

Beyond Representation: Reconstructing Muslim Hero Identity through Procedural Rhetoric in Islamic Video Games

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Abstract

The representation of Muslims in digital games has received increasing scholarly attention, yet existing research has largely focused on visual imagery, narrative representation, and ideological discourse while overlooking the procedural nature of gameplay. This article argues that Muslim hero identity in Islamic video games cannot be adequately understood through representational analysis alone. Instead, identity emerges through players' interaction with computational systems that organize ethical choices, moral responsibility, and religious meaning. This study aims to reconstruct the concept of Muslim hero identity by integrating Representation Theory, Procedural Rhetoric, and Digital Religion into a unified conceptual framework. Employing a qualitative theory-building approach, the study combines systematic literature review, qualitative content analysis, critical discourse analysis, and theory synthesis to examine how identity is constituted through interactive gameplay rather than static representation. The analysis demonstrates that procedural mechanics, player agency, moral agency, and religious meaning-making collectively shape the construction of Muslim hero identity. Based on these findings, the study proposes the Procedural Muslim Hero Identity Framework (PMHIF), comprising five interconnected dimensions: Representational Foundation, Procedural System, Interactive Moral Agency, Religious Meaning-Making, and Procedural Muslim Hero Identity. The framework reconceptualizes Muslim hero identity as an emergent, participatory, and ethically situated process enacted through gameplay rather than merely represented through narrative or visual symbols. By moving beyond representational paradigms, this study extends Procedural Rhetoric into the domain of Digital Religion and offers a new interdisciplinary framework that contributes to Game Studies, Islamic Media Studies, and the broader scholarship on religion and interactive digital media.

Keywords: *Islamic video games; Muslim hero identity; procedural rhetoric; digital religion; representation theory; game studies*

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1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of the global video game industry has transformed digital games from entertainment media into influential cultural platforms for constructing social, political, and religious identities. Unlike traditional media, video games communicate meaning not only through narrative and visual representation but also through interactive systems that require players to make choices, experience consequences, and participate in simulated worlds. Consequently, scholars increasingly recognize digital games as important sites where identities are produced, negotiated, and experienced rather than merely represented (Huizinga, 1955; Juul, 2005).

Within this context, the representation of Islam and Muslims has become an important topic in game studies. Existing scholarship consistently demonstrates that mainstream video games have frequently portrayed Muslim characters through orientalist narratives associated with terrorism, extremism, and geopolitical conflict, reinforcing stereotypes that became particularly prominent after the events of 9/11 (Said, 1997; Šisler, 2008; Al-Rawi, 2018). In response, developers from Muslim-majority societies have produced Islamic-themed video games that seek to present alternative narratives in which Muslim protagonists embody Islamic history, ethics, and cultural values (Šisler, 2013).

Despite these developments, most existing studies continue to analyse Islamic video games primarily through representational perspectives that emphasize visual symbols, narratives, and ideological discourse. While such approaches explain how Muslims are portrayed, they provide only limited insight into how players construct religious identity through gameplay itself. Unlike films or television, video games function as procedural systems in which meaning is generated through rules, mechanics, player choices, and interactive participation. Consequently, Muslim hero identity cannot be fully understood through representation alone but must also be examined as an emergent procedural experience (Hall, 1997; Juul, 2005).

This perspective is informed by Procedural Rhetoric, which explains that video games persuade through computational processes rather than visual or verbal representation alone. Gameplay mechanics, constraints, rewards, and consequences communicate values by shaping how players interact with virtual systems (Bogost, 2007). At the same time, research in Digital Religion argues that digital media are not merely channels for representing religion but environments in which religious identities are actively negotiated and performed. Integrating these perspectives suggests that Muslim hero identity emerges through the interaction between narrative, procedural mechanics, moral agency, and religious meaning-making (Campbell, 2013; Campbell & Garner, 2016).

1.2 Research Gap

Despite the growing body of scholarship on Islam and digital games, three significant gaps remain in the existing literature.

First, previous studies have predominantly adopted a representational paradigm, examining how Muslims are visually and narratively portrayed in digital games. Research has successfully identified recurring stereotypes, orientalist imagery, and counter-representations developed by Muslim game designers. However, these studies rarely investigate how game mechanics themselves contribute to the construction of religious identity through player interaction. Consequently, the dynamic relationship between gameplay and identity formation remains insufficiently theorized.

Second, although the concept of procedural rhetoric has become one of the most influential theoretical frameworks in game studies, its application to religion—and particularly to Islamic digital games—remains remarkably limited. Existing scholarship has extensively employed procedural rhetoric to explain political communication, persuasive design, education, and social simulation, yet few studies have explored how computational procedures mediate religious values, ethical reasoning, and Muslim identity construction. This theoretical separation between Game Studies and Digital Religion has prevented a more comprehensive understanding of how religion operates within interactive media.

Third, current research generally conceptualizes Muslim identity as a representational category rather than an interactive and performative process. Muslim protagonists are

frequently analysed as narrative characters whose meanings derive primarily from visual appearance, dialogue, or historical settings. Such approaches overlook the fact that video games require players to enact identities through decisions, strategic actions, moral dilemmas, and procedural constraints. As a result, identity is often treated as something represented by the game rather than something actively produced through gameplay.

These limitations indicate the need for a conceptual framework capable of integrating representational analysis with procedural approaches to identity formation. Rather than viewing Muslim heroes merely as symbolic figures embedded in narrative texts, this article argues that they should be understood as procedurally constructed identities emerging from the interaction between game mechanics, ethical systems, player agency, and religious meaning. By bridging Digital Religion and Procedural Rhetoric, this study seeks to move beyond representational analysis toward a more dynamic understanding of Muslim identity in Islamic video games.

