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Online and Offline

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Nico Prucha¹

Worldwide Online Jihad versus the Gaming Industry Reloaded – Ventures of the Web

“In a similar way, thanks to the Internet, there is no shortage of individuals who want to be the next al-Qaeda Idol.”²

“What makes the US-forces best: We can put accurate fire on our enemy. Look at where we are going, don’t show anything to the enemy. Again, that is how we use cover and that is how we are going to go ahead to use cover in this game as well. We always want to make sure we are using these things using real-world tactics because our game is made of real-world tactics [and will] help you survive.”³

With abundant jihadist material freely available online and with an ever present crowd of sympathizers at hand, the nature of al-Qa’ida’s (AQ) spheres on the internet have changed, adapted, increased and simply synchronized with the technical developments of the World Wide Web over time. Independent of AQ’s actual size and its operational status, the genre, the corpus, the narrative of its online published jihadist materials remain both active and effective. Pseudo AQ members and sympathizers can have a double life, adhering to the jihadist narrative and iconography online while remaining – more or less – subjugated to their individual surrounding and social environment. This phenomena, described as “homegrown radicalism” or “homegrown terrorists”, if decisive enough to attempt to undertake actual operations in the real, offline, world, is certainly the next major burden for security agencies. As Jarret Brachman and Alex Levine put it, “there is a lower barrier for entry to becoming a practicing extremist on the Internet than there is in the real world” (Brachman/Levine 2011: 32). Citing a posting of the member “AbdulMatin” (aka “Abu Sayyaf”) of the English-language *Islamic Awakening Forum*, Brachman and Levine further

1 The author would like to thank Terry Pattar for reviewing the article and for his never-ending patience.

2 You Too Can Be Awlaki!, Jarret Brachman and Alix Levine, <http://jarretbrachman.net/?p=1157> (11.02.2011, this date applies to all links in this document, unless otherwise noted).

3 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zgzP9ckIq0> – David Tractenberg is a military consultant with combat experience for the gaming industry. In this video, he introduces the first-person-shooter “Breach” which innovatively uses real-world-physics, enabling players to use real-world military tactics.

underline the need to carefully watch and monitor the internet in all its aspects in regard of online-radicalization:

“Islam is not about big talk, those who engage in it in life and esp. online without backing it up are deficient in one sense or another, you can see it clearly when people say things to extreme you have no doubt that this is just an outlet for their frustrations. Oh you who believe why do you say that in which you do not do? It’s easy to live a double life these days – a virtual life and a real one.” (Brachman/Levine 2011: 32)⁴

As AQ & co⁵ are utilizing the internet to its outmost means, the intention of this article is to provide the reader with some observations of this *modus operandi* and to provide a comparison with another, similarly adventurous as well as industrious group online: The worldwide Gaming Industry (GI). As the internet, with all its channels and by all its means, is open to anyone and any organization, it provides a public room for followers and members of any genre.

“Individuals can openly and loudly cheer for al-Qaeda’s ideology by replicating its content in the form of videos, audio files, composite images and monographs.”

The most important aspect, however, as Brachman and Levine further note, is that

“beyond replicating content, users can actually replicate themselves, or at least virtual projections of themselves. They can register an unlimited number of accounts on social networking websites. They can start as many blogs as they want and tweet without constraint” (Brachman/Levine 2011: 34)

Therefore, it may be surprising – and surely somewhat controversial – to compare the worldwide online jihad with another avant-gardist, in a purely technical stance, sphere of the internet who professionally and innovatively promote their content online (=publicly). Paired with an attempt to ‘recruit’, at least ‘bind’ and somewhat ‘indoctrinate’ users, the (GI) deploys pop-cultural artwork and slogans on all channels of the internet. Ranging from classical websites, to forums, blogs, gaming platforms and all outlets of the social media, users reproduce within and without ‘official’ webspaces. The GI’s mechanisms to use the Internet are closely related to how another technically adept generation

4 Brachman and Levine provide the source of the following posting by AbdulMatin, “Abu Sayyaf” as: *Islamic Awakening Forum*, November 2008, <http://forums.awakening.com/f18/abu-sayyaf/18624/index3.html>, (accessed November 1, 2010).

5 By al-Qa’ida & co I comprehend and grasp ideological related sunni jihadi groups such as the “Islamic Army of Iraq” (<http://iaisite.org/>), “Jama’at Ansar al-Sunna” (Iraq – <http://www.ansar11.org/>), the Somalia based Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin (active primarily within AQ affiliated jihad-forums) and other torrents. This includes various propaganda subgroups directly related to AQ, such as – for example – the Sada al-Malahim Media Foundation (al-Qa’ida on the Arab Peninsula, Yemen), al-Fajr (Qa’idat al-Jihad (global)) or al-Furqan (Islamic State of Iraq, AQ in Iraq).

understands and considers the internet, namely the followers, the armchair jihadists and actual fighters, bomb makers and the whole leadership caste of AQ. Together with user input and user generated content, which is more than welcome and a logical evolution of the participation enabled internet. While AQ sympathizers define the internet as the new technology for modern missionary work and in order to “convey jihadist deeds into a sophisticated phase, enabling us to compete and to successfully challenge the media of the enemies” (al-‘Amili 2010),⁶ the GI is part of a young medium that dwells within the spheres of its innovative global multiplayer games. Both groups move within their individual specific genre-based cluster or web-genre (Stein / Meyer zu Eissen 2006).⁷

The sympathizers of the GI as much as of AQ or any other online genre use all available channels of the contemporary internet for consumption. AQ primarily uses online forums for its sympathizers and adherents as platforms for exchange and as the first go-to areas to acquire the newest jihadist propaganda (‘official’ writings, statements, guidelines and, most important, *jihad* videos). Moreover, AQ also uses social media sites such as Facebook (personal profiles and groups) or YouTube (individual users and channels) to promote its ideology and reasoning. The GI does this as well, while online forums of forthcoming games are created where its fans and potential buyers acquire the newest info and development status while gaming companies just as much promote its products by all means of the web with web-based advertisement: professionally made pictures, trailers, gameplay movies on YouTube; advertisement on social media sites. Fans of either genre have reactionary abilities by producing their own videos or pictures favoring their individual genre. For the GI this includes fan-made-movies of popular games, such as Valve’s “Left 4 Dead”⁸, in which a group of four survivors team up against hordes of attacking zombies.⁹ Some highly devoted fans have uploaded an “official teaser with actual footage for the upcoming

6 Abu Sa’ad al-‘Amili is a regular contributor within jihadist forums, publishing primarily for a media group calling itself al-Mas’ada. In this document al-‘Amili writes about “Realities and the Future of Jihadist Torrents.” Brynjar Lia calls him “a prolific “Internet Shaykh” who has gained very high standing on jihadi webforums over the past few years” in his posting *Jihadis Debate Egypt* (3), Jihadica, <http://www.jihadica.com/jihadis-debate-egypt-3/> 08.02. 2011.

7 http://www.uni-weimar.de/medien/webis/publications/downloads/papers/stein_2006k.pdf.

8 <http://www.l4d.com/l4d/home.php>.

9 The game is highly successful and had its first sequel, about a year later. “Left 4 Dead 2” has generated about 36 million US Dollars, <http://news.bigdownload.com/2011/02/03/study-claims-steam-generated-970-million-in-revenue-in-2010/>. Part of the success of the “Left 4 Dead” games is the gameplay. It is essential to cooperate in order to survive, players are highly dependent on the fellow players good will and support.

unofficial movie” on YouTube¹⁰, providing updates on the forthcoming movie on their Facebook group.¹¹

The main observation is threefold:

1. The phenomena of (individual) armchair jihadists online,
2. Who move freely throughout the Internet and also employ
3. Elements taken from popular and mainstream games and distort these elements for the sake of jihadists online propaganda.

