choice of layers and genres should play a key role when setting out on a process to create, teach, impart, or even address certain Islamic principles and deliver them through the medium of video games. Different layers can highlight different aspects of the Islamic experience, and the limitations and strengths of each genre must be considered and aligned with the intended objective of incorporating Islamic principles into a video game. These are good considerations to make for my project moving forward.

3. Islamic Principles: What Are They?

To be able to somewhat depict an “authentic” view of Islam within my project, I decided that I would like to instill some Islamic principles that I chose which have shaped my life as a Muslim. While the ones that I chose below certainly are not *all* the principles that Islam has to offer (otherwise, this project would be impossible to realize within my lifetime), I chose them because I believed they would be appropriate to remediate through a video game medium while also showing others a window into what Islam is about. Aside from being subtle but rich and intricate, these principles are core to the Muslim everyday experience and crucial in understanding what being a Muslim is like. These principles can also be interpreted and

expressed in different ways because Islam encompasses many eras and cultures, and therefore there are a myriad of ways to express it in video games.

Since the details of these Islamic principles have been established, debated, and discussed throughout the centuries since Islam has been founded, I will try to make a succinct explanation of them while also conveying the subtle intricacies. By doing this, I hope to somehow implant this in my project as a proof of concept – I believe video games would be a great medium since we can experience these principles in a narrative. That way, ideally, I would like to show the subtle, but intricate details of Islam and how that can be used to make compelling narratives and positive representations within video games. This will help with my research's contribution to insights into game development to incorporate Islamic and/or religious principles into delivering a specific experience through video games.

3.1 *Salah*/Prayers

Salah, or prayers as usually directly translated, is one of the five pillars of Islam, and a duty for any practicing, sane Muslim who has reached the legal age of responsibility (Katz, 2013) as an obligation to fulfill. It must be done five times a day, barring any (unintentional) prohibitions of body or mind. While the premise of *salah* seems simple enough, in truth the details and the intricacies of this act of worship are very expansive and beyond the scope of this project and my understanding to truly explain it with justice. But I can highlight the main points of the rituals of *salah* and any accompanying, “minor” principles that encompass the prayer in Islam.

Before initiating the act of *salah*, one must first do a purification rite called *wudu*, a minor ritual ablution where you briefly wash your face, head, hands, and feet. Then, you must cover your *au'rat* (private parts) and face the *qibla* (direction of the Ka'bah in Mecca). You must then state your *niyyah* (intentions) to pray and prostrate before the One God, and then begin your prayer with *Allahu Akbar* (“God is Most Great”) while standing upright. After reciting some *surahs* (chapters) of the Qur'an, you continue the motions and recite more obligatory *dua'a* (supplications) of prayer and eventually close it by invoking *salaam* (peace) to one's left and right sides while seating. The full details of a single *rak'aat* (prostration cycle) during *salah* are highlighted in Marion Holmes Katz's “Prayer in Islamic Thought and Practice” (2013). But, as you can see in the brief description I gave, this is already quite a lot to explain from the single act of worship, but I will try to describe why each step is meaningful to the practicing Muslim.

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Sometimes, people conflate the idea of *salah* with *dua 'a*, and while technically translated both are a form of prayer, in Islam, they are treated somewhat differently. The word *dua 'a* is also called “calling out” to God; as mentioned by Katz, “the word is more specifically used to designate petitionary prayer or supplication” (p. 29), meaning to pray to God for aid and in praise. For the practicing Muslim, the simplest *dua 'a* is done in the mundane parts of daily life, and not only in *salah*; it includes when leaving the house, eating food, or even going to sleep, among other things. In these cases, not only is it a remembrance of God in our daily activities, but it is also a plea to protect us throughout the day from any fates we cannot control. For the more “complex” *dua 'a* that is done during more fraught or perilous circumstances – which can range from praying you do well on your exam, to praying for a blessing when you are in dire financial straits – that can also be done anytime, but there are times throughout the day and year where those *dua 'a* are especially accepted. For example, *dua 'a* during nights after *salah* is usually an auspicious time, as well as making *dua 'a* during the last ten nights of the holy month of Ramadhan, when Muslims are encouraged to fast from dawn to dusk for a month.

For both *salah* and *dua 'a*, there is a concept in Islam called *niyyah*, which is directly translated as intent. When doing all the above, intent is very important, as what your intentions mean when doing all these acts of worship will determine how God accepts your prayers. Are you praying truly because of God, or because a fellow practicing Muslim is observing you, and thus you want to be seen as “pious”? This hypocrisy is common and yet dangerous amongst Muslims, for matters of the human heart are complicated to manage. One slip-up can lead to many problems, but repentance is always possible. This ties into the concept of *riya'* (showing off) where you seek approval from someone other than God (Badawi, 2023). Hence, declaring one's *niyyah* before, during, and after an act of worship (whether quietly or loudly) can be seen as aligning our hearts for the sake of God, and solidifying our intentions. Even if you stray along the way, e.g., if your thoughts stray during *salah*, your *niyyah* declared in the beginning will keep your *salah* valid. As Al-Ghazali (paraphrased by Katz) mentions, “If the person knows what it is he is about to do, by necessity he has the intention of doing it.” (p. 53)

While this all may seem a lot and very exacting and needs effort and commitment, in Islam it is recognized that every single one of these acts is achievable by ordinary people, rather than requiring the special gifts of the spiritually adept (Katz, 2013, p. 44). Hence, it may take months or years for a Muslim to truly get used to the many rules and rituals, but it is doable. In

Islam, it is said that God made everything easy for humans to be Muslim, and that thought is an essential part of the faith to move forward. As I have discussed, *salah* is very subtle and intricate and core to the Muslim experience, hence why I chose this principle for my project.

3.2 *Fiqh*/Jurisprudence; Understanding

Directly translated, *fiqh* is the Arabic word for “understanding”, and in the context of Islam, it means a deep understanding of matters related to religion. This is especially true concerning the words of God and His Messenger, the Prophet Muhammad *salla -llahu ‘alayhi wa-sallam* (“Peace be upon him”, henceforth SAW) (Hamza, 2022). Usually, within the religion, *fiqh* is also Islamic jurisprudence and is often conflated with *shari’ah* (Islamic law). They are not the same, though *fiqh* is often the basis for much of *shari’ah* (Robinson, 2021), especially with matters of the human heart. Both are key components of the ethics in Islam, which is the angle I will explain *fiqh* from for this project and for the sake of simplicity, as this Islamic principle is extremely intricate otherwise.

As Islam is centuries old, and the Qur’an and *hadith* (sayings and customs of the Prophet SAW) are just as old, there is often a discussion of whether the teachings from the time of the Prophet would apply to modern times. The idea and beauty of *fiqh* are that it claims that the Qur’an and *hadith* are valid for all times and places when each *surah* and *ayah* (verses of the chapters) is applicable in different contexts. This, I believe, is what makes Islam and *fiqh* unique – different understandings of a single context have a basis in culture/upbringing/etc. and do not clash with one another, merely interpretations in different situations. Navigating the scale of what is *halal* (permissible) and *haram* (forbidden) and everything in between, while applying *fiqh*, is what I believe Muslims do subconsciously in every era. In “Ethical Landscape: Laws, Norms, and Morality” by Ebrahim Moosa (2014), he addresses five themes where *fiqh* can be applied in daily modern contexts: everyday life, the global, the family, sex and intimacy, and innovation in Muslim ethics (p. 36). For the sake of this project, I will focus on the contexts of everyday life and of the family.