1.3 Research Questions

Building upon the theoretical gaps identified above, this article addresses the following research questions:

1. How has existing scholarship conceptualized the representation of Muslim heroes in Islamic video games?
2. What are the theoretical limitations of representational approaches in explaining Muslim identity construction within interactive digital environments?
3. How can the concept of procedural rhetoric provide a more comprehensive explanation of Muslim hero identity formation in Islamic video games?
4. How can the integration of Digital Religion and Procedural Rhetoric contribute to the reconstruction of a conceptual framework for understanding Muslim hero identity in interactive media?

Rather than evaluating the historical accuracy or religious legitimacy of particular games, these questions focus on the theoretical mechanisms through which gameplay participates in constructing religious identity.

1.4 Contribution of the Study

This article makes three principal contributions to the interdisciplinary scholarship on Digital Religion and Game Studies.

First, it advances the theoretical discussion beyond representational analysis by arguing that Muslim identity in video games cannot be adequately understood through visual and narrative representation alone. Instead, the article demonstrates that identity is simultaneously shaped by procedural structures that organize player actions, ethical choices, and interactive experiences. This argument extends existing discussions on Muslim representation by incorporating gameplay as a central analytical category.

Second, the article establishes a conceptual dialogue between Procedural Rhetoric and Digital Religion, two theoretical traditions that have largely developed independently. While Procedural Rhetoric explains how computational systems communicate meaning through rules and interaction, Digital Religion examines how religious beliefs and practices are negotiated within digital environments. Integrating these perspectives enables a more comprehensive account of how Islamic values are communicated, experienced, and enacted through interactive gameplay.

Third, the article proposes the concept of Procedural Muslim Hero Identity as a conceptual framework for analysing identity construction in Islamic video games. The proposed framework conceptualizes Muslim identity as an emergent process produced through the interaction of four interconnected dimensions: representation, procedural mechanics, moral agency, and player participation. Rather than treating these dimensions as separate analytical categories, the framework demonstrates how they collectively shape the experience of becoming a Muslim hero within interactive digital environments.

Accordingly, this study contributes not only to the growing literature on Islam and digital media but also to broader debates concerning identity construction, interactive storytelling, and the role of computational systems in shaping religious experience. By moving beyond

representation toward procedural identity, the article offers a theoretical foundation for future studies on religion, games, and digital culture.

1.5 Muslim Representation in Digital Games

The representation of Muslims in digital games has become an increasingly significant topic within media and cultural studies, particularly in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. Early scholarship consistently demonstrates that commercial video games developed in Western contexts frequently reproduce orientalist narratives by portraying Muslims as terrorists, extremists, or culturally backward communities. Such representations extend long-standing stereotypes previously identified in film, television, and news media into interactive digital environments, where players actively participate in simulated geopolitical conflicts (Said, 1997; Shaheen, 2009).

Drawing upon the theoretical tradition of representation, scholars argue that media representations do not simply reflect reality but actively construct social meanings. Within this perspective, the recurring depiction of Muslim characters as enemies contributes to the normalization of particular ideological assumptions concerning Islam, security, and global politics. Digital games therefore function as cultural texts through which political identities are produced and reproduced, rather than merely communicated (Hall, 1997).

Among the most influential contributions to this field is the work of Vit Šisler, who demonstrates that representations of Arabs and Muslims in video games are deeply embedded within broader geopolitical discourses inherited from colonial and post-9/11 imaginaries. Rather than presenting culturally diverse Muslim identities, mainstream games frequently reduce Muslim societies to homogeneous spaces characterized by violence, military conflict, and religious extremism (Šisler, 2008).

Šisler later expanded this discussion by examining Islamic-produced video games that seek to construct alternative representations of Muslim heroes. Games such as *Under Siege*, *Quraish*, and *Abu Isa's Quest for Knowledge* illustrate attempts by Muslim developers to challenge dominant stereotypes by presenting Muslim protagonists as ethical agents, historical leaders, and knowledgeable believers. These games demonstrate that digital media can function not only as instruments of representation but also as sites for negotiating religious identity and cultural self-representation (Šisler, 2013).

Nevertheless, despite these important contributions, representation-focused scholarship remains primarily concerned with what games depict rather than how games generate meaning through interaction. While visual narratives and symbolic content undoubtedly influence players' perceptions, they cannot fully explain how gameplay itself shapes identity formation through procedural engagement. This limitation has motivated scholars within game studies to shift analytical attention from representational content toward computational processes and player interaction.

1.6 Identity Construction and Representation Theory

Representation theory has long provided the dominant analytical framework for understanding how identities are constructed through media. Rather than treating media as passive mirrors of social reality, representation theory conceptualizes meaning as a cultural process in which language, images, and symbols continuously produce and negotiate social identities. According to Stuart Hall, representation is not simply the transmission of information but the production of meaning through systems of signification that organize how individuals understand themselves and others (Hall, 1997).

This perspective has profoundly influenced scholarship on religion and media, including studies examining the representation of Islam in newspapers, television, cinema, and digital communication. Researchers have demonstrated that recurring symbolic patterns contribute to the formation of collective perceptions concerning Muslims, often reinforcing simplified distinctions between "Islam" and "the West." Consequently, religious identity becomes culturally mediated through representational practices rather than determined solely by theological doctrines (Said, 1997; Asad, 2003).

However, the application of representation theory to video games encounters important limitations arising from the interactive nature of the medium. Unlike cinematic spectatorship, gameplay requires continuous participation in decision-making, strategic planning, and rule-

governed interaction. Players do not merely interpret representations; they actively perform roles within computational systems designed to produce specific forms of experience. Consequently, identity in video games cannot be understood exclusively through representational symbols because interaction itself becomes a constitutive element of meaning-making.

This critique has encouraged scholars to move beyond representational analysis toward performative and procedural understandings of identity. Identity is increasingly viewed not as a fixed attribute represented by media texts but as an emergent process enacted through repeated practices, situated interactions, and institutional rules. Such perspectives provide an important theoretical foundation for analysing religious identity within interactive digital environments where meaning arises through participation rather than observation alone (Butler, 1990; Goffman, 1959)...