All level access: The Internet as the medium for armchair jihadists

One of the first “armchair jihadists” was perhaps Babar Ahmad who gained some fame for promoting radical views and who was arrested in 2004 (Musharbash 2006: 104–107). Allegedly, Ahmad “solicited funds for rebels in Chechnya and Afghanistan on the internet during the 1990 s.”¹² His supporters have started an online campaign entitled “Free Babar Ahmad – British Justice for British Citizens”¹³ with corresponding communication channels via Twitter¹⁴ and a Facebook group.¹⁵ The internet is not necessarily a safe haven for the ‘free radicals’, but it certainly is a huge and growing database, a corpus and a genre of its own, of jihadist materials of all kinds that infiltrate every aspect of the contemporary web. Thus, immediacy as well as interactivity is granted. One of the most renowned, and more recent, armchair jihadist is Younis Tsouli. He gained fame with his alias “Irhabi 007” (“Terrorist 007”) and he was one of the first generation of online jihad sympathizers who used his technical skills to become one of AQ’s chief networkers in the West.¹⁶ Yusuf al-‘Uyairi, one of the co-founders of the Saudi AQ branch in 2003, also ran a website with highly radical content which may best be described as a test run for the subsequently

10 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-aEbujsjfQ>. In the case of “The Lord of the Rings”, a fan movie, by a group calling itself “Independent Online Cinema” scored nearly 6.5 million clicks on YouTube with their 40 minute long “The Hunt for Gollum: Prequel of the Lords of the Ring”.

11 Which is scheduled for Fall 2011: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/LEFT-4-DEAD-THE-MOVIE/183947398465>.

12 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2010/aug/12/babar-ahmad-timeline> (21. 12. 2010).

13 <http://www.freebabarahmad.com/> (07.01.2011).

14 <http://twitter.com/#!/FreeBabarAhmad/>. The Twitter account is described as “Babar Ahmad @FreeBabarAhmad / London / Babar Ahmad is a 34 year old British Muslim and the longest detained-without-charge British detainee held as part of the global ‘war on terror’. <http://www.freebabarahmad.com>”.

15 <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2487557572>. Both Twitter and Facebook accounts are also linked.

16 http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4156/is_20080120/ai_n21206775/.

developed media campaign, including an Arabic e-zine, *The Voice of Jihad* (Prucha 2010).

The phenomenon of the armchair jihadist has subsequently evolved with AQ's extensive use of the Internet. Any user within the virtual spheres of AQ can consume and participate by all means. If a user chooses to reflect intellectually on specific writings and notions of *jihad*, he certainly has the potential to do so within online forums. The forums are also the main place where not only AQ ringleaders and media institutions disseminate their content first-hand but also where individual members can contribute by uploading and sharing any home-made material with the like-minded.

While fans of certain games make their own movies, the *online jihad* side of this phenomena is expressed equivalent in regard of fan-made *jihad*-movies, praising (alive) or eulogizing (killed) outstanding AQ leaders and commanders or by simply refurbishing sequences of 'official' jihadist movies, depicting violent operations and placing these sequences in a different context of the ideology. Mostly, such home-made videos are a mash up of sequences taken from other movies of *jihad*. These films, I will refer to as 'compilations' include a movie uploaded by a sympathizer of the now defunct *al-Ekhlaas* forum in 2008. The 42-minute long video is entitled "Pain of the USA Army" and is a compilation of various jihadist videos, starting with the, at the time, logo of the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF). Sequences of wounded US-Soldiers in Iraq being rushed to military doctors follow with the actual Arabic title of the video "*fa-innahum ya'lamuna*" ("so they are suffering hardship"). This is a reference to the Quran 4:104, which states:

"Do not be faint-hearted in pursuing the enemy: if you are suffering hardship, so are they, but you hope to receive something from God for which they cannot hope. God is all knowing and wise" (Haleem 2010: 96)

By just cherry-picking a short part of the verse (*Surah al-nisa'*) a common notion is reflected and scenes of extreme violence are subtly (and in the video directly) justified. Any setback or pain endured is part of a greater religious duty and worship whereas any *Mujahid* shall rest assured that his enemies – the enemies of God – are suffering likewise, but are not to expect any reward after departing this world (*dunya*) (al-'Amili 2005).¹⁷

The first sequence is accompanied by a *nashid*, a-cappella styled chanting. Crying uniformed American servicemen, severely wounded combatants are rushed to a emergency room, body parts are amputated and fatally wounded US-soldiers are placed in the morgue of a US-Army operated field hospital in Baghdad. This sequence is followed by the first and only video of Abu Mus'ab al-

¹⁷ <http://tawhed.ws/r?i=rqy4nyeo>.

Zarqawi, who addresses the Islamic *umma*. The logo of this sequence changes, as, at the time (2006), Zarqawi operated as leader of the *Shura al-Mujahidin*. The video is edited and followed shortly after by the third sequence, which is taken from an older video, whereas al-Zarqawi had been initially the leader of the Iraq-based group *Tawhed wa-l-Jihad*, depicting “military preparations [of the *Mujahidin*] in al-Madi”. What subsequently follows is in great parts taken from an American made documentary. The US-based private channel *Home Box Office* (HBO) aired its documentary “Baghdad ER”¹⁸ in 2006 – the documentary was obviously seen by jihadist sympathizers and hence distorted for jihadist propaganda. Pictures of wounded soldiers are displayed while Zarqawi’s voice is constantly present. Whoever edited this movie then decided to show Abu Yahya al-Libi preaching in Afghanistan (taken from a *Labayka* video) as well as Abu Nasir al-Qahtani, with whom al-Libi managed to escape the US-Army operated prison at Baghram Air Force Base, Afghanistan.¹⁹ The video is concluded by Ayman al-Zawahiri’s eulogy (*as-Sahab* video, 2006) of the “*amir al-istishhadiyyin*”²⁰, Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi. First the viewer reads “Watch the sadness of the pigs over a colleague of theirs after he perished” with the camera showing a dead soldier despite the ER treatment. “In a place where the Americans have killed thousands of innocent Muslims.” The deceased is brought away in a black body bag, we read: “The annihilated pig is being transported into hell and [cast into] a miserable fate. This is your fate, soldier of the Cross.” After this short sequence, Ayman al-Zawahiri speaks:

“As for the Americans, I say to them: Yes, our heroic, fearless, the daring *istishhadiyya* seeker, death embracing chief, Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi – may God have mercy with him – has been killed among us. So, tell me, how your drunken deserters die. Tell me, how many of you have really been killed and how much your economy lost and how the morale of your troops is collapsing. And tell me about the extend the Muslims hatred of you and moreover the extend of hatred shown to you by your oppressed victims worldwide (...). You are facing neither individuals nor organizations, rather, you are facing the Islamic *ummah* in which flows the spirit of *Jihad*” (al-Zawahiri, *as-Sahab* video, 2006).

According to the individuals’ ability and the personal favored appeal of the jihadist propaganda spectrum, the personal propaganda is formed, created and then (re-) loaded within the genre of the online jihadist sphere. While to some

18 <http://store.hbo.com/detail.php?p=100243>; for a description: http://www.democracynow.org/2006/5/17/baghdad_er_documentary_on_us_military.