In the context of everyday life, Moosa tells an anecdote of a Muslim woman of Pakistani origin who starts her chores with the Arabic words, “I begin this action with the name of Allah (God)” and cooks a meal while listening to Muslim spiritual music in Urdu. She then reminisces about how she was taught growing up that Islam forbids music, but a story of the Prophet SAW wherein he was welcomed in Medina with the sound of drums allows her to find her resolution in

her religious conscience (p. 37). This simple process of a woman finding solace in her understanding of Islam without contradicting her desires is a small example of *fiqh*, namely, the understanding of revelation (p. 39).

In the family context, Moosa mentions the marriage ruling between a Muslim and a non-Muslim. In *shari'ah* marriage law, Muslim men are allowed to marry spouses of other Abrahamic faiths (Jews and Christians), but Muslim women cannot marry men of other faiths. The reasoning for this rule is stated to be due to patriarchy; the husband may coerce the wife into *shirk* (idolatry/polytheism), or their children are likely to follow the religion of the father (p. 45). In modern times, of course, this raises the question of equality and different contexts regarding marriage; what if the woman is a convert after marriage? What if the two spouses have not objected to each other's faith? If the goal of *shari'ah* is to preserve religion, life, reason, wealth, and paternity (p. 46), then there is no reason to separate husband and wife depending on these contexts. *Fiqh* plays an important role here to maintain peace in married life in contemporary times.

Moosa then concludes with that Muslim ethics is dependent on methods, approaches, temperaments, and contexts; while the pre-modern ethical models have long stood within Islam, as the world changes, the rulings and law must hence accommodate (p. 52). Hence, this is where *fiqh* is inseparable in Islam for the modern *ummah* (community) and a key principle to navigating this increasingly complex and interconnected world; thus, subtle, intricate, and core to the Muslim experience, and why I chose *fiqh* for my project.

3.3 *Fitrah*/Instinct in Faith

Fitrah is defined in Islam as the “instinct of faith”, meaning here that every human being has an innate need to believe in a higher power. In the case of Islam, that would be Allah *subhanahu wa-ta'ala* (“Praised and Exalted”, henceforth SWT), the One and Only God. There are certainly other definitions to it, and as mentioned by Yasien Mohamed in “*Fitrah* and Its Bearing on the Principles of Psychology” (1995), *fitrah* can also be 1) a God-given innate state of inclination to believe in God and to worship Him, and 2) can be translated as “original purity” or “primordial faith” – an ontological state that disposes the individual to the good and lawful (p. 2). According to Mohamed, “*fitrah* relates to the individual's innate reality and has a bearing on one's beliefs, values and attitudes to life, worldview, and interaction with the surrounding environment. As such, *fitrah* cannot be viewed in isolation from one's mind, conduct, and

institutions in the phenomenal world” (p. 2). To help us fully understand the gravity of *fitrah* within Islam, Mohamed looks at it through a psychological lens of Islam and uses seven psychological principles to give weight to the term.

The first psychological principle is the Metaphysical; how the human is placed within the vast universe, their nature, and their destiny. Humanity is given the burden of *amanah* (trust); in Islam, they are honored with the status of vicegerent of God on Earth and given power and dominion over things. However, this is justified on the condition that they remain an obedient servant to Allah SWT and that they do not neglect this condition, lest they exploit the power and privilege of things (p. 3).

The second psychological principle is Epistemological. This is how human comprehends the highest source of knowledge and revelation, and Mohamed says they do this on three levels of human perception: Sensory, Intellectual, and Spiritual (p. 5). Sensory means physical traits like sight, hearing, and smell; Intellectual means mindful traits such as logic, reasoning, and cognition; and Spiritual, heartfelt traits like intuition and inspiration. All three are needed to have complete knowledge of humanity’s reality.

Ethical principle is the third psychological trait, and this is seen as making good values dear to one’s heart, and the bad ones abhorrent to the individual (p. 6). This ethical principle encourages the cultivation of virtue, bringing us closer to our faith. According to Mohamed, humans are naturally predisposed to innate goodness, and *fitrah* cultivates this.

While we are predisposed to goodness, the fourth trait of the Psychological principle of the same name also says that humanity has the potential for *nafs*, meaning “evil as represented by the self” (p. 7), or succumbing to desires. This does not mean removing any bad desires – indeed, being human means having good and bad emotions – but reaching an equilibrium state. Mohamed gives the example of anger and passion. Without equilibrium, both can be an outlet of violence or lust, but with equilibrium, these emotions can be a drive to fight injustice and give compassion (p. 8).

The fifth psychological trait, the Volitional principle, means that humans have the capacity for free will. Humans have the freedom to choose between good and evil (p. 9). However, according to Mohamed, the gift of free will from God should not make one arrogant; by submitting their will to God, they can walk the right path (p. 10).

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The sixth psychological trait deals with the Legal principle, and this deals with the responsibility of the human to live. When a human reaches the age of maturity (around fifteen), they are held accountable for their actions upon living. This means that before the “age of discernment” (Mohamed mentions it as before the age of seven), due to *fitrah*, a human is not held accountable for their actions, though it is the responsibility of their guardians and society to guide them to the right path. As the vicegerent of God on Earth, that responsibility is a spiritual legal matter, until death (pp. 12-13).

The final, seventh psychological trait is the Therapeutic principle; this means that Islam is designed to fulfill the needs of humans, whether that be material, psychological, or spiritual (p. 15). *Fitrah* ensures that humans are fulfilled in not only the body and mind but also in the heart. Once human finds their faith and adheres to their *fitrah*, they are “complete”.

I chose to explain this specific Islamic principle through this psychological lens of viewing *fitrah* to show the ubiquitous nature of the principle and how it touches the various aspects of the human, not just the body and the mind, but also the spirit. Incidentally, as a personal goal, not only does this psychological lens of viewing *fitrah* serve as a learning experience for me, but this can also serve as inspiration for the stories in my game. Since this principle can be interpreted and expressed in many ways regarding the human and is core to the Muslim everyday experience, it can be expressed through video game narratives in a myriad of ways.

3.4 Key Summary of Islamic Principles

To briefly summarize, these Islamic principles I have chosen amongst many reflect much of the teachings of the faith that I grew up with and are subtle but rich and intricate. These principles are also core to the Muslim everyday experience and are crucial to understanding what being a Muslim is like. As they can be interpreted in different ways because Islam encompasses many eras and cultures, therefore there are many possibilities of expressing these principles in a video game narrative.

Salah/prayers, which encompasses *niyyah*/intent and *dua 'a*/supplication, is an intricate act of worship integral to being a Muslim. *Fiqh*/Jurisprudence/Understanding is important to the modern Muslim to interpret their knowledge of the Qur'an and *hadith*/wisdom of the Prophet Muhammad SAW within changing eras and contemporary times. And finally, *fitrah*/instinct in faith is important to balance the needs of the heart alongside the body and mind and guides the

Muslims towards their faith. While I have only explained each Islamic principle briefly and only within certain contexts, I believe this is sufficient to be able to apply these to a video game medium where these principles can be positively experienced through the narrative.

Choosing these principles also aligns with my goals for this project. For Goal 1, where I aim to further the understanding of these Islamic principles, naturally, since these principles are subtle but intricate, there is still a lot to learn about them. This learning can only happen through experience, research, and expressing it in different ways – in this case, by creating a video game. For Goal 2, where I aim to learn about the medium of video games to portray a personal and spiritual experience, these principles that explain the core of the Muslim everyday experience will lend themselves to the video game narrative, and this can emphasize the video game experience. Choosing these specific Islamic principles to achieve my goals will help with my research's contribution to insights into game development to incorporate Islamic and/or religious principles into delivering a specific experience through video games.