2. Method

This study adopts a qualitative conceptual research design aimed at reconstructing a theoretical framework for understanding Muslim hero identity in Islamic video games. Rather than collecting empirical data from players or conducting experimental observations, the study seeks to develop conceptual knowledge through critical engagement with existing scholarly literature and selected Islamic video games. This approach is appropriate because the primary objective of the article is theory development rather than hypothesis testing or measurement of player behaviour (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Swedberg, 2014).

Conceptual research has become an established methodological approach in the social sciences and humanities for generating new theoretical insights by synthesizing existing concepts, identifying limitations in prevailing frameworks, and proposing alternative explanatory models. Instead of treating theories as fixed explanatory systems, conceptual inquiry critically examines their assumptions, relationships, and analytical boundaries to construct more comprehensive theoretical perspectives. Accordingly, this study positions itself as a theory-building investigation that integrates perspectives from Game Studies, Digital Religion, and media representation.

The analytical process consists of three complementary stages. First, the study conducts a critical literature synthesis of major scholarly works concerning Muslim representation in digital media, procedural rhetoric, identity construction, and Digital Religion. Rather than providing a descriptive review, the synthesis identifies convergences, divergences, and unresolved theoretical issues across these interdisciplinary traditions. This stage establishes the conceptual foundations from which the proposed framework emerges.

Second, the study employs qualitative content analysis to examine selected Islamic video games frequently discussed in existing scholarship, including *Under Siege*, *Quraish*, and *Abu Isa's Quest for Knowledge*. These games are not analysed as isolated case studies but as representative examples illustrating different approaches to constructing Muslim protagonists within interactive environments. The analysis focuses on four interconnected analytical dimensions: (1) representational narratives, (2) gameplay mechanics, (3) procedural structures governing player actions, and (4) ethical agency embedded within game systems (Krippendorff, 2018).

Third, the study applies Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as an interpretive framework for examining how ideological assumptions concerning Muslim identity are embedded not only in visual and narrative representations but also within computational procedures and gameplay systems. Following the discourse-oriented tradition of CDA, the analysis understands digital games as socio-cultural texts that both reflect and produce systems of meaning. However, unlike conventional discourse analysis, this study extends the analysis to procedural structures by examining how rules, rewards, constraints, and player choices communicate religious values through interaction (Fairclough, 2015; Bogost, 2007).

The integration of these three methodological components enables a multidimensional analysis that moves beyond representational interpretation. While critical literature synthesis identifies the theoretical limitations of existing scholarship, qualitative content analysis provides concrete illustrations of identity construction within Islamic video games, and Critical Discourse

Analysis reveals the ideological implications embedded in both narrative and procedural systems. Together, these approaches provide the methodological foundation for reconstructing what this article conceptualizes as the Procedural Muslim Hero Identity Framework.

Table 1. Analytical Framework of the Study

Analytical Dimension	Theoretical Foundation	Key Analytical Concepts	Analytical Focus
Representation	Stuart Hall	Representation, signification, identity	How Muslim heroes are visually and narratively represented
Orientalism	Edward Said	Orientalism, othering	Construction of Muslims within geopolitical and cultural discourses
Procedural Rhetoric	Ian Bogost	Rules, gameplay, persuasion, simulation	How gameplay mechanics communicate values through procedural systems
Game Ethics	Miguel Sicart	Moral agency, ethical gameplay	Ethical decision-making and player responsibility
Digital Religion	Heidi A. Campbell	Religious practice, digital identity	Negotiation of Muslim identity in digital environments
Identity Performance	Judith Butler	Performance, identity formation	Identity as performative practice rather than fixed representation
Conceptual Integration	This study	Procedural Muslim Hero Identity	Integration of representation, gameplay, moral agency, and digital religion into a unified conceptual framework

To enhance analytical rigor, the reconstruction of the proposed framework follows the principles of theory synthesis, whereby concepts derived from Representation Theory, Procedural Rhetoric, and Digital Religion are systematically compared, integrated, and reinterpreted into a unified explanatory model. The objective is not to replace existing theories but to demonstrate how their integration offers a more comprehensive understanding of Muslim hero identity as an interactive, procedural, and religiously situated phenomenon within contemporary digital games (Swedberg, 2014; Campbell, 2013; Bogost, 2007).

Table 2. Analytical Procedure

Stage	Method	Data Source	Analytical Objective	Expected Output
Stage 1	Critical Literature Synthesis	Books, journal articles, conference papers	Identify theoretical debates on Muslim	Mapping of theoretical gaps

			representation, Digital Religion, and Procedural Rhetoric	
Stage 2	Qualitative Content Analysis	Selected Islamic video games (Under Siege, Quraish, Abu Isa's Quest for Knowledge)	Examine representation, gameplay mechanics, procedural structures, and moral agency	Comparative analytical findings
Stage 3	Critical Discourse Analysis	Narrative, visual elements, gameplay systems	Examine ideological assumptions embedded within procedural systems	Critical interpretation
Stage 4	Theory Synthesis	Findings from previous stages	Integrate Representation Theory, Procedural Rhetoric, and Digital Religion	Procedural Muslim Hero Identity Framework

The analytical procedure presented in Table 2 demonstrates that this study does not employ the selected theories independently. Instead, each analytical stage progressively contributes to the reconstruction of a unified conceptual framework. Representation Theory provides the point of departure for understanding symbolic meanings embedded in Islamic video games; Procedural Rhetoric explains how those meanings are operationalized through gameplay mechanics; Digital Religion situates these procedural experiences within broader processes of religious identity negotiation; and Theory Synthesis integrates these perspectives into a coherent explanatory model. Accordingly, the methodological process is designed not merely to analyse existing games but to generate a new conceptual understanding of Muslim hero identity in interactive digital environments

3. Results and Discussion

Beyond Representation: Reinterpreting Muslim Heroes

The preceding discussion has demonstrated that existing scholarship on Islamic video games has predominantly examined Muslim heroes through the lens of representation. While this perspective has been instrumental in identifying orientalist stereotypes and documenting counter-representations developed by Muslim game designers, it remains insufficient for explaining how religious identity is experienced during gameplay. Representation identifies what is depicted, yet it cannot fully explain how players become participants in constructing religious meaning through interaction.