19 Four men had fled Baghram prison and later appeared in two videos telling their tales (*innahum qadimun* part 1 and 2). Besides Abu Yahya, Abu Nasir al-Qahtani (re-captured in late 2006), Faruq al-Iraqi (killed by British forces in Iraq, 2006) and Abu’l-Layth al-Libi (killed by a US-Predator drone in 2008/09) tell their tales.

20 “The leader of the suicide-bombers” is the name mostly accrediting al-Zarqawi.

extent fan-produced video compilations as described above had been quite popular and frequent, the majority now has shifted to home-made propaganda pictures. A popular image is the display of killed children as the ultimate argument to justify violent, terrorist, reactions – defined as justice.



As the *Shumukh al-Islam* user “Zinad al-Haqq” (the hammers of truth) displayed graphically by a gif-animation containing four pictures: “They destroy our houses; they kill our children; The terrorist. I am a Muslim. I am with him.”²¹

21 A picture of a wounded boy lying on a stretcher reaching out in direction of the viewer, his face in terror, is without any text.

<http://www.shamikh1.net/vb/showthread.php?t=93146> (10.02.2011). The slogan “the terrorist; I am Muslim; I am with him” has become somewhat popular in the last years, whereas the jihadists attempt to hijack the notion “terrorist” for themselves. It runs along the lines that if terrorism is the term applied by the enemies than I am a terrorist, fighting for justice and against injustice, tyranny and oppression. Hamad bin Abdallah al-Humaydi, *We are terrorists, so, who are you??* The Voice of Jihad Series, 2006.

A note regarding organization via the Internet

The individual users, who favor their individual genres have the ability to repost, republish and re-upload, in short: to multiply any web-based content by their behavior and according to their skills online. This includes posting links, pictures, texts on Facebook profiles, creating special Facebook groups, on individual YouTube channels, participating in 'official', 'semi-official' and 'non-official' forums, by blogging or by simply republishing content out of conviction on individual websites.

This may sound familiar to any contemporary surfer of the Internet. Using all channels of the internet, particularly popular ones where one's voice and conviction is most likely received, is, naturally, open for any individual or group. Social media is used more and more frequently by social or protest movements, who just as much use all levels and all channels of the internet, ranging from Facebook to YouTube, from blogs to online forums, from Twitter to MySpace and so on. The "followers" and "clouds" are free in their specific "free culture"²² of the internet (Lanier 2010: 77–79).

The Internet as a medium is naturally being used and exploited by all kinds of interest groups, organizations and genres. It must be noted that the jihadist sphere of the Internet is quite assiduous and particularly driven to exploit other groups online, claiming, for example, protest-movements in Arabic countries as their product or simply attempting to hijack legitimate civil movements by proclaiming these as potential future AQ members who are trying to dispose dictators in the Middle East. Or by simply claiming that the goals are the same, whereas the wave of protests in Arabic countries of January 2011 has absolutely nothing to do with fundamental Islam, AQ or *jihad* in any sense. Jihadist forums discuss the developments and post within their forums the links to the Facebook groups of "The Day of Anger" (*yawm al-ghadab*). This is also a natural expression of the Internet, a link is quickly posted and a posting is quickly written.²³ In regard of social movements, the Internet is the key-driver of communication of exchanging useful information. This includes the flow of non-controllable information bypassing repressive governments to the outside world as

22 To use a modern terming of the contemporary internet – "followers" is derived from the online service "twitter" (www.twitter.com) while the "clouds" are in its sense the spheres crafted and maintained by individuals who, within a specific cloud or sphere, adhere to a certain genre of any kind.

23 For example the *Shumukh al-Islam* forum member Qannas al-Hesbah issued a posting with a link to the "Day of Anger" in Libya. Only in Libya it was called "the day of the shuhada". "The Day of Anger" was sparked by a Tunisian, non-jihadist, non-religious, social movement of angry citizens tired of living under the oppression of dictators, <http://www.shamikh1.net/vb/showthread.php?t=92168>.

well as “important tactical findings” by fellow revolutionaries in Tunisia to the Egyptians on January 29, 2011, just four days after protest erupted at Cairo’s Tahrir Square.²⁴ Jihadists attempt to utilize the situation in Egypt but these are

“popular uprisings [and] are just about the complete opposite of everything al-Qaida stands for: they are non-violent, mass-based, popular, all-inclusive, mostly secular, democratic, and perhaps most important: they work!”²⁵

When riots in Tunisia broke out, the AQ department for North Africa (AQIM) was quickly to respond when its leader issued a message to “support and aid the *intifada* of our people in Tunisia”. Its leader Abu Mus’ab Abd al-Wudud read out in a audio message published in jihadist forums on January 13, 2011 to “send us your sons, so that we can train them in handling weapons and to obtain military knowledge”. In a parallel move, al-Wudud attempted to capitalize on the unfolding civil protest movement against the Bouteflika regime by issuing “a call to avenge our people in Algeria.” While the social movements of Tunisia and Egypt are quite successful and make use of social media to express their demands and rights, AQ seems to be a step behind and yet desperately uses its online channels in a move to hijack these social movements, but to no avail.

Similar behavioral patterns online – overlapping worlds

As an example on how the Internet is in motion and a passageway for each and every potential user on the planet, we shall now exclusively focus on the two online entities, namely the Gaming Industry and al-Qa’ida’s endeavors in cyberspace. In the meantime, both are established cultural subgroups who are in great parts exclusively using the Internet. Without it, both groups would have less influence and potential in the offline world. And both are somewhat a product of this specific fast changing and influential development. The bonus of the GI is its vast amounts of (online/multiplayer) games offering complex platforms for users to hook up, join and play with or versus other human players.²⁶ At the same time, specific games and products within specific gaming

24 <http://werebuild.eu/wiki/Image:1296299426067.jpg#filehistory> – a broad civil movement started peacefully protesting against the Mubarak regime on January 25, 2011. After peaceful protests in Tunisia led to the ousting of long-term dictator Ben Ali, Tunisians are keen to disseminate useful findings. This includes to protect oneself against the potential police brutality as well as advice such as carrying black spray paint to blacken to windshields of armored police cars.

25 Lia, *Jihadis Debate Egypt (3)*, <http://www.jihadica.com/jihadis-debate-egypt-3/>.

26 But also against Artificial Intelligence, computer controlled opponents and such. In the meantime various game modes are almost standard for most games of, for example, the shooter genre.

platforms or forums are advertised, marketed and favored by the crowd present. Political interest groups such as AQ & co use the Internet by all means to disseminate their content (writings, videos, audios) and enable the users to contribute to the growing corpus of the *jihad* genre. Both groups can attain feedback and react to criticism. While surfing the Internet over the past years, being within AQ's online spheres as well as keeping track of recent developments of the GI (out of personal curiosity, of course), the similarities of both of these characteristic groups is their apparent appeal to a particularly younger generation, who possess an outstanding IT-fluency. With the jihadist sympathizers increasing in size and always being up to date in regard of technical developments, games have also entered the spheres of AQ – while in parts the virtual iconography of military-style shooters have influenced in some cases the design of jihadist propaganda and are sometimes even enthusiastically described as 'training' outlets for the future *Mujahid*.

The technical diversity with the possibilities of colorful, intercultural and multilingual filmed and audio recorded data as well as writings in general make up wide parts of the richness of the contemporary internet. The mentioned possibilities are in parts developed and carried by those who use the Internet, namely the individual user and specific online groups. Innovation is inspired and crafted by "user generated content" or, by user demand, with individuals voicing their complaints and aspirations in their forums and within their online societies.