4. Research Statement

The end goal and the best possible outcome of my project are to design a small video game using some or all the Islamic principles I have outlined above to bring Islam and its subtle intricacies to the medium. This can be done through the narrative and/or gameplay, showing and having them experience Islam and its beauty in a nuanced way, as I had done growing up. By doing so, I hope to learn more about the richness of these principles, and how to use video games for telling personal, spiritual experiences with a rich narrative. And, hopefully, this research will be used for further insights into this kind of game development; where others can use this to pursue a similar journey of incorporating Islamic and/or religious principles, stories, etc., into delivering a specific, personal, and spiritual experience through video games.

Based on all the categories of religious games that were discussed, I believe that creating a Didactic game with a dash of the Praxic game category would be sufficient to achieve my goal. I believe that the genre of single-player, role-playing, and adventure story games would be a good genre to fully express the subtle intricacies that I intend to portray with the Islamic principles I have highlighted. The affordance that this genre gives me allows me to convey a narrative that a user can experience vicariously through the player character.

I will reflect on my process of building this video game as part of the conclusion for this project. As such, the project falls under the paradigm of research by design, where I will reflect on the successes and difficulties of this method of research once the project is completed. Hopefully, as I learn how to make a narratively rich game that is like a spiritual experience (therefore, a Praxic game), this will also give me more insightful knowledge into Islam compared to how I experienced it growing up (therefore, a Didactic game), and as mentioned, this knowledge can be used for further research into using such religious principles to deliver a specific experience through video games.

5. Methods and Execution

5.1 Research by Designing a Video Game

To reiterate, I am using a concept of research by design to answer the questions for my project. These questions are: 1) How can I further the understanding of these rich but nuanced Islamic principles through game development, as outlined in section 3 of this document, and 2) How can I then use this knowledge to tell personal, spiritual experiences through the medium of video games? To further elaborate on these questions, the goal of my project is not to create a perfect video game, but rather, to reflect on the process and what I learned as I am creating it, given the topics that I have chosen. This is where my definition of research by design comes in. Once I have done the reflection and the research, ideally this can be a basis for others to pursue a similar type of research to incorporate Islamic and/or other religious principles into delivering a specific experience through video games.

From the words of Stefano Gualeni in his paper, “Self-Transformation Through Game Design”, mentions that “(video)game design is a transformative experience that changes the designers in ways that are analogous to the changes that they intend to cause in the players” (2015). This is about how designing something that aims to teach others may also elicit change in the designer, which is in line with what my project’s research by design aims to do. While learning to do so, this can be a template for others attempting similar research to be informed of the issues and choices undertaken in this project. To do this, I’d like to paraphrase Amanda Daltro de Viveiros Pina in her presentation “The Archaeology Awakens: Archaeogaming as a New Learning Tool” (2023) about the idea of a Resonant Game. This kind of game emphasizes the emotional impact and meaningful experiences that games can generate in a player’s daily

life. While the goal that Pina specifies in her presentation is to provide the players with perspective changes that affect them beyond the boundaries of the game world, in the case of my project and my goals, I will use the concept of a Resonant Game combined with Gualeni’s design concept to fuel the focus of my project’s research by design. Hence, I am using my own experiences to create as well as learn how to make such a Resonant Game, using the Islamic principles above, and hopefully give others insight on how to do the same, while dealing with the issues when attempting such a project.

5.2 Narrative, Mechanics, and Aesthetics in Video Games

To start, I’d like to borrow Vít Šisler’s concepts of the audiovisual, narrative, and procedural layers (Šisler, 2014) and apply them to my project for my research by design method. To make the terms more self-explanatory, I will call the audiovisual layer the ‘aesthetics’ of my video game, and I will rename the procedural layer to the ‘mechanics’ of my game. Now that I have three roads to creating my game, I will try to apply the three Islamic principles to each of these layers. That way, I have an avenue to start paving the road to creating my single-player, role-playing, and adventure story game for this project. For a quick visual, I made a chart to explain in Table 1:

Islamic Principles	<i>Salah/Prayers</i>	<i>Fiqh/Jurisprudence; Understanding</i>	<i>Fitrah/Instinct in Faith</i>
Narrative	(Each of these boxes will be filled as we go along.)		
Mechanics			
Aesthetics			

Table 1: A visual chart of how I designed my game using the Islamic principles and game design layers.

As this is a game that relies on a rich story narrative, I also decided to make the game on two platforms: a prototype of the story on Twine, and the full game in Unity 2D. The Twine version is written purely in text format; therefore, all the descriptions of the story, location, and the non-player characters (henceforth NPC) are described in script form. The advantage of using Twine is that I can focus on how the story progresses and can chart out the multiple choices the player can make, therefore giving a semi-linear progression of the story. This allows me to focus on the Narrative layer and a glimpse of the Mechanics layer with the multiple-choice options. (See Figures 1 and 2 for an example of Twine development and gameplay.)

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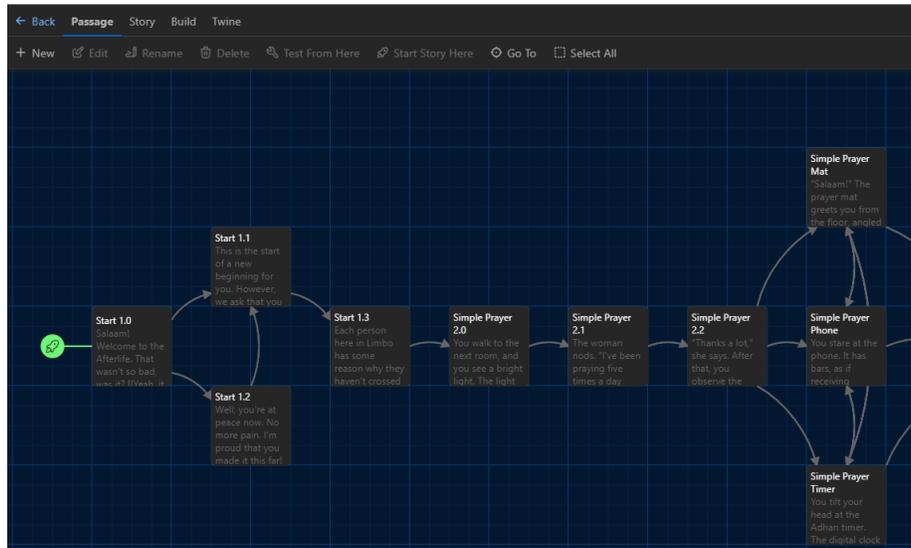


Figure 1: Twine Graph Progression.

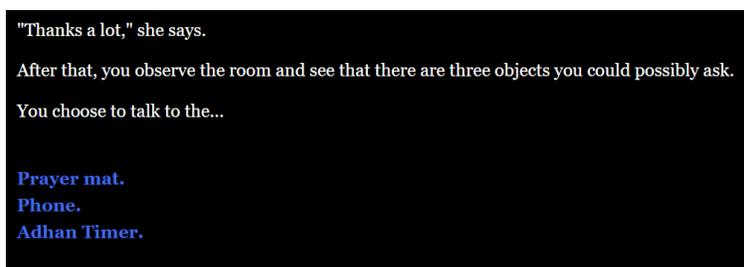


Figure 2: Example of Twine Gameplay.

This Twine version will be a stepping-stone for me to fully develop all layers of the game, especially the Aesthetics layer, in Unity 2D (see Figure 3), which has more functionality that allows me to also flesh out the Mechanics layer that was briefly outlined in the Twine version. Both versions will be considered in the reflections and the deliverables of this project.