The distinction is particularly important because video games differ fundamentally from linear media. Films, novels, and television programmes communicate meaning primarily through narrative and visual representation, whereas digital games organize meaning through procedural systems that require players to make decisions, solve problems, negotiate constraints, and experience consequences. Accordingly, Muslim hero identity should not be understood solely as a representational object embedded within narrative texts but as an interactive identity continuously produced through gameplay.

This perspective challenges the assumption that replacing negative stereotypes with positive Muslim protagonists is sufficient to reconstruct Islamic identity within digital media. A game may feature a historically accurate Muslim hero while simultaneously employing gameplay mechanics that reward behaviours inconsistent with the ethical principles the narrative seeks to promote. Conversely, a comparatively simple visual representation may nevertheless cultivate meaningful religious reflection if its procedural structure encourages justice, cooperation, responsibility, and moral deliberation. Consequently, representational authenticity and procedural authenticity should be regarded as analytically distinct dimensions of identity construction.

The distinction between these dimensions becomes evident when comparing Islamic educational games with commercially oriented action games. In educational games such as *Abu Isa's Quest for Knowledge*, religious learning is embedded within procedural activities requiring players to seek knowledge, solve ethical challenges, and practice virtuous behaviour as conditions for progression. Here, Islamic identity is not merely narrated but enacted through participation. Likewise, *Quraish* does not simply portray early Islamic history; it invites players to assume strategic responsibility for protecting communities, allocating limited resources, and making decisions under conditions of uncertainty. The persuasive force of these games therefore resides not exclusively in their narratives but in the procedural experiences they generate (Šisler, 2013).

This observation supports the central proposition of Procedural Rhetoric: computational systems communicate values through the organization of action rather than representation alone. Rules determine what actions are possible, reward systems encourage particular forms of behaviour, and procedural constraints establish normative expectations that players gradually internalize through repeated interaction. Consequently, Muslim hero identity emerges not solely from symbolic representation but from sustained engagement with computational systems that organize ethical action (Bogost, 2007; Sicart, 2009).

Such an interpretation also expands current discussions within Digital Religion. Existing scholarship increasingly argues that digital technologies should not be understood merely as channels for transmitting religious messages but as environments in which religious practices and identities are actively negotiated. Applying this perspective to video games suggests that gameplay itself constitutes a site of religious identity formation, where players experience Islamic values through procedural participation rather than passive observation (Campbell, 2013; Campbell & Garner, 2016).

Accordingly, the transition from representation to procedural identity does not imply abandoning representational analysis. Instead, it requires repositioning representation as only one dimension within a broader interactive process. Visual symbols, historical narratives, and religious imagery remain significant because they establish the cultural context in which gameplay occurs. However, the actual formation of Muslim hero identity depends upon the interaction between representational meaning, procedural mechanics, player agency, and ethical experience. Identity therefore becomes an emergent property of gameplay rather than a fixed attribute attached to digital characters.

This reinterpretation provides the conceptual foundation for the following analysis, which examines how procedural structures transform Muslim heroes from representational figures into interactive ethical agents. Rather than asking whether Islamic video games portray Muslims positively or negatively, the analysis shifts toward a more fundamental question: how do procedural systems enable players to experience, negotiate, and internalize Muslim identity through gameplay?

Procedural Construction of Muslim Hero Identity

The transition from representation to procedural identity requires a fundamental reconsideration of how Muslim heroes are understood within interactive media. Rather than viewing identity as a static attribute attached to a digital character, this study argues that Muslim hero identity is procedurally constructed through the dynamic interaction between computational rules, player agency, moral decision-making, and religious meaning. In this

perspective, identity is not simply represented by the game but gradually emerges through the player's continuous engagement with the game's procedural system.

This argument builds upon the concept of procedural rhetoric, which explains that video games communicate ideas through rules and interactive processes rather than through representational symbols alone. According to Ian Bogost, procedural systems persuade by modelling how particular social, political, or ethical systems function. Consequently, meaning is generated not merely through narrative exposition but through the player's participation in computational procedures that reward, constrain, or prohibit specific actions (Bogost, 2007).

When applied to Islamic video games, procedural rhetoric reveals that Muslim hero identity is produced through several interconnected procedural dimensions.

The first dimension is narrative context, which provides the historical, religious, and cultural environment within which gameplay occurs. Narrative establishes the symbolic framework through which players recognize the protagonist as a Muslim hero, whether through historical settings, Qur'anic references, Islamic ethical values, or encounters with significant figures in Islamic civilization. Representation therefore remains important because it provides the interpretive context that gives procedural actions religious significance.

The second dimension consists of procedural mechanics, namely the rules, objectives, constraints, and reward systems that organize player interaction. Unlike narrative representation, procedural mechanics determine what players are permitted, encouraged, or discouraged from doing throughout the game.

The third dimension concerns player agency, referring to the capacity of players to make meaningful decisions within procedural constraints. Agency is central because identity cannot emerge without active participation. Whereas representation presents completed meanings to audiences, gameplay requires players to construct meanings through choice, experimentation, and adaptation.

The fourth dimension is moral agency, which constitutes the central mechanism through which procedural identity is internalized. Moral agency refers not simply to choosing between right and wrong but to experiencing the consequences of ethical decisions through gameplay itself.

The interaction among these four procedural dimensions suggests that Muslim hero identity should be understood as an emergent process rather than a predefined characteristic.