Worlds and elements appear to be overlapping. One could rely on Betsy Book's list of "six features of virtual worlds", where she lists common denominators for gaming worlds and social worlds (Book 2004).²⁷ The term "virtual world" applies for both genres, namely, (i) "gaming worlds" as well as (ii) "social worlds." Both of these gaming elements, or genre of the playful side of the Internet, are part of what is widely known as "MMORPG" – *Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games*.²⁸ MMORPG are games that consist of a particular world (fantasy or real, or a mixture), whereas the player, via his avatar, assumes a specific role. "Gaming worlds" usually consist of a

"popular medieval, literary, fantasy genre, or science fiction setting of MMORPG, [while] the settings of social worlds are based on modern-day realistic environments like tropical islands, gardens, suburbia, hotels and tourist attractions" (Book 2004)

27 http://www.virtualworldsreview.com/papers/BBook_SoP2.pdf.

28 <http://www.mmorpg.com/>.

In some cases, the worlds are overlapping, with real-life money spent on virtual avatars or by buying “virtual t-shirts for customers’ avatars along with matching real t-shirts for the offline bodies”²⁹ and so on.

In the meantime (2011), I argue that this list is also a description of common denominators of various genres of the Internet in general. By this I mean that the Internet has expanded (culturally as well as technically, with users spending more time online, not just at home or at their computers) with more potential and more options. Betsy Book provided the list of six common denominators in 2004 for “gaming” and “social worlds” as:

“Shared Space: the world allows many users to participate at once.

Graphical User Interface: the world depicts space visually, ranging in style from 2D “cartoon” imagery to more immersive 3D environments.

Immediacy: interaction takes place in real time

Interactivity: the world allows users to alter, develop, build, or submit customized content.

Persistence: the world’s existence continues regardless of whether individual users are logged in.

Socialization / Community: the world allows and encourages the formation of in-world social groups like guilds, clubs, cliques, housemates, neighborhoods, etc.”

In the meantime, however, the interaction as a participant on the Internet has greatly improved, even when individual users are *not* part of *any* “gaming” or “social world.” Rather, the Internet *itself* has turned into a “world” of its own, with multiple layers and indefinite channels – that can be consumed, altered, authored, edited by individuals worldwide. It is one ‘mother’ virtual worlds, into which any user connects, with common (mainstream) platforms available as much as highly specific nodes. With “gaming” and “social” world providing both the graphical as well as the ‘physical’ (virtual) environment to act and re-enact certain elements and aspects, the (armchair) jihadists hook up just as much within their specific online based worlds, enabling them to contribute and consume all forms of *jihad* related propaganda.

While both, “gaming” as well as “virtual worlds” are different by its “cultures of play”, the individual is more than an observer. “By re-enacting them, re-inserting themselves into storylines as actors rather than viewers, and changing the storyline to suit their own whims” (Book 2004), each and everyone online can be a greater part of individually favored aspects, political sentiments, musical torrents and so on.

If we understand “virtual world(s)” as an applicable term to describe the contemporary Internet (2011) as a whole, we can perhaps agree to define the six common denominators for almost any genre / culture / sub-culture. In respect of

29 Book, reference note 7, describing “Second Life”.

al-Qa'ida (AQ) and the Gaming Industry (GI) as genres of its own within the “virtual world”, common factors exist between these sub-genres:

- *Shared Space*: all levels and layers of the Internet. There is no room online not yet used for advertisement (GI) or hardcore propaganda (AQ).
- *Graphical User Interface*: both groups deploy a similar node for its users. While there are forums by fans for games, we find forums for jihadist sympathizers. With the GI disseminating advertisement via YouTube, AQ does so as well. The graphical user interface (originally intended by Books to describe the handling of social games) can also be understood as the graphical means provided as a interface by public spaces such as social networking sites MySpace or Facebook. The handling of these sites are identical for most users and most content is acquired by similar to same means.
- *Immediacy*: life online goes on, with or without extreme fans and sympathizers participating. There are simply too many.
- *Interactivity*: user generated content is highly effective and common for AQ as much as for the GI.
- *Persistence*: the propaganda of AQ by its senior to mid to low leadership circles continues. It is only a question of frequency. The GI is online 24/7 with players active around the clock. What Betsy Books had in mind was that gaming worlds and social worlds never sleep – the same can be said about the growing materials and chatter on AQ channels and the GI.
- *Socialization/Community*: for both groups, AQ and the GI, we have sub-sub-groups and cultural sub-torrents within specific genre-based clusters. This process, as part of the above described elements, also concludes personal identification and spurs a feeling of joint possession. This takes place in shared spaces and due to interactivity of community members.

Entering the Jihadists' hunting grounds – Never mind the Copyright

Both torrents are online actors and both are sub-groups of the Internet deploying their specific advertisements, propaganda, promotional trailers, their ideology and filmed or animated clips online, within their genre-based specific cluster (Marin et al. 2009) and within a characteristic framework. However, and this is the main observation and the underlying fundamental principle of this article, both groups, like many others on the so called “web 2.0”³⁰, have very

30 By the so called “web 2.0” the contemporary form of the internet is widely understood. This version is less statically html bound and allows a higher level of action, interaction, participation and new formats such as social networks, online videos and audios and much more. Please consult the yearly ongoing Web 2.0 Expo for next generation technical prophecies:

similar means of promoting their specifically notions, ideas, products, videos and writings, with a similar effect on what users are contributing in terms of technical proficiency within a cult or pop-cultural context. Worlds can overlap, particularly with the jihadists' potential of being within both of these virtual worlds – AQ transforms elements of the GI for its propaganda. The products – and along with it the iconography as well as some pop-cultural aspects – of the Gaming Industry has indeed entered the realms of the jihadists' genre-based cluster. Screenshots of games, in most cases of first-person-shooters, are taken by *jihad* sympathizing players, modified with Arabic jihadist slogans and icons of real terrorist groups and are subsequently published within its genre-based specific cluster (mostly jihadist forums). Both spheres are highly persistent and dependent on the socialization/community effects combined with personal identification processes of their members, fans, sympathizers.

One recent– and controversial – example is a picture disseminated via the jihadist forum *Shumukh al-Islam*, by the user “Abu Qatada al-Libi.” He praised the “Islamic State of Iraq” by graphically defacing³¹ an advertisement of the highly successful and popular first-person-shooter *Call of Duty: Black Ops*.³² Abu Qatada, a certainly talented individual who has contributed greatly to ‘home-made’, Adobe Photoshop created, AQ propaganda took the original advertisement and branded it accordingly to his liking. He is the product of

“fans [who] have been transformed from passive consumers into active reproducers of al-Qaeda content: anyone can now be an al-Qaeda propagandist” (Brachman/Levine 2011: 27)

Abu Qatada al-Libi branded the picture with the logo of the “Islamic State of Iraq” (ISI), which he professionally managed to engrave on the left weapon as well. He signed the picture (left picture, in the lower left) with his name. The original US-Special Forces character, who the player controls in the game during the 1960 s, is transformed into a *Mujahid*, insinuating fighting for the ISI. Abu Qatada remained in the Special Forces genre by writing “assassination battalions to annihilate the despicable [elements]” (lower right side). While some pictures, stolen from the gaming-genre, adapted with jihadist logos and slogans are widely accepted in the jihadist forums, the above shown picture by Abu Qatada was removed by the *Shumukh al-Islam* administration. In the forum Abu Qatada wrote in a posting where he published his picture:

<http://www.web2expo.com/webexsf2010>. Another platform, including summits, can be found at <http://www.web2summit.com/web2010>.