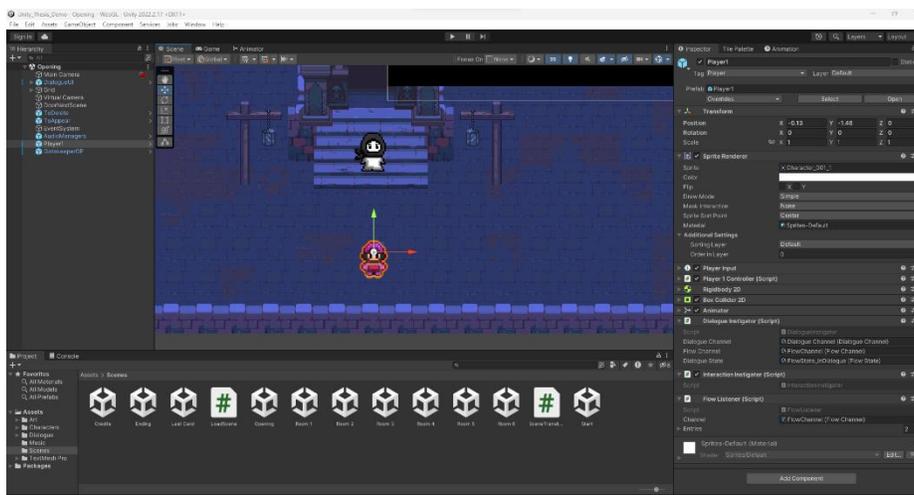


Figure 3: Unity 2D HUD for my game.

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The title of my video game for this project is called “*Salaam* in the Afterlife”. *Salaam*, in this case, means “peace” in Arabic, and it is also a common greeting amongst Muslims; a derivation from the full greeting, *Assalamu 'alaikum warohmatullahi wabarokatuh* (“May the peace, mercy, and blessings of Allah be with you.”). This game can be played on my itch.io page, for both the Twine version and the Unity 2D version (See Appendix A for links, and Appendix B and C for screenshots). Both will be referenced as I reflect on my methodology of research by design.

5.2.1 Implementation of the Islamic Principles in the Game Narrative

Due to the genres of the game, this Narrative layer is arguably the most important one in terms of my project’s goals. Therefore, the story and the reasoning behind it will be a huge chunk of my reflection. As shown in Table 1, I have split the layers of game design and the three Islamic principles into sections. For the Narrative layer, I chose two stories for each principle to represent in the game. These stories are based on my own experiences, as well as the experiences of my fellow Muslim peers, with some artistic liberties. Some of these stories were also inspired by the details of the Islamic principles mentioned in section 3. All these decisions I made for the narrative tie into the idea of these Islamic principles being “subtle, but rich and intricate”, which will be the driving focus behind my choices.

The overarching story of the game is that the entire setting is in the Afterlife. The player has just recently died and gone to Limbo, the ‘waiting room’ just before their final resting place. While they are in this Limbo, the player will encounter others in different rooms who are also waiting for their time to cross over and move on. The player’s task is then to find out what these people’s stories are and whether they can help these people move on before the player decides to move on themselves. There are a total of six rooms in the game, each with its NPCs and story.

I chose the setting of the Afterlife due to the lack of geographical and cultural boundaries that encompass such a setting, reflecting Islam as a religion that resides in many cultures and peoples. This also invites the advantage that in such a setting, the characters are not bound to the rules of the real world and therefore a lot of the story’s premise can be taken with a willing suspension of disbelief (e.g., talking to a clock). The concept of a Limbo also plays into the fact that in Islam, no Muslim can ever comprehend the concept of Heaven, an eternal paradise, and nothing we make in this world can ever compare to the real thing, for it is better than the entirety of time and space; Limbo serves as the connection between the world and the hereafter, so there

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are objects and souls here that tread the line between. This allows for a lot of liberties taken in the story, as Islam is a deeply spiritual religion that focuses on life after death.

For the Islamic principle of *Salah*, two of the rooms in the game correspond to this principle; Room 1 and Room 4. In Room 1, there resides a Woman, whose regret in life was that she made concessions in her night prayers when the times got too late for her schedule, as she lived abroad for her studies and the prayer timings in that country were vastly different and unequal compared to her home country. The timings for the five daily prayers in Islam are dependent on the cycle of the moon and sun; therefore, if the Woman had lived in a place where the nights are extremely short, then the timings for the night prayer changed drastically. The concession the Woman made to accommodate her schedule was to pray slightly earlier for the night prayers, which did not coincide with her time zone but did work with the nearest earlier time zone. In Room 4, there is a Praying Girl, who regrets that she had trouble praying five times a day; only doing three at most each day, except during Ramadhan, when she had the drive to pray five times a day for the duration of the Holy Month (which, in Islam, means you get more rewards if you do any good deed in this month). She worries that she was merely being a hypocrite with her prayers when praying five times daily, regardless of the month, is the most important aspect of being a Muslim.

Both these stories show the struggles that an average Muslim may experience in their lifetime. I based the story of the Woman in Room 1 on my own experiences, and the Praying Girl in Room 4's story is reminiscent of many other Muslims I know who struggle to pray five times a day. As mentioned in section 3.1, praying is one of the five pillars of Islam, and it is extremely important, as it is one of the main aspects of your worldly life that reflects where you go in the hereafter (i.e., to Heaven, or Hell). However, as shown by these two personal stories, the path of prayer is not always easy, and changes depending on circumstances and personal beliefs. Showing this in a video game medium was tricky, as I wanted to show that even such a seemingly simple thing as praying five times daily would include a lot of subtleties that depend on each person. I wanted to show that these struggles exist in the Muslim world and that only God can truly judge a person's circumstances.

For the Islamic principle of *Fiqh*, another two rooms tell this story: Room 2 and Room 3. In Room 2, there is a Bun Girl, and her worry is concerning the food she ate in her lifetime. As she often ate abroad where not every food is *halal*-certified (meaning permissible for Muslims to

eat by Islamic law (Felton, 2022)), her concern about whether the food she ate was truly *halal* or not despite her efforts gnawed at her. In Room 3, there resides a Hat Boy, who regrets not contributing to the endowment for building a fountain for his community, which then became one of the important sources of water for them. (Islamic endowment is also called *waqf*, which means philanthropic deeds in perpetuity (Islamic Relief Worldwide, 2019)). He instead only reaped the benefits after the fountain had successfully been built, which became his biggest regret. Now, while these two stories are vastly different from one another, in the lens of *fiqh* as described in section 3.2, they follow a common theme: the understanding of one's faith, ethics, and morals depends on their situation.

In both cases, while from their perspective they seem to have not done enough, the NPC souls surrounding them that the player can interact with think differently (the food for the Bun Girl, and the community members for the Hat Boy). Through those other souls, the player sees the flip perspective of their actions and deeds, and the idea that being Muslim is about doing the best to your faith in the situation that you are in, as we are only human and there are limitations to our perspective of things. This is in line with the description of *fiqh* as described in section 3.2 and aligns with my understanding of the principle; Islam is not just a series of dos and don'ts, but rather, how we apply our understandings of our faith in our daily life, which is not always black and white and is dependent on each person's situation. I learned how to express this deeply spiritual concept due to the lack of restrictions in the setting of the Afterlife that I created in my game, which means that I can express that this principle relies on the belief that in Islam, God is All-Knowing, and He knows what is best for us humans.

Finally, for the Islamic principle of *Fitrah*, the last two rooms I used to express this concept were Room 5 and Room 6. Room 5 is inhabited by an Old Man who had converted to Islam in his youth due to love. He is worried that, despite his change of faith and his peaceful journey to this Afterlife, he was not a "good enough" Muslim. In Room 6, it is a story of a Man who had struggled with a mental illness in life, and he is worried that it was not enough to be dependent on faith to heal his illness, despite being already dead and thus already reached eternal peace. Both these stories are deeply intertwined with the concept of *Fitrah* as described in section 3.3, which concerns the innate tendency of human beings to believe in a higher power.