Unlike representational models, which assume that identity exists prior to player interaction, procedural identity develops progressively through gameplay. Narrative establishes cultural meaning, procedural mechanics structure possible actions, player agency activates participation, and moral agency transforms procedural experiences into ethical understanding. None of these dimensions alone is sufficient to construct Muslim hero identity. Rather, identity emerges through their continuous interaction within the procedural logic of the game.

Figure 2. The Procedural Construction of Muslim Hero Identity



Figure 2. The four interconnected procedural dimensions of Muslim hero identity.

Moral Agency as Interactive Religious Experience

The preceding analysis has demonstrated that Muslim hero identity cannot be adequately explained through representation alone. Nor can it be fully understood by examining procedural mechanics in isolation. Between procedural systems and identity formation lies a critical mediating dimension: moral agency. This study argues that moral agency constitutes the primary mechanism through which procedural interaction is transformed into religious experience. Through moral agency, players do not merely execute game mechanics but actively negotiate ethical responsibilities embedded within gameplay. Consequently, Islamic video games become environments in which religious identity is experienced through action rather than passive observation.

In Game Studies, moral agency refers to the player's capacity to make meaningful ethical decisions whose consequences shape both gameplay and narrative development. Unlike conventional media, where moral judgments are typically directed toward fictional characters, video games require players themselves to assume responsibility for actions performed within simulated environments. Every strategic decision, cooperative interaction, or moral dilemma therefore becomes part of an experiential learning process through which

players evaluate competing values and accept the consequences of their choices (Sicart, 2009; Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014).

From the perspective of Digital Religion, this process acquires additional significance because digital environments increasingly function as spaces in which religious practices and identities are actively negotiated. Religious identity is no longer understood solely as adherence to doctrinal beliefs but also as participation in digitally mediated practices that cultivate moral dispositions and communal belonging. Accordingly, gameplay should be interpreted not merely as entertainment but as a potential site of religious practice in which ethical values are experienced through interactive participation (Campbell, 2013; Campbell & Garner, 2016).

Within Islamic video games, moral agency is embedded in procedural systems that reward or discourage particular forms of behaviour. Success frequently depends upon cooperation, responsibility, perseverance, knowledge acquisition, and strategic restraint rather than unrestricted violence or individual domination. Consequently, procedural mechanics become ethical structures that guide players toward particular forms of conduct. The persuasive force of the game therefore lies not simply in presenting Islamic moral teachings but in enabling players to experience those teachings through repeated procedural interaction.

This distinction fundamentally differentiates Islamic video games from conventional religious media. In books, sermons, or films, moral instruction is primarily transmitted through narrative explanation or verbal exhortation. By contrast, digital games communicate ethical values through procedural participation. Players learn justice by making just decisions, responsibility by accepting the consequences of their actions, consultation through collaborative decision-making, and perseverance by overcoming challenges within the game's procedural constraints. Religious values therefore become embodied experiences rather than abstract propositions.

From an Islamic ethical perspective, this procedural process closely corresponds to the concept of *taklīf* (moral responsibility). Classical Islamic ethics understands human beings as morally accountable agents entrusted with the freedom to choose while remaining responsible before God for every action performed. Human dignity is therefore inseparable from accountability, intentionality, and ethical deliberation (al-Ghazālī, n.d.; Hallaq, 2009). This conception of moral responsibility resonates strongly with interactive gameplay, where meaningful choices derive their significance not from unlimited freedom but from responsible action within normative boundaries.

Accordingly, player agency in Islamic video games should not be interpreted as unrestricted autonomy. Instead, it reflects what may be termed bounded moral agency, in which procedural freedom operates within ethical constraints inspired by Islamic principles. The player remains free to make decisions, yet those decisions acquire meaning because they are evaluated according to moral consequences embedded within the game's procedural logic. Such an understanding parallels Islamic jurisprudential conceptions of human action, where freedom (*ikhtiyār*) is inseparable from accountability (*mas'ūliyyah*) and moral intention (*niyyah*) (Hallaq, 2009; Kamali, 2003).

The significance of bounded moral agency becomes particularly evident when examining Islamic educational games. Progression is commonly achieved not through maximizing destructive power but through demonstrating virtues such as patience (*ṣabr*), justice (*ʿadl*), trustworthiness (*amānah*), consultation (*shūrā*), and the pursuit of beneficial knowledge (*ṭalab al-ʿilm*). These virtues are not simply represented through dialogue or narrative but operationalized as procedural requirements for successful gameplay. Consequently, ethical conduct becomes inseparable from game progression, allowing players to experience Islamic values as practical competencies rather than merely symbolic ideals.

This procedural enactment of ethics transforms gameplay into what may be described as an interactive religious experience. The term does not imply that video games replace ritual worship or constitute religious practice in a theological sense. Rather, it refers to the experiential process through which players encounter, negotiate, and internalize religious values within digitally mediated environments. Religious experience therefore emerges

through participation in procedural systems that continually invite ethical reflection, responsibility, and self-evaluation.

Understanding gameplay as interactive religious experience also expands current discussions within Digital Religion. Previous studies have primarily examined online religious communities, digital rituals, virtual authority, and networked religious communication (Campbell, 2013; Hutchings, 2017). Comparatively little attention has been devoted to how computational procedures themselves shape religious subjectivity through interactive participation. By foregrounding moral agency as the bridge between procedural rhetoric and religious identity, this study argues that Islamic video games represent not merely digital representations of religion but procedural environments in which religious identity is progressively enacted.

Accordingly, Muslim hero identity should be understood as the cumulative outcome of repeated procedural experiences that cultivate ethical dispositions through interaction. Representation provides the symbolic language of identity, procedural rhetoric structures possible actions, and moral agency transforms those actions into lived religious experience. Identity is therefore neither predetermined by narrative nor freely invented by players; instead, it emerges through the continuous negotiation between procedural systems, ethical responsibility, and religious meaning.