31 <http://shamikh1.net/vb/showthread.php?t=82222>.

32 <http://www.callofduty.com/hub>.



“When I saw the news that the [Islamic] State [of Iraq] had announced a campaign of a hundred days for annihilating the despicable and as we have seen the start of this blessed campaign with the military campaigns yesterday, we are yet to see [what’s to happen] today. I decided to make a untraditional picture and ask God to grant success.”

The second response already criticized the picture as “innovations/novelties” (abda’), with forum-member Abu Usama al-Baghdadi asking for “God to obstruct your errors, my beloved brother.” While most other members found the picture either “wonderful” or stated, “it would have been better, if the guns had silencers”. Nevertheless, the above shown picture had been removed but Abu Qatada al-Libi has remained a highly active user on the forum, continuing with his activities inside the shared space.

Other, approved, examples include modified screenshots of the freely downloadable “Insurgency” for Valve’s “Counter-Strike”. Being based on the game “Counter-Strike” any user can freely download the add-on entitled “Insurgency – Modern Infantry Combat.”³³ Here the individual “armchair jihadist” can indeed get a feeling as a sniper or a loosely organized member of a cell fighting against a troop of US soldiers. Every virtual soldier and *Mujahid* is controlled by a human player. This game consists of several multi-player maps that have an Iraq like setting whereas two teams play against one another: The US Army, with different soldier characteristics (engineers, snipers, heavy machine gunner et al) versus an insurgent group that look like a gang of prime time Hollywood *Mujahidin*.

33 <http://www.insmod.org/>.



“Insurgency – Modern Infantry Warfare” – from an jihadists perspective.

A picture taken from the “Insurgency – Modern Infantry Warfare” game (during the loading process). However, this picture was stamped by an online jihadist sympathizer. The ideological and theological implication as based on religious and historical sources has its expression by the “frontier of Islam.” Again we see a brave *Mujahid* carrying the banner of *Jihad*, with the *shahada* [the Islamic creed] written on it. The “frontier of Islam” is attributed to a comprising ideological mindset of AQ globally – basically meaning the defense of “Islamic borders” and “Muslim territory” as set forth by specific religious and religious-historic sources within the jihadists’ sentimentality of *ribat* (Prucha 2009).

It may be logical to find that with the GI and its fans developing so called “modifications” (mods), add-ons or enhancements for already published games – to keep certain games attractive and thus popular –this software also resonates within jihadist circles. A great deal of such mods provide purely multi-player based scenario of dominating “Western forces versus Oriental looking Insurgents”. For the jihadist, the graphical and role-playing elements published by mostly Western GI branches regarding the ‘Arabic-Muslim Insurgent’ is nevertheless highly appealing. Any form of warfare, preferably against American or Western soldiers, may serve as a parallel to actual conflicts around the world,

especially within the Islamic countries that AQ vows to defend and ultimately liberate from direct as well as indirect occupation.

One's intense violent fantasy of being or becoming a real-life *Mujahid* may of course be fueled by the products of the GI and the resonance one may receive by publishing professionally made pro-jihadist pictures within the forums. Besides the publications of AQ's warfare (both military and ideological) concepts, armchair jihadists may exploit online what was taken by the Lebanese Army as lessons learned in the conflict with the jihadist Fatah al-Islam movement in the Palestinian refugee camp Nahir al-Barid in 2007 (Dagher 2009: 99–106). The Lebanese army was surprised to encounter a highly sophisticated enemy using guerrilla tactics and ambushes, who knew how to operate and move according to theoretical handbooks and practical videos in an urban- and guerilla warfare situation. This includes understanding the enemy's intended movement, setting up concealed positions for sniper attacks, using high grounds (inside the camp: buildings) to lay strategic suppressive fire, planting improvised explosive devices (IED) and by setting up booby-traps.

Fatah al-Islam had their real war in an urban setting against the Lebanese Army. The battle may serve as an example for armchair jihadists who in some cases perceive specific military games as a training outlet and find, individually, their own role-models there. The more input armchair jihadists have, particularly with filmed real-military operations of armed jihad groups, they more they can build up their imagination. Naturally, it is always the question, with what intend armchair jihadists actually play military-styled shooters. With most armchair jihadists remaining simply online sympathizers, products of the GI can be seen as a further virtual outlet to re-enact and to role-play – with real-life *Mujahidin* ever present by *jihad* videos and pictures.

We can also observe that jihadist users are grasping all available means to further their propaganda. In this picture, two animated *Mujahidin* are seen, the figure on the right has simply been taken from the loading screen of the game "Insurgency." The standing *Mujahid* on the left appears to be praying, while the fighter on the right is on the watch (ideological connotation). "Rise up or die, if you want to be a *shahid*" is written in bright letters by the creator "gharib." Anyone can contribute and thus be interactive by all means, including personally crafted output by graphics.

With the Fatah al-Islam movement termed and portrayed by some jihadist forum members as "Fatah al-Islam, the men of al-Qa'ida in the Levant"³⁴ (*fatah al-Islam rijal al-qa'ida fi bilad al-sham*), this notion found its expression, again,

34 Levant is not the correct translation for the region al-Sham. However, in the jihadists' notion and perception, the greater region of Syria, Lebanon and northern Israel (Palestine) is referenced by this historical connotation.



by home-made pictures. The real world meets the virtual one. The evolved shared space.

Two elements are striking in this picture: (i) A real photograph of a Fatah al-Islam member, armed with an Rocket-Propelled-Grenade launcher (RPG) holds a Quran and meets (ii) the virtual world. In the foreground an animated, masked and armed (AK-47 assault rifle) *Mujahid* implies further military preparedness and seems to be in a state of alert. The bottom line reads:

“Indeed, they act on behalf of the *shahada* and they reject humiliation and defeat. Therefore, they please their merciful protector. Your achievement is due to God (*fa-li-llahi darrukum*), o lions of Fatah al-Islam.”

The picture is subsequently concluded by “Islamic al-Faluja Forums > ::technical [sub-] forum:: > pictures and graphics (Photoshop and Flash), <http://www.al-faloja.info/vb>.” The al-Faluja forum is defunct and the content as well as the users have simply shifted to new, lively, forums. This form of persistence was not granted to the Fatah al-Islam movement, which was subsequently defeated, after “a war of 106 days in Nahir al-Barid, 2007” (Rihana 2008).

While the crowd of jihadist followers, forum-members and participants are consuming mostly Arabic based videos, writings and other forms of propaganda, such as pictures, the majority can best be termed as “armchair jihadists” who live and dwell within the online spheres of AQ and have the ultimate wish to



join the real-life *Mujahidin*. It must be noted that this phenomena is not entirely new, but rather has become a global and more mainstream due to the possibilities of the Internet. It has become a reality that, on a increasing scale, for loosely organized, if at all, individuals are becoming adherents of AQ's defined way of life and its mindset. As long as these sympathizers and ideological adherents are not carrying out any attacks or may not even have the wish to actually join a terrorist training camp, they may remain undetected and vitally virtually active. Socialization and community is leaving the virtual boundaries, entering the real world – and vice versa. With the desire of joining the *Mujahidin* in a real battle-field, thus conducting the jihadists' defined one and only proper 'worship', some individuals within the virtual will naturally always attempt to be a *real* part, perhaps appearing themselves one day in a *as-Sahab* video production. But it is important to consider both aspects, the wanna-be *Mujahid* who remains in his armchair contributing and those of the virtual world who try to plug-in to real and existent jihadi networks.