For the story of the convert, I gathered inspiration from my own mother's story, who was a convert herself. Unlike myself who was born Muslim, I needed the perspective of someone

who hadn't the concept of Islam ingrained since birth and had seen the religion from an outside perspective to truly convey the principle of *fitrah*. As this principle concerns the matter of the belief in faith itself, what better way to convey this through someone who had to go through that conversion journey in their life? Similarly, with the Man struggling with his mental illness, often I have heard of stories where Muslims struggle with depression where they were simply just told to "believe more in God", or "you're not pious enough, that's why you're struggling". But, of course, this matter is more complicated than that. I gathered inspiration from the psychology of Islam (Mohamed, 1995) in section 3.3, and from the lecture "The Qur'an and Depression" by Omar Suleiman (Yaqeen Institute, 2023). Tackling both these profound stories was a struggle to convey in a video game format, but thankfully due to the setting of the Afterlife, I was able to at least attempt to show some concepts of the principle of *fitrah* through these stories.

Overall, all these stories were based on my stories or the stories of my Muslim peers that fully encompass the applications of these Islamic principles. While I had learned about these principles growing up, I was unaware of the many different stories from both academics and my circle of relationships that relate to these principles. In section 3 where I described these principles, I intended to collect academic papers that I could apply to the stories in the game, but conversely, I had learned more about *fiqh* and *fitrah* specifically by trying to write what these principles were about. By gathering stories from my Muslim peers, I was able to convert that understanding into a playable story format that could appeal to a video game narrative. This way, I could try to create a Praxic, Didactic game that reflects what I learned throughout this project of research by design.

What, then, are the insights into game development that I unlocked through creating these narratives? For every Muslim peer I gathered stories from, I noticed there were certain individual triggers that they related to each principle. While these triggers were individual stories, meaning they were subtle and mundane in relatable everyday life, their impact on the Muslims is big and ties into these bigger Islamic principles. I recreated these triggers and converted that into a game experience, allowing the player character to walk a mile in another person's shoes. Using the setting of the Afterlife also made making this game experience easier, as the setting allows liberties to be made in terms of cultural and geographical boundaries, as my Muslim peers come from all walks of life. Of course, future research can put such stories into a worldly context, which is worth exploring. By doing so, hopefully, this method of research can be used by others

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to pursue a similar journey of incorporating such principles into delivering a specific experience through video games – by making use of these subtle triggers, drawn from other people’s encounters, to convey big ideas such as these Islamic principles.

While in the Twine version, I could fully flesh out the story and the decision-making tree of the player, in Unity 2D a lot of this story is condensed for brevity. This will be further explained in section 5.2.2 about implemented Mechanics.

Going back to the table, I can thus fill in the Narrative layer as such in Table 2 (highlighted in yellow):

Islamic Principles	<i>Salah/Prayers</i>	<i>Fiqh/Jurisprudence; Understanding</i>	<i>Fitrah/Instinct in Faith</i>
Narrative	Room 1: Concession in night prayers Room 4: Struggling to pray five daily prayers	Room 2: Concerns about Halal food Room 3: Endowment of the fountain in the community	Room 5: Story of a Muslim convert Room 6: Man struggling with mental illness
Mechanics			
Aesthetics			

Table 2: Updated my chart with the game design Narrative layer with the Islamic principles.

Now we can discuss the other two layers: the Mechanics and the Aesthetics of game design within my project.

5.2.2 Implementation of the Islamic Principles in the Game Mechanics

The Mechanics game design layer applies to the gameplay and technical aspects of making a video game. In this case, I tried to convey the nuances of the Islamic principles using as little as possible to maximize the impact of the narrative. By attempting this “show, don’t tell” approach, I aim to convey the idea that while each principle is rich in meaning and intricate in detail, the subtleties are what make these principles impactful and meaningful to the Muslim believer. The bulk of this section will then answer the question of how this is done in Unity 2D, and what I learned in the process, as well as impart the knowledge of what I uncovered to others who wish to do a similar project. (Since Twine’s gameplay is simply choosing answers in a text-based adventure, that gameplay will only be briefly alluded to in this section.)

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Since I aimed to mirror the concept of “subtle, but rich and intricate” in the Islamic principles to the gameplay, I had to give a few rules to myself as I was creating the game. Rule 1: the game only has three inputs: WASD/Arrow keys for eight-directional movement, Spacebar for

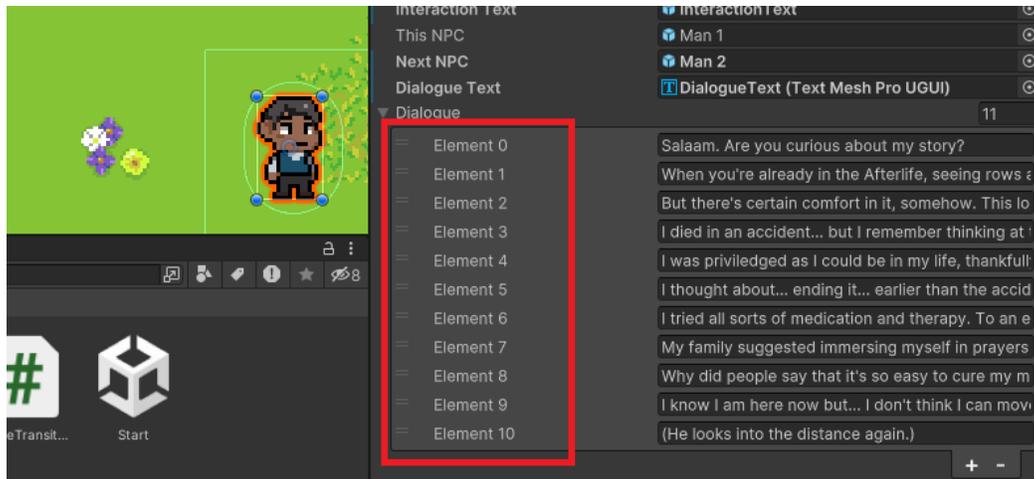


Figure 4: Ten speech bubbles for each NPC. The "Elements" table highlighted in red is the number of speech bubbles.



Figure 5: 3 lines max per speech bubble, highlighted in red.

interaction, and the left mouse-click for dialogue buttons. Rule 2: Dialogue for each NPC will need to be concise. This means for the dimensions of the dialogue box for the game’s interface, each NPC will have 10 speech bubbles at most, and each speech bubble will be a maximum of 3 lines of reading. To illustrate, Figures 4 and 5 below show the details.

And, finally, Rule 3: each room that corresponds to an NPC’s story will only have three other interactives in the room. Hence, each room will only have the player talk to four items; the main NPC to which the story belongs, and three corresponding items or souls that tell roughly the story of the NPC in the room.

As mentioned, these rules were self-imposed so that I could focus on the “subtle, but rich and intricate” aspect of the Islamic principles in the gameplay, but it was also done for the

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interest of time, as I did not have the luxury nor the manpower of large gaming companies to implement more mechanics to create a fully fleshed-out game. These rules also meant that I had to cut down a few dialogue choices from the Twine to the Unity 2D version – however, this trades agency of player’s choices in the dialogue for a more engaging gameplay, as the two platforms differ in that regard.