This understanding represents an important theoretical extension of existing scholarship. While Procedural Rhetoric explains how games persuade through computational rules, and Digital Religion explains how religious identities are negotiated within digital environments, neither framework independently explains how ethical participation mediates the relationship between gameplay and Muslim identity formation. Moral agency thus functions as the conceptual bridge connecting these two traditions and constitutes the central mechanism through which procedural interaction becomes religious experience.

Toward a Procedural Muslim Hero Identity Framework

The preceding analysis has argued that Muslim hero identity in Islamic video games cannot be adequately explained through representational analysis alone. Rather, identity emerges from the continuous interaction between representational symbols, computational procedures, ethical decision-making, and religious experience. Building upon this argument, this study proposes the Procedural Muslim Hero Identity Framework (PMHIF) as an integrative conceptual model for analysing how Muslim identity is constructed through interactive gameplay.

Unlike existing approaches that privilege either narrative representation or procedural systems independently, the proposed framework conceptualizes Muslim hero identity as an emergent phenomenon produced through the interaction of multiple analytical dimensions. Identity is therefore understood neither as a fixed attribute possessed by digital characters nor as a purely subjective interpretation created by players. Instead, it develops through an iterative process in which representational meaning, gameplay mechanics, player participation, and moral responsibility mutually reinforce one another.

The framework consists of five interrelated dimensions that collectively explain the procedural construction of Muslim hero identity.

(1) Representational Foundation

The first dimension is the Representational Foundation, comprising the visual, narrative, historical, and symbolic elements through which Muslim heroes are initially introduced. This dimension includes religious symbols, historical narratives, Islamic ethical themes, linguistic expressions, and cultural settings that provide players with an interpretive context for understanding the protagonist.

Representation remains indispensable because it establishes the semantic framework within which procedural interaction acquires religious meaning. Without representational grounding, gameplay mechanics would operate merely as abstract computational systems lacking cultural and theological significance.

(2) Procedural System

The second dimension is the Procedural System, referring to the computational rules that organize gameplay. This dimension encompasses objectives, reward structures, constraints, progression systems, strategic interactions, and simulated social relationships.

Following Procedural Rhetoric, the framework argues that these computational procedures function rhetorically by persuading players through action rather than verbal explanation. Islamic values therefore become embedded within gameplay mechanics instead of being communicated exclusively through narrative discourse. The procedural system determines not only what players are capable of doing but also what forms of behaviour are implicitly encouraged or discouraged throughout gameplay (Bogost, 2007; Juul, 2005).

(3) Interactive Moral Agency

The third dimension, Interactive Moral Agency, constitutes the central mechanism of the framework.

Whereas representation provides meaning and procedural systems organize action, moral agency explains how players transform procedural interaction into ethical experience. During gameplay, players repeatedly encounter situations requiring judgment, responsibility, cooperation, restraint, sacrifice, and accountability.

These decisions are not external evaluations of fictional characters; rather, they are actions personally performed by players within the game's procedural environment. Consequently, ethical reflection emerges through participation instead of observation.

Interactive Moral Agency therefore functions as the principal bridge connecting computational procedures with religious identity formation.

(4) Religious Meaning-Making

The fourth dimension is Religious Meaning-Making, referring to the interpretive process through which procedural experiences are understood within an Islamic moral framework.

Religious meaning does not arise automatically from gameplay. Instead, players interpret procedural experiences through prior religious knowledge, cultural background, historical understanding, and personal ethical reflection. Consequently, the same gameplay experience may produce different religious interpretations depending upon the player's interpretive horizon.

This dimension integrates insights from Digital Religion by recognizing that religious identity is continuously negotiated within digital environments rather than merely transmitted through digital media (Campbell, 2013; Campbell & Garner, 2016).

(5) Procedural Muslim Hero Identity

The final dimension is Procedural Muslim Hero Identity, representing the cumulative outcome of the preceding four dimensions.

Within this framework, Muslim hero identity is conceptualized not as a static narrative category but as an emergent identity continuously reconstructed through interaction.

This identity possesses several distinguishing characteristics. First, it is procedural, because it develops through repeated engagement with computational systems. Second, it is ethical, because identity is shaped through moral responsibility rather than symbolic affiliation alone. Third, it is participatory, because players actively construct identity through decision-making instead of passively receiving predetermined meanings. Finally, it is religiously situated, because ethical experiences are interpreted within Islamic moral and cultural traditions.

Accordingly, Muslim hero identity should be understood as a dynamic process of becoming rather than a fixed representational status.

Figure 3. Procedural Muslim Hero Identity Framework (PMHIF)

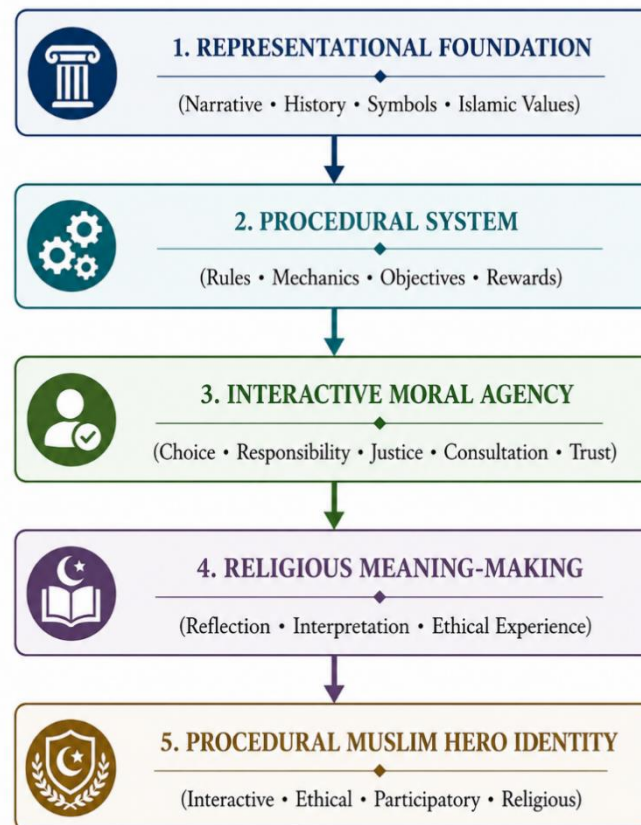


Figure 3. The five interrelated dimensions of the Procedural Muslim Hero Identity Framework (PMHIF).