The primary goal of the freely available – and easy to find – materials that in some cases depict extremely violent scenes, is to enable a process of radicalization and a division of the world among the consumers. This is to be understood in combination with a long-term aspired outcome of being recruited or at

least inspired to undertake individual operations³⁵ (al-Suri 2005) and is crafted in a professional and ideological adherent manner by the Senior and Junior Leadership circles of AQ. Individual operations are mostly termed *al-jihad al-fardi*, relying on the principle that *jihad* is an individual obligation valid for all capable Muslims as implied by scholars such as Yusuf al-‘Uyairi (Al-‘Uyairi 2004).³⁶ Many “armchair jihadists” adhere to the specifically determined interpretation of chosen religious concepts by the ideological authoritative circles of AQ and can see a practical and mostly military output of these definitions within AQ’s extensive library of videos³⁷ (Hafez 2007).

Dipping into the Gaming Industry, or: Playing as an ideologue

The GI’s fans, on the other hand, the so called “gamers”, are the ones using the internet with all its options and possibilities to meet and mostly play multi-player games online. The GI could be termed as the present avant-garde of the “web 2.0”, an industry that has over the recent years subsequently designed games and gaming products that are in some parts exclusively played with others over the internet. The avant-gardism set by this particular industry is bound to the core technical developments and foundations of the worlds hardware and in wide parts software manufacturers, that are being professionally and for purely

35 Plenty of mostly Arabic documents and sources openly advocate on how to set up, maintain and establish cells of Mujahidin. Most prominently the 1600 page long writing by AbŪ Mus’ab al-SŪrĪ, who considers practical implications and possible threats to ambitious secretly operating –whether active or as “sleeper cells” – worldwide: <http://tawhed.ws/dl?i=f3r0098v> (Arabic). A translation of excerpts has been done by Brynjar Lia (2008) with a biography of al-Suri. Additionally, Osama bin Ladin describes the importance of well established and connected cells of Mujahidin to carry out operations in general according to the example of the 9/11 hijackers in the as-Sahab Video production “High Hopes, part II”.

36 Frequently calls are made to the individual members of AQ’s online spheres to become active and “strike the enemies of God”. *Jihad*, with all its military interpretation and obligation, is an individual obligation (*fard ‘ayn*) – a concept often repeated by jihadist groups in general. The “Fort Hood Shootings” in Texas, USA, had been instantaneously celebrated by the online jihadists, with Major Nidal Hassan being a “Muslim hero”, a “true *Mujahid*” according to some statements in jihadist forums, who defended and avenged the Muslims within the heart of the enemy. The implication is that this was an operation accordingly entitled *al-jihad al-fardi*. Allegedly, Major Nidal Hassan was an online sympathizer of AQ internet spheres and had e-mail contact to Anwar al-Awlaki, an open sympathizer and alleged recruiter for AQ: <http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/11/13/blogging-imam-who-knew-fort-hood-attacker-and-911-hijacker-goes-silent/?scp=6&sq=fort%20hood&st=cse>.

37 These videos can be highly appealing to anyone who has read and consumed specific AQ related writings or listened to pro-jihadist sermons (khutba). Some of the videos are of a purely militarily nature and show jihadist implementations of their proclaimed “proper” life as a “Muslim”, committed to God and the alleged divine command of undertaking armed preparations and operations against “the enemies of God.”

commercial reasons exploited by the GI. With the dawn of blogs and online forums³⁸, Facebook³⁹, YouTube⁴⁰ and Twitter⁴¹, besides the “classical” websites⁴², the GI was one of the first enterprises with its popular branches and genres that extensively used this “web 2.0” functionality in a comprehensive way for its entrepreneurial purposes.

The GI is one of the pioneers when it comes to using the complete spectrum of the internet for its promotions to reach out to a maximum amount of potentially interested people online. The offerings range from promotional tours within

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- 38 Forums are of general great value, whereas the individual members have the possibility to freely open discussion topics (“threads”) and reply to other members (“postings”). Both subgroups GI and AQ heavily rely on the individuality of their members while by “official” postings and threads members are encouraged to engage themselves in a wanted direction. Within the spheres of AQ as in the GI, the forums particularly are responsible for the unfolding of relevant questions, suggestions, demands and claims by its members that have forced a response as much as from AQ Senior Leadership or the adaption of gaming products by the GI. Forums are often mistaken for chat rooms. Unlike a chat room, however, where information is provided by the participants in real time, by typing or speaking, a forum shows the individual postings submitted by its members after an indefinite period of time and are thus longer lasting than a chat room.
- 39 www.facebook.com – a “social networking” site, whereas the individual member can (re-) connect with old friends and join specific groups, become a “fan” of, for example, TV-shows, rock bands, electronic entertainment products, merchandise and so on. All of this is public and by becoming a “fan” of a TV-show, all your friends will know of this and perhaps pick up your taste and follow the very same TV-show as well. In the past years products have been specifically advertised via facebook, promotional trailers of Hollywood blockbusters for instance can be played as well as web-based interactive mini-games. Besides local and global media on facebook, the GI is using facebook just as much as political parties, like the “Future Movement” of Lebanese Sa’ad al-Hariri, Hizbullah, torrents of AQ (“Uzbekistan Martyrdom Academy”) or the al-Huthi movement of Yemen/Saudi Arabia. Almost everything can be found on facebook.
- 40 www.youtube.com – an online portal that houses billions of videos. Again, various branches of the international industry advertise their products on YouTube as much as the GI or people, who submit their own, private home-made clips they want to share with the online world. Users have the possibility to comment and rate videos. Hizbullah videos can be found as easily as any AQ related video or the YouTube Channel of Hamas (“HamasTube”). Various computer manufacturers have discovered that private users publish commented home-made videos on the type of hardware they are using and have begun to, in some parts, exclusively host their official advertising videos on YouTube. For a nicely written overview of YouTube: http://www.surfnetkids.com/safety/YouTube_what_is_it_and_why_use_it-19026.htm.
- 41 www.twitter.com – a relative new, but nevertheless interesting, format of the internet: each individual can contribute his/her thoughts or “status” by providing an SMS-long (156 characters) input. Various international news outlets use twitter for instant news, with links leading to their main websites, as is the GI and various GI related sites and fans in general. Jihadist influenced members of twitter are using it as much as, for example, the Lebanese Army, who is using twitter and blogs as a service for their members of the Lebanese Armed Forces.
- 42 By websites I understand sites that are found throughout the online world, which could best be described and termed as classical, first generational, non-interactive, purely based html sites – the “web 1.0”.

Facebook to meticulous updates regarding specific game developments, upcoming publication dates to announcements within official and non-official forums and a wave of websites and blogs that publish general information to the immense gamer communities. Common denominators may be specific games or genres and also initiatives taken by the developing software company. In most cases the GI has during stages of new games released demos, video clips, graphical impressions and level designs for the fans to comment and to react to the fans' desires and ideas – this is a free service for the developing software companies. By listening to the fans, the product is more likely becoming a success. In many cases official forums exist where the various gamers can comment, rate or criticize the game – and are moderated by official administrators and read by the development team.⁴³ But the Internet also enables plenty of critical thought that is freely disseminated. The broader and civil spectrum of gamers has its effects on the various gaming dedicated news outlets and blogs that pick up current trends from the forums and websites of clans⁴⁴ who are in some cases heavily criticizing the GI and have in the past even forced the industry to respond. This is one important area of difference between the GI and the AQ controlled online spheres, where most criticism is immediately edited or even banned.