Aside from these technical gameplay details, there is also the idea of having the NPC’s full story described by the objects or souls that they had interacted with in their lifetime, rather than by other human NPCs. This is to drive home the notion that in Islam when you die, you have objects that surround you in life be your witness in death. Your mouth will be shut, rendering you unable to speak, while your body parts will testify to the actions that you have done in your lifetime to the One God (Yunus, 2023). While there are no body parts to talk to in this game, I’ve extended that notion to other objects and souls related to the NPC’s story, which is related to the idea that creations of God will be witnesses to your character on the Day of Judgement, which is the end of all existence (Bhimji, 2022). This gameplay aspect I found important because it drives home how these Islamic principles are deeply a personal and spiritual journey depending on the person, and only them and the things they interact with daily would know their story. This ties into the idea of this game being a Praxic game, meaning that playing the game would potentially be a spiritual experience.

Another overarching gameplay aspect is the fact that the player will follow the journeys of seven people in the game: six other NPCs, and you, the player character. I chose to include seven stories due to the significance of the number 7 in Islam. There are seven layers of Heaven and Hell in Islam, and during the pilgrimage to Mecca, you circle the Ka’bah seven times as well as go between the hills Safa and Marwa seven times. There are many more as described by Dr. Shabir Ally in his interview (Let the Quran Speak, 2016), but to simplify, I wanted to display this idea implicitly in the progression of gameplay. This ties into the idea of this game being Didactic, but subtle enough that it gets the player thinking.

What then are the insights I can give to others by making these choices for the Mechanics layer of my game? I wanted to focus on the “subtle, but rich and intricate” aspect of the Islamic principles reflected in the simple gameplay experience. By choosing to frame my game as a Praxic and Didactic type of religious game, I can frame my gameplay to fit this focus, as the Islamic principles are too vast and require a lot of knowledge to understand otherwise. Islam is a

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daily lived experience, and so by fitting the simple gameplay to this focus, I can show how Islam manifests in the day-to-day while also attempting to show the plethora of principles at work during each moment of the day. This insight is valuable for this research and can be used by others to pursue a similar journey of incorporating such principles into delivering a specific experience through video games.

To return to update the table, Table 3 shows that the Mechanics layer encompasses all three of the Islamic principles, showing that each principle is not only within its bubble but interacts and weaves itself with others to create a system of belief in the religion.

Islamic Principles	<i>Salah/Prayers</i>	<i>Fiqh/Jurisprudence; Understanding</i>	<i>Fitrah/Instinct in Faith</i>
Narrative	Room 1: Concession in night prayers Room 4: Struggling to pray five daily prayers	Room 2: Concerns about Halal food Room 3: Endowment of the fountain in the community	Room 5: Story of a Muslim convert Room 6: Man struggling with mental illness
Mechanics	The three rules for “subtle, but rich and intricate”; having objects as interactable witnesses alongside the NPC; The significance of the seven layers of stories.		
Aesthetics			

Table 3: Updated table with Mechanic layer of game design, highlighted in yellow.

5.2.3 Implementation of the Islamic Principles in the Game Aesthetics

As with the Mechanics, the implementation of the game’s Aesthetics was deliberately chosen to be in line with the “subtle, but rich and intricate” idea of Islamic principles. Some NPC designs, like the Woman in Room 1 and the Gatekeeper, are wearing the Islamic headscarf required of Muslim women (see Figure 6). For the rooms relating to the Islamic principle of *Salah*, I added prayer mats and even a mosque (see Figure 7). None of these are explicitly clear to the player unless the player interacts with them. Conversely, the player character’s design is deliberately chosen because of its lack of “obvious” stereotypical Muslim traits, to emphasize that the player can look like anyone, which is true of Muslims in real life (see Figure 6). Faith is not always obvious, after all.



Figure 6: Women with headscarves (left and middle) and the player character (right).



Figure 7: Mosque and Prayer Mats in Room 4

Overall, the decision to choose a pixel-art concept for this game is the appeal of such a design to the players, and it is also a game art form that I am familiar with. The idea of a pixelated art form means that every pixel placed to create the whole is important; one pixel is out of place, and the art changes. While the premise seems simple, it can weave into a rich and intricate whole; therefore, “subtle, but rich and intricate”, as with the Islamic principles.

Like the Mechanics layer, the insights gained from making these choices in the Aesthetics layer are focused on the idea of the “subtle, but rich and intricate” of the Islamic principles, reflected in the look and feel of the game. Choosing to implement “obvious” aspects of Islam only subtly, adheres to this focus. Islam is a subconscious engine that runs in the background as Muslims live their lives; these principles are instilled in Muslims while living the mundane everyday life. But for this engine to be functioning, a vast amount of knowledge of these values needs to be implemented, and that is reflected in the choices made for the Aesthetics and Mechanics layers of this game. To be able to reflect this focus of “subtle, but rich and intricate” through these choices is an important insight for this project’s contribution to game development to incorporate such principles into a video game experience.

Finally, with this last section, we can complete the table of game design layers with the Islamic principles, as seen in Table 4.

Islamic Principles	<i>Salah/Prayers</i>	<i>Fiqh/Jurisprudence; Understanding</i>	<i>Fitrah/Instinct in Faith</i>
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Narrative	Room 1: Concession in night prayers	Room 2: Concerns about Halal food	Room 5: Story of a Muslim convert
	Room 4: Struggling to pray five daily prayers	Room 3: Endowment of the fountain in the community	Room 6: Man struggling with mental illness
Mechanics	The three rules for “subtle, but rich and intricate”; having objects as interactable witnesses alongside the NPC; The significance of the seven layers of stories.		
Aesthetics	Addition of prayer mats and Mosque in Rooms 1 and 4	Non- “stereotypical” design of player character; Pixel-art style for the entire game leaning into “subtle, but rich and intricate”.	

Table 4: Completed table with all layers of game design; recently added Aesthetics decisions in yellow.

5.3 Feedback Procedure

As mentioned, a lot of the inspirations for the building blocks of my project’s game and all its layers were not only inspired by my own stories and the knowledge I gained from other academic papers as described in section 3. I was also inspired by gathering stories from my family and my fellow Muslim peers – for example, as mentioned in section 5.2.1, the story of the Muslim convert was based on my mother, who was a convert herself. However, please note that these conversations were informal and not official interviews for the data-gathering for this project.

To paint a general picture of how these conversations went with them, I needed a reference point for stories related to Islamic principles that I chose, therefore I initiated separate calls with my family and friends abroad and showed them an empty version of Tables 1 to 4. As the discussion went on, the table was gradually filled with their stories of how they interpreted or experienced these Islamic principles. I then chose the stories that I could fit within the rules I established for myself as mentioned in section 5.2.2, and the ones that fit the aesthetics that I had on hand in section 5.2.3. Hence, the result was that my game was filled with the combined knowledge and narrative of me and my fellow Muslims, all of whom had their interpretations of the Islamic principles, which broadened my horizons on them. These people are credited in the Acknowledgments section.

6. Discussion

6.1 Goals Achieved

Now that my project has reached its end, it is time to reflect upon what I learned during the conception of my games and how that contributes to my overall goals. As I have already explained my reasoning for the decisions that I made in every game design layer in section 5, in this section, I will reflect on the overall results of my research by design, and how this will affect the bigger picture of this method of research for this genre of video games.

To look inwardly into my overall method of research by design, I believe we can start by answering the questions at the beginning, and whether the goals I sought to achieve have been accomplished using the two versions of the game that resulted from this research.

Goal 1: To further the understanding of these rich but nuanced Islamic principles through game development. I thought I knew what these Islamic principles were when I had chosen them for this project, as I had grown up with these concepts my entire life as a practicing Muslim. However, as I researched more into them, specifically by reading related academic papers and consulting my Muslim family and peers, my knowledge of these specific Islamic principles expanded. While the *Salah*/Prayers principle was exactly as I expected, the *Fiqh*/Understanding and *Fitrah*/Instinct in Faith principles gave me more insight into the understanding of my faith. Specifically, the concept of endowment in *fiqh* taught me that this simple act of charity had been done in many ages past, and how it could give *barakah* (blessings) to both the people who give these endowments and to those that receive them. It also brought people together as a community that becomes a force of good that can outlive the people who created it, showing that *fiqh* is not just about the interpretation of good deeds in the name of faith, but also a belief and understanding of the number of lives it can affect, not just yours.