The framework proposed in this study extends previous scholarship in three important respects.

First, it expands Representation Theory by demonstrating that symbolic representation alone cannot adequately explain identity formation within interactive media.

Second, it extends Procedural Rhetoric by incorporating religious meaning and ethical responsibility as central analytical categories, thereby moving beyond predominantly political or educational applications of procedural systems.

Third, it enriches Digital Religion scholarship by conceptualizing gameplay as an interactive environment in which Muslim identity is procedurally enacted rather than merely represented.

Consequently, the PMHIF provides an interdisciplinary analytical model capable of bridging Media Studies, Game Studies, Digital Religion, and Islamic Ethics. Beyond its application to Islamic video games, the framework offers a transferable conceptual foundation for future research examining the construction of religious identities across a wide range of interactive digital environments.

Table 3. Comparison between Existing Theoretical Approaches and the Procedural Muslim Hero Identity Framework

Analytical Dimension	Representation Theory	Procedural Rhetoric	Digital Religion	PMHIF (This Study)
Primary Focus	Visual and narrative representation	Computational rules and persuasion	Religious practice in digital environments	Procedural construction of Muslim hero identity

Unit of Analysis	Images, narratives, symbols	Rules, mechanics, procedural systems	Digital religious interaction	Representation, mechanics, agency, ethics, and meaning-making
Role of the Player	Audience or interpreter	Active participant	Religious participant	Interactive moral agent
Nature of Identity	Represented	Performed through gameplay	Negotiated in digital contexts	Emergent through procedural interaction
Role of Ethics	Implicit	Embedded in procedural rules	Embedded in religious practice	Central mechanism of identity formation
Religious Dimension	Symbolic representation	Generally absent	Religious communication and practice	Interactive religious experience
Analytical Outcome	Interpretation of representation	Explanation of procedural persuasion	Understanding digital religiosity	Procedural Muslim Hero Identity Framework (PMHIF)

Table 3 demonstrates that the PMHIF does not replace existing theoretical approaches but rather integrates their principal analytical strengths into a unified framework. Representation Theory remains indispensable for explaining how Muslim heroes acquire symbolic and cultural meaning. Procedural Rhetoric contributes an understanding of how gameplay mechanics communicate values through computational systems, while Digital Religion explains how religious identities are negotiated within digitally mediated environments.

However, none of these approaches independently explains how Muslim hero identity emerges through the interaction of representation, gameplay mechanics, moral agency, and religious interpretation. The PMHIF addresses this theoretical gap by conceptualizing identity as an emergent process rather than a static representational attribute or a purely procedural effect. In doing so, the framework provides a more comprehensive analytical model capable of explaining how Islamic values are enacted through interactive gameplay.

The comparison also clarifies the principal theoretical contribution of this study. Rather than positioning procedural rhetoric and digital religion as competing perspectives, the PMHIF demonstrates their complementarity. Procedural systems structure ethical possibilities, while religious meaning-making transforms those procedural experiences into identity formation. Consequently, Muslim hero identity is understood as the cumulative outcome of interaction among representational, procedural, ethical, and religious dimensions.

Theoretical Implications for Game Studies

The Procedural Muslim Hero Identity Framework (PMHIF) proposed in this study contributes to contemporary Game Studies by extending the analytical scope of procedural rhetoric beyond its conventional applications in political communication, education, and persuasive technology. Existing scholarship has primarily employed procedural rhetoric to explain how computational rules persuade players about political systems, economic structures, or social processes. While these applications have demonstrated the expressive capacity of procedural systems, comparatively little attention has been devoted to religion as a domain of procedural persuasion (Bogost, 2007; Sicart, 2009).

The present study argues that religious identity is not merely represented within video games but procedurally enacted through gameplay. This shift expands procedural rhetoric from a theory of computational persuasion into a framework capable of explaining identity formation. Rather than viewing gameplay as a vehicle for transmitting ideological messages, the PMHIF conceptualizes gameplay as an interactive environment in which ethical dispositions and religious subjectivities emerge through repeated engagement with procedural systems.

This perspective also complements recent developments in Game Studies that increasingly conceptualize games as systems of meaning-making rather than entertainment products alone. Rules, mechanics, and reward structures are understood not only as design components but also as cultural mechanisms that shape how players interpret responsibility, justice, cooperation, and moral choice. Consequently, procedural systems should be regarded as environments for ethical formation rather than merely platforms for strategic interaction (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004; Juul, 2005).

The framework therefore broadens the explanatory capacity of procedural rhetoric by demonstrating that computational procedures may communicate not only political arguments but also religious values, ethical responsibilities, and identity performances. This represents a significant theoretical extension because it integrates computational systems with questions traditionally examined within religious and cultural studies.

Rethinking Digital Religion through Procedural Experience

The findings also contribute to Digital Religion scholarship by proposing that gameplay constitutes a distinctive form of digitally mediated religious experience. Previous studies have largely examined digital religion through online communities, virtual rituals, religious authority, social networking platforms, and digital communication. These studies have convincingly demonstrated that digital technologies reshape religious practices and institutional structures (Campbell, 2013; Campbell & Garner, 2016).

However, video games differ fundamentally from other forms of digital media because they require continuous interaction. Religious meaning is therefore not simply consumed but enacted through procedural participation. Within Islamic video games, ethical principles become embedded in computational systems that reward particular forms of conduct while discouraging others. As players repeatedly negotiate these procedural environments, religious identity becomes progressively constituted through experience rather than representation alone.