Games affect jihadists as well. Being online and having a computer, it is quite logical to enjoy playing a game every now and then?

A *fatwa* issued on the website “Salaf Voice” (*sawt al-salaf*, maintained by Shaykh Yasir Barhami) responded to an interesting question on June 2, 2008:

“Question: What is the [legal] ruling of the [electronic soccer] game for adults “FIFA”⁴⁵; a game depicting real humans as soccer players?

Answer: All praise be God, peace and blessing upon the messenger of God. These games are legitimate for children (...), regarding adults, the overwhelming proof prohibits pictures (drawings and sculptures) and prohibits playing such games.”⁴⁶

This fatwa spurred some discontent among the *al-Hanein* forum, another jihadist platform, whereas several users responded after the above stated fatwa was posted there. Responding to the fatwa banning soccer video games:

43 For example the “Left 4 Dead 2” official forum on the online gaming and publishing platform Steam: <http://forums.steampowered.com/forums/forumdisplay.php?f=611>.

44 A clan in the gaming terms is a loose organization of online players who meet to play together (on- and offline). In most cases the various clans have their websites, blogs, forums and facebook groups as well as videos of their great achievements on YouTube. For example the “Left 4 Dead” and “Counter Strike” dedicated Clan119: <http://www.clan119.com/>.

45 <http://www.ea.com/uk/game/fifa-08>.

46 <http://www.salafvoice.com/article.php?a=2461&back=aHR0cDovL3d3dy5zYWxhZnZvaWNlMmNvbS9hcnRyY2xlcY5waHA/bW9kPWNhGVnb3J5JmM9NDE=>.

“mohamedforces: “All praise be God – I don’t like soccer [games]... well, [what about] strategy games ۞ wars and such...?”

Abu Talha: “Games depicting pictures of humans, men and women or even playing music is not permissible.”

Shahid ‘ala-l ‘asr: “Pictures??? [of] Humans??? And bodies??? What is this fatwa that will afflict me with boredom, o Abu Talha??? Who issued it??? These games are a waste of your time and do not remember God with their passive means, these games are neglected in this fatwa, concentrating only whether or not humans are depicted??? Need for Speed shows cars!!! Wasting time with it is not forbidden (*haram*) for this game, as it teaches you to drive whereas we need to learn to shoot, with games like Medal of Honor, swimming, shooting and riding the horse (Need for Speed).”⁴⁷

What the member “Shahid ‘ala-l ‘asr” implies, is that he is considering games as a legitimate form of acquiring jihadist relevant knowledge (“shooting and riding the horse”). By riding the horse, he refers to the dominant jihadist visualized attribute, the *Mujahid* embarked on horse, the *al-mujahid al-murabit* (Prucha 2009). Considering any means for military preparation an alleged divine command, based on Quran 8:60, men on horses also have a strong visual link to the historical epochs of Islamic conquest. This is also reflected in such branded pictures taken from the above mentioned example “Insurgency” with the remark “Frontier of Islam.”



These are the aspired male role models for the generations of armchair jihadists in combination with their real-life male *Mujahidin* role models (either

47 <http://www.hanein.info/vbx/showthread.php?t=69435>.

fighting, struggling, praying and alive or deceased, killed “on the path of God”) in the various romanticizing *jihad* videos published by AQ and its affiliated groups. This is the output of the romanticized, idealized, ideological side in virtual pictures, inspired by (mostly) Western created games. Ideals are mixed with ideological sentiments and rulings set by the senior AQ leadership as much as any jihadist legal decree online.

Online jihadists are in some parts fans and followers of the GI product range that may be just as much appealing to them as it is to anyone else seeking fun, without a jihadist or political agenda. But what is striking, is the deliberate “user generated content” published by various online jihadists, who use games such as “Insurgency – Modern Infantry Warfare” or, “Call of Duty – Modern Warfare”⁴⁸ (2007) to place manipulated screenshots of such game freely within the online forums, mostly in the specific “pictures” section. These pictures are altered according to the genre of *jihad* and equipped with the iconography of jihadist groups and elevated with religious slogans suggesting an active combatant role within AQ’s ideology. These pictures could be you or me – with a virtual alter ego, a avatar in an aspired role. In contrast to the videos of actual real-life *Mujahidin*, the online armchair jihadist can have the feeling of participating in an actual war that also affects their personal and private lives as “Muslims” – and as it is being proclaimed by AQ’s huge library of online documents and videos.

Games for jihadists – by jihadists

What makes this type of propaganda dangerous is the combination and the mix of AQ’s ideology that is openly and freely disseminated over the internet, via its various media departments. Calling out to spread such propaganda, as it is perceived as the only true interpretation of “Islam”, forum members frequently advise to reach out by all means of the internet: Infiltrating, thus committing “missionary work” (*da’wa*) in favor of pro-violent and radical interpretations on all layers of the Internet. AQ can be termed as an avant-garde user of the Internet (nevertheless, so as a terrorist group), as it considers itself, because it has been using this medium professionally for several years and it has proven to be capable of adapting to changed circumstances, may they be virtually online or real-life offline. It is likely that new generations of armchair jihadists will continue to learn from and adept the techniques used by the GI to increase the diversity and impact of AQ influenced propaganda.

This dissemination and this borderless virtual free public space grants the individual followers, fans or adherents the exact same means and potentials of

48 For a review, <http://pc.ign.com/articles/832/832795p1.html>.

replying and becoming an interactive (counter-)⁴⁹ part of the individual genre-based cluster. But the important development may be, that AQ with its vast amount of online sympathizers can attract new sympathizers, potential recruits among them, by also promoting *games* of its own – within its genre on the Internet. While the Lebanese based Hizbullah has developed several professional games of its own, such as Special Force 1 and 2⁵⁰ or “The People of the Border” (*ahl al-thughur*)⁵¹ and even the (early) modification for “Counter-Strike” entitled “The Men of God” (*rijal allah*), the sunni AQ *jihad* media was slow to pick up this trend. Despite the influx of some branded pictures in the forums, AQ affiliates have not yet managed to compete with the extend of Hizbullah or Hamas games available.⁵² Two examples of AQ affiliated games, however, are distinguishable and are highlighted. In 2006 a game was released within the AQ sphere of the Internet entitled “The Night of Bush Capturing.” The game can best be described as the attempt to release some anger in a badly made single player environment, whereas the user had it all: from hunting down US-President George W. Bush to killing Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and ambushing Hizbullah’s Hasan Nasrallah. Each level was accompanied by a *nashid* while the player was responsible for “the American Hell”, a term mostly used for Iraq, in jihadist discourses. While this game cannot be taken seriously, it was a first – even hopeless – attempt to host a new virtual layer for sympathizers. Most interestingly, the game was found by members of the BitTorrent site *The Pirate Bay* who, out of amusement, shared the game as well. Uploaded in September 2006, *The Pirate Bay* member GM.Yitzhak writes:

“NOTE: I DO NOT ADVOCATE ANY OF THE VIEWS OR ACTIONS DEPICTED IN THIS GAME. I AM UPLOADING THIS FOR HUMOR PURPOSES ONLY.

This game was downloaded from a bona-fide terrorist site, so I cannot guarantee that is free from spyware or malware. It was downloaded on a Mac and scanned with the latest updates of both Norton and McAfee, so I believe it’s fairly secure, but don’t sent [sic] me any angry emails blaming me for any issues. INSTALL AT YOUR OWN RISK!”⁵³

49 By counter-part I understand the ongoing trend of parts of the Internet: For any establishment, culture or social standards groups emerge online who claim to be the exact opposite of such. *Jihad* forums, blogs and websites may serve as an extremist and pro-violent example on how key concepts such as “statehood”, “democracy” or “the West” can be opposed by authoring a different worldview and understanding.