Consequently, I also learned the concept of how to handle mental illnesses in my faith as a deep connection with *fitrah*, and how psychological help needs to depend not only on the body and mind but also on the spirit. Mental illnesses are not just cured by simply believing; you also need to take all the help available to you in this world to cure you. While this does not mean that this is a guaranteed cure, it does give me a new perspective for me as someone who has seen others suffer from these illnesses and tried to help them.

These new insights that I learned about these Islamic principles directly influenced how I told my in-game narrative, and how that affected the gameplay mechanics and aesthetics. This leads to the question of whether these insights helped me achieve my second goal.

Goal 2: To learn about the medium of video games as an experience that can be used to portray a personal and spiritual experience for the player. By using the expanded knowledge that I obtained through researching Islamic principles, I set to implement them in my game's narrative by giving each of these stories a face that the player can interact with, listen to, and help with. This plays into the special affordances that video games can offer; by giving the player a story they can experience with their agency, they can explore these concepts and Islamic principles and ingrain them through this experience, which makes the experience more personal and possibly spiritual. This achieves the concept of a Didactic, Praxic game, which means that this game teaches the player these subtle Islamic principles, but the inherent richness and intricacies of the principles make playing the game akin to a spiritual experience, as explained in sections 2 and 4. Also, by making two versions of the same game, I was able to smooth out this narrative using the Twine version and learn how to implement the most while making use of the rules I imposed upon myself for the Unity 2D version. Both versions of the game were crucial to my overall understanding of the process of making a video game that tells a personal, spiritual experience for the player. As described in section 5, I wanted to fully lean into the concept of “subtle, but rich and intricate” in every aspect of the game, and I would like to say I am pleased with the results.

6.2 Reflections

Now, to look outwardly at the results of my project of research by design: what now? What does it mean that my goals were achieved? I had achieved my goals and reflected upon them, resulting in two versions of the game “*Salaam in the Afterlife*”. How, then, will this affect the bigger picture of this method of research for this genre of video games?

To answer this, I can look back on Pina's research on Resonant Games (The Archaeology Awakens: Archaeogaming as a New Learning Tool, 2023) and Gualeni's paper on Self-Transformation through Game Design (2015). These two researchers emphasize the concept of learning something by creating and subsequently playing video games. If the result of my research is any indication, it is that this method is proven to be reliable and a good precedent moving forward. I have learned a lot as I was creating a game, both in the technical aspect of

game design as well as the narrative. I also had to understand aspects of the video game medium that were important for conveying these concepts. To be able to understand how to give weight to this subject matter given the art form of video games is a crucial part of the results of this research. If this research is done in a broader context with more time and feedback, it could be a valuable angle to take in terms of creating a compelling personal, spiritual video game story.

Furthermore, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of my faith, which is deeply important to me and will affect me for years to come. While I had already understood the general concepts of the Islamic principles I had chosen for this project, implementing them in a format unconventional for religious themes meant that I had to dissect and analyze these principles and what made them so important to my faith; not just for me, but for other Muslims. Hearing their stories and implementing them in this video game helped me internalize these principles that are so important for a Muslim to have. Therefore, this method of self-learning is worth consideration for future research into this area and this type of research by design.

Overall, what contributions can this project give to academic research into game development? Aside from the personal learned experience I achieved through making this video game experience, I'd like to reflect again on the insights made through this journey and how they can be used by others seeking to do a similar project. After discovering and deciding on the type of religious game I wanted to portray to achieve my goals, I investigated the Islamic principles that are core to the Muslim everyday experience, in addition to being subtle, but rich and intricate. That way, these principles can be interpreted and expressed in different ways because Islam encompasses many eras and cultures, and therefore there are myriad ways to express them in video games. This helped with my choices during the game development of all three game design layers: Narrative, Mechanics, and Aesthetics. By focusing on the mundane day-to-day experience where for a Muslim, a plethora of Islamic principles is at work at each moment of the day, I'm able to implement these principles during game development to create a game that delivers a personal and spiritual experience. By detailing this process, this method of research can be used by others to pursue a similar journey of incorporating Islamic and/or religious principles into delivering a specific experience through game development.

6.3 Limitations

However, I need to acknowledge the limitations of this research by design. While I had achieved my personal learning goals for my project, and what contributions this could give to

others seeking to pursue similar research, this research by design could benefit much more from the official input of other players as a source of qualitative data. By doing so, I could learn about what they thought, how did they play, and what their perceptions were of the Islamic principles I implemented in the game.

I received unofficial feedback from my Muslim family and peers to gather their stories and their reviews on my game, as well as my advisors and critics for this project (who were all non-Muslim). While gathering this unofficial feedback from these multiple parties, I noticed that there are many values, ideas, and inherent principles about being a Muslim that may be incomprehensible to a non-Muslim and cannot simply be explained by the “subtle, but rich and intricate” approach that I took for this project. For example, there is this subtle idea portrayed in my game that every problem a Muslim encounters will not always be solved in their lifetime and is dependent upon the faith that God is the solution to their regrets and problems in the afterlife. This is an implicit addendum to the Islamic principle of *fitrah* and is a core idea for a believing Muslim. However, to the non-Muslim, this idea may cause frustration that no problem portrayed in the game is solved, and everything is reliant on God. The choices I made to put the setting of my game in the afterlife, as well as the subtle ways the principle of *fitrah* is portrayed, had caused this dissonance, which I thought was an interesting and important experiential difference in how people of different faiths view the narrative experience of my resulting game, “*Salaam in the Afterlife*”.

However, due to the interest of time and the limited scope of this project, I could not gather more people for official testing of the results of this research. It would have been very valuable to not only grab data from Muslim players but also non-Muslim players to see whether any of the concepts of Islamic principles were conveyed through this video game medium. In similar future research, this aspect could be considered for a more conclusive qualitative data collection that will enrich the research. When making a game, it is often beneficial to gather the thoughts and feelings of others to test whether you truly made a product that gives others the experience that you wish to give them.

That being said, I must note that while it is ideal that I conduct user testing to make sure this research has conclusive data, this project’s definition of research by design was a conscious decision to not do so in this iteration of the research. Every aspect of the project, as well as the components that made up the final game, was carefully researched from reputable sources, from

both academic and personal interviews and feedback. The video game components, ranging from the types of religious games to the existing games using Islam in their game narrative, and the different layers of game design, all were grabbed from previous game developer research. The Islamic principles, as well as their definitions and the lens they are viewed, are taken from existing academic definitions as well as from the lived realities and lives of my Muslim family, friends, and peers. I have combined all this research into my resulting game, “*Salaam in the Afterlife*”, to portray a specific video game experience to achieve my goals as well as lay the groundwork for similar research into game development. Hopefully, this research by design can inspire others to do the same.