This understanding challenges the implicit assumption that digital religion primarily concerns communication or information exchange. Instead, the PMHIF emphasizes procedural experience as an equally important dimension of digital religiosity. Religious identity emerges not only from exposure to Islamic narratives but also from repeated participation in systems that cultivate ethical reflection, responsibility, and moral judgment.

Accordingly, the study introduces the concept of interactive religious experience, referring to the process by which players encounter religious values through computational interaction. This concept complements existing Digital Religion scholarship by highlighting procedural participation as a significant mode of religious engagement within digital environments.

Reframing Muslim Hero Identity in Islamic Digital Media

Perhaps the most important implication of this study concerns the conceptualization of Muslim hero identity itself.

Previous scholarship has predominantly analysed Muslim heroes as representational figures whose significance derives from visual appearance, historical narratives, or ideological symbolism. Such analyses remain valuable because they reveal how media shape public perceptions of Islam and Muslims. Nevertheless, they do not fully explain how players participate in constructing Muslim identity through gameplay.

The PMHIF reconceptualizes Muslim hero identity as an emergent and performative process. Identity is not simply attached to a fictional protagonist but develops through the interaction of representation, procedural systems, moral agency, and religious interpretation. Consequently, becoming a Muslim hero is understood less as adopting a predefined character and more as participating in an ethical process of decision-making and responsibility.

This reconceptualization also resonates with broader discussions concerning identity performance in contemporary social theory. Rather than treating identity as a stable possession, the framework understands identity as continuously enacted through repeated practices situated within institutional and cultural contexts (Butler, 1990; Goffman, 1959). Applied to Islamic video games, this perspective suggests that Muslim identity is neither exclusively theological nor purely representational but simultaneously computational, ethical, and experiential.

Such an understanding may also inform future game design. Developers seeking to produce Islamic educational games should pay greater attention to procedural ethics rather than relying exclusively on religious symbols or historical narratives. Embedding Islamic values within gameplay mechanics may cultivate more meaningful forms of engagement than merely increasing the quantity of explicit religious content. Thus, educational effectiveness depends not only on representational authenticity but also on procedural coherence between narrative, mechanics, and ethical objectives.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its theoretical contributions, this study has several limitations.

First, the PMHIF is developed as a conceptual framework based on theory synthesis and qualitative analysis rather than empirical observation of player behaviour. Consequently, the framework explains how Muslim hero identity may be procedurally constructed but does not directly examine how different players interpret or experience these procedural systems in practice.

Second, the discussion focuses primarily on Islamic video games that intentionally incorporate Islamic historical or educational themes. Whether the proposed framework is equally applicable to mainstream commercial games featuring Muslim protagonists remains an open empirical question.

Third, the present analysis concentrates on procedural identity from the perspective of game design and interaction. Additional variables—including cultural background, theological orientation, gender, age, gaming literacy, and prior religious experience—may significantly influence how procedural systems are interpreted by different communities of players.

Future research should therefore combine the PMHIF with empirical methodologies such as ethnographic observation, gameplay studies, player interviews, digital ethnography, and experimental game analysis. Comparative studies involving Muslim and non-Muslim players may further illuminate how procedural systems generate diverse forms of religious interpretation across different cultural contexts.

Moreover, future scholarship may explore the applicability of the PMHIF beyond Islamic video games. Similar analytical frameworks could be developed to investigate procedural constructions of identity within Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, or other religious digital environments, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of religion in interactive media.

Ultimately, the PMHIF should be understood not as a definitive theory but as a conceptual foundation for future interdisciplinary research connecting Game Studies, Digital Religion, Islamic Ethics, and Interactive Media Studies.

4. Conclusions and Suggestions

This study has argued that Muslim hero identity in Islamic video games cannot be adequately understood through representational analysis alone. While previous scholarship has primarily examined visual, narrative, and symbolic portrayals of Muslims, it has paid comparatively little attention to how gameplay mechanics contribute to identity formation. By

shifting the analytical focus from representation to procedural interaction, this article demonstrates that Muslim identity emerges through the interplay of computational systems, player agency, moral responsibility, and religious meaning-making.

The study further shows that integrating Procedural Rhetoric and Digital Religion provides a more comprehensive framework for explaining how religious identity is enacted in interactive media. Rather than functioning merely as representational artefacts, Islamic video games become procedural environments in which ethical values are experienced through participation. Gameplay thus serves not only as a medium of entertainment but also as a space where religious identity is negotiated through meaningful action and moral choice.

The principal contribution of this article is the development of the Procedural Muslim Hero Identity Framework (PMHIF), which conceptualizes Muslim hero identity as an emergent process generated through five interconnected dimensions: Representational Foundation, Procedural System, Interactive Moral Agency, Religious Meaning-Making, and Procedural Muslim Hero Identity. By integrating Representation Theory, Procedural Rhetoric, Digital Religion, and Islamic ethics, the framework offers a new conceptual model for analysing religious identity in interactive digital media.

Beyond its theoretical contribution, the PMHIF also provides practical implications for the design of Islamic educational games. It suggests that Islamic values should be embedded within gameplay mechanics and decision-making systems rather than conveyed solely through narrative or visual symbolism. In this way, ethical principles become procedural experiences that encourage meaningful player engagement.

This study is limited by its conceptual orientation and has not empirically examined how players experience or interpret procedural identity formation. Future research should therefore test the PMHIF through qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods studies involving diverse gaming communities and comparative analyses across different religious and cultural contexts.

Ultimately, this article argues that understanding Muslim hero identity requires moving beyond representation toward a procedural understanding of identity formation. The PMHIF provides a conceptual foundation for future interdisciplinary research connecting Game Studies, Digital Religion, Islamic Studies, and interactive media, while demonstrating that video games can function not only as sites of representation but also as environments in which religious identity is actively experienced and reconstructed through gameplay

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