7. Conclusions

Overall, I am confident in the reliability of this project’s definition of research by design. I started this project by researching thoroughly existing video games that use other religions within their narrative, mechanics, or aesthetics; I then did the same with contemporary games that used Islam, my faith, using certain Islamic principles that I had grown up with. By doing so, I had a baseline idea of how to do the same with my project and went on to create two versions of my game that reflected my goals. I have achieved my goals, acknowledged my limitations, and learned from my reflections in the process, as well as outlined how this method of research can be used by others to pursue similar research of incorporating Islamic and/or other religious principles into delivering a specific experience through video games. Should I be afforded the opportunity in the future to continue this line of research and expand the time and scope, I would be glad to do so; there is still much to be learned with the implementation of rich and subtle religious principles in a modern medium such as video games.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Links to the game “*Salaam in the Afterlife*”

Twine version: <https://caniaeast.itch.io/salaamintheafterlife-twine>

Unity 2D version: <https://caniaeast.itch.io/salaamintheafterlife-unity>

Appendix B: Screenshots of the Twine version of the game “*Salaam in the Afterlife*”

Salaam!

Welcome to the Afterlife.

That wasn't so bad, was it?

Yeah, it was okay.

Could have been better...

"Salaam!" The prayer mat greets you from the floor, angled in the direction of... what you assume is Mecca.

Even in the Afterlife, there is a set direction of prayer to the *Ka'bah* as well.

"I overheard your conversation," the prayer mat affirms. "In life, I was often used by her to pray every day. I was very happy and content being used for such a purpose."

"She really tried her best to stay up to pray *Isha*... but with her busy schedule, sometimes she would fall asleep before the time so she could wake up earlier the next day for class. Sometimes it cannot be helped. I'm sure God wouldn't rebuke her for her efforts."

"Regardless, she still prayed despite the timings. She tried to accommodate her time for her faith. You can't find fault in that."

You consider it, then nod. That sounds like a reasonable excuse.

"Maybe you can ask the others. Or convince her that she'll be fine."

Nodding again, you go towards the...

Phone.

Adhan Timer.

Go back to the woman.

"Hello again!" She greets you. "So, how did it go? Was I correct in my decisions on my food?"

**There were some unfortunate situations, but you did your best.
Maybe you could have inquired a bit more about the food...**

He looks surprised, then collects himself. "I wonder what would make you say that," he says.

You tell him the stories of the other objects you talked to.

"I see," he looks towards the hills. "All my struggles so far... regardless, it has led me here, one step before I meet our One God. The greatest blessing a Muslim like us can get."

He takes a deep breath.

"Thank you," he smiles, genuinely. "I think I'm ready to move on now. Finally meet our Lord."

"I hope to see you there too, friend. Salaam."

He disappears into light, a serene look on his face.

You take a deep breath.

I'm ready to go.

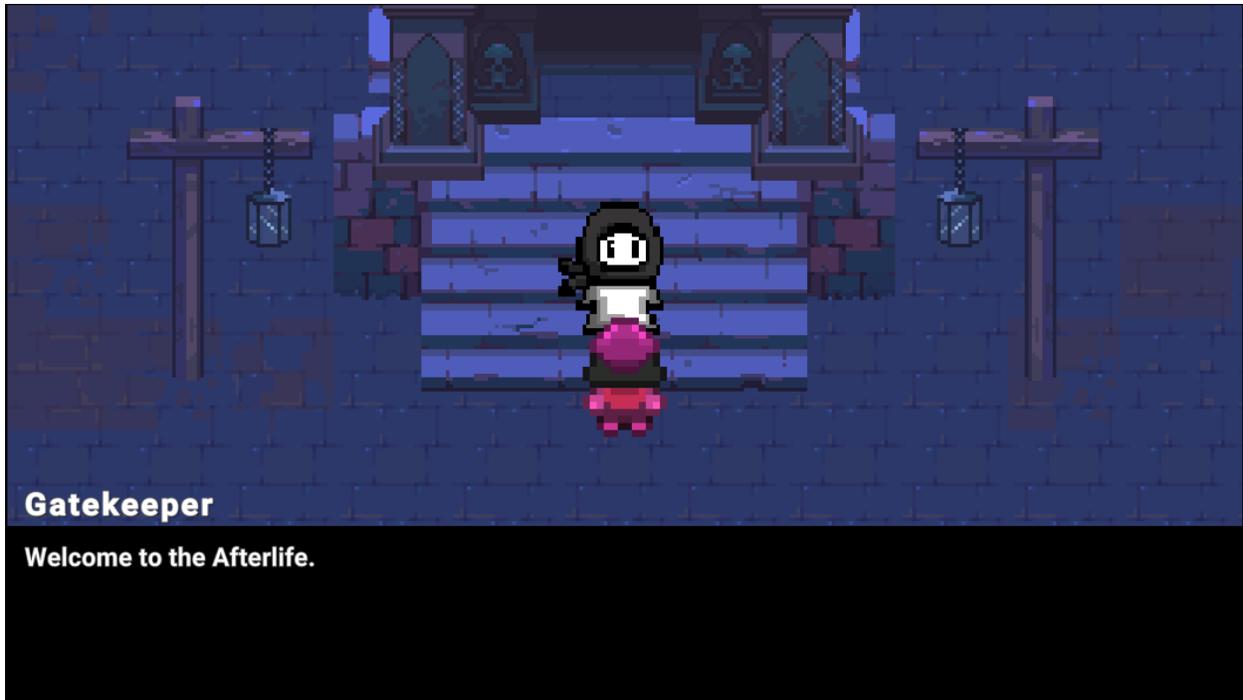
Appendix C: Screenshots of the Unity 2D version of the game "*Salaam in the Afterlife*"

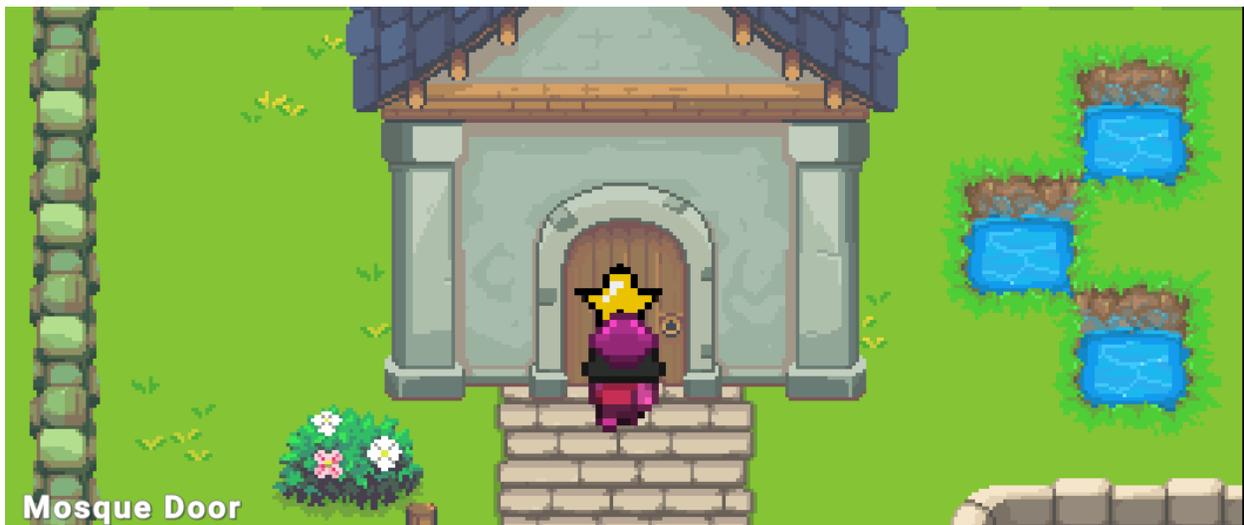
SALAAM IN THE AFTERLIFE

Start Game

Credits

: CONTROLS:
WASD/ARROW KEYS TO MOVE
SPACEBAR TO INTERACT
MOUSE CLICK FOR BUTTONS





Mosque Door

In our faith, prayer is very important, and it's one of the first responsibilities God asks you when you die. Especially when you cross over and move on from this Limbo.