50 www.specialforce2.org.

51 <http://lpt-lb.com/games.html>.

52 Hamas published several games in the past, among the titles “Under Siege part 1 and 2” or the “Heroes of Jenin”.

53 [http://thepiratebay.org/torrent/3526673/Night_Of_Bush_Capturing_\(Terrorist_Recruting_FPS\)](http://thepiratebay.org/torrent/3526673/Night_Of_Bush_Capturing_(Terrorist_Recruting_FPS)).

A much more interesting game of the jihadist genre is a modification for the highly successful *Command and Conquer Generals – Zero Hour*. Originally published by Electronic Arts, who created the popular gaming genre “Real-Time-Strategy” (RTS), *Command and Conquer Generals* enabled players to either chose the *Western Alliance* (US looking combat troops and military equipment), the *Asian Pact* or an obscure, Taliban-like, terror group *Global Liberation Army* (GLA). In a modification for *Command and Conquer Generals*, published in 2006, players had the possibility not to play as the GLA but as the “Islamic State of Iraq.” It remains unclear, whether highly engaged fans of *Command and Conquer* programmed this meticulous set-up modification, or if online jihadists fulfilled their dreams. The website remains active⁵⁴ and shows the – at the time – effective iconography of Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi’s “*Majlis al-Shura al-Mujahidin*” that would later render itself into the ISI. The mod was called *Iraqi Resistance*⁵⁵ and basically enabled the player to fight as an *amir* (commander) of the *Mujahidin* of the “Islamic State of Iraq” with all subversive, guerilla style tactics of the GLA available, including suicide-bombers, setting IED’s, preparing ambushes and having armed mobs to repel foreign armies.



Installing “Iraqi Resistance” with the iconography of jihadist groups active in Iraq in 2006.

54 <http://iraqi.byethost12.com/>.

55 http://commandandconquer.filefront.com/file/Iraqi_Resistance_Mod_ModToaster_Package;61778

The coherent presence of AQ in the virtual world

As stated, the same means and mechanisms offered to a global and local audience by the abilities of the internet and specifically the “web 2.0” have been systematically penetrated and exploited by AQ. After the dawn of the internet and its discovery by AQ, the group systematically began hosting its propaganda and magazines under the auspices of the Saudi AQ branch in 2003 (Prucha 2010). Since then the internet has become vitally important for AQ and its related torrents and other jihadist – primarily Arabic speaking – groups worldwide. With blogs established, forums created, facebook profiles and groups set up and YouTube available as a free and easy to use platform to quickly spread jihadist videos, AQ has substantially infiltrated the internet and proudly calls this the “raids on websites, blogs and forums”⁵⁶ and has incorporated the Internet as *the* vital backbone for radicalization, motivation and recruitment of potential siblings. Another important aspect for AQ and its sympathizers are the various groups that in most parts seem to be publishing exclusively online and exclusively via jihadist forums, such as the *Global Media Front* (GIMF), or the *Ansar Mailing List Newsletter*, to name two of many. Furthermore, a number of “media” and “language departments” strive to supply a growing community of online jihadists with non-Arabic material, increasingly in German next to English, Urdu, Dari, Pashto or Russian translations of videos and ideological writings. But other languages are also covered by jihadist “media departments” with non-Arabic language forums working in unison with their Arabic counterparts.

Over the years sub-torrents adhering to the global AQ ideology have deployed local messages and threats in local languages.⁵⁷ Just as the GI has certainly discovered the multi-lingual setting of the internet, so has AQ and seeks to speak out for and to all Muslims, hoping to recruit as many as possible with al-Qa’ida’s radical creed and militancy. The Internet does not only enable AQ to rapidly respond to claims made by either Western media or governments, but it allows AQ to issue its “truth” as in contrast to the “lies” and terms this an universal debate between “the program of truth (*al-haqq*) versus the program of falsehood

56 AQ has over the years also published a wide variety of hacker manuals and programs that enables its members to communicate securely with PGP encryption and other tools.

57 Such as a group of pro-jihadist AQ affiliated individuals, based in Austria’s capital Vienna, who claimed to be members of the GIMF and opened the “Caliphate Voice Channel”. In 2007 two videos in German demanding a withdrawal of German and Austrian troops from Afghanistan had been issued while threatening the corresponding government in case of non-compliance. For a detailed report in German: <http://onlinejihad.wordpress.com/2007/03/11/terrordrohungen-gegen-osterreich-und-deutschland-auf-soldaten-in-afghanistan-als-auch-gegen-wirtschaftl-und-tourismus-ziele/>.

(*al-batil*)." The up-to-date responsive character of AQ in a highly professional ideological as well as technical manner may be one of the reasons for its success as a global terror brand which has led to various mergers with other radical-Islamist or jihadist groups (and / or online forums) in the past. When the Taliban kidnapped a group of South Korean Christian missionaries in Afghanistan, it was the leadership of AQ under Abu Yahya al-Libi who defended, justified and praised the action of "our fellow *Mujahidin*." Also the notion was systematically reinforced and emphasized by al-Libi that AQ and the Taliban are indeed fighting together for the same cause and the identical sake (al-Libi 2007).⁵⁸ This writing was published while the international media focused on the hostage crisis and served as a response to quiet potential criticism that was sparked in the forums by members calling for the execution of the South-Korean missionaries. In a somewhat joint Taliban / AQ declaration, AQ member 'Abdallah Sa'id praised Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar and addressed the virtual *ummah* of the "Cheerful news of victory beaconing from Afghanistan", propagating the inseparability and the close cooperation of AQ with the Taliban, further strengthening primarily within the Arabic online spheres the unity of both groups and their 'allied' objectives against the invaders (Sa'id).⁵⁹

AQ has what the German Red Army Faction could only dream of and what was frequently emphasized in their writings and statements in the 1970 s, in planning "the next steps" (ID-Verlag 1997):

"Comprising propaganda for the armed struggle; explaining to the masses why it is necessary and unavoidable and how it can be prepared (conspiratorial leaflets and graffiti)."

From a technical standpoint, AQ is like most online actors, including the GI, as it has taken the next steps that are perhaps a logical result of the contemporary technological development. Both groups are part of what can be termed a youthful "pop-cultural movement" that draws attention on the Internet by specific messages and products and both groups have a specific language, graphical symbols in a highly individual iconography limited within its culture that is confined to the individual influence zones. While the same AQ related videos can be found within Facebook, there are also specific groups that use

58 In this writing al-Libi builds his arguments on various historical arguments and religious sources to legitimize hostage taking in Islam. Some of his arguments are in accordance with jihadist operations in Grozny who in 2003 asked the Saudi AQ chief ideologue al-'Uyairi for his legal opinions that had been used to justify the execution of seven captured Russian Special Police members.

59 This document was published 11 April 2009. Both groups, AQ as well as the Taliban, frequently respond to changes of Western, mainly US, policy and propagate strategic aims and goals.

Facebook to upload, host and propagate their personally made graphics, pictures and videos.

With particular “products” openly broadcast, and which are always easy to download and install, a specific “corporate guideline” has unfolded that makes sense for the GI but is somewhat odd to find within AQ and its subgroups. One could say, AQ has adopted industry standards and established guidelines for its online materials. These guidelines, logos, symbols and the specific rhetoric provide a product authenticity and identification. The used icons, names, symbols and general layouts of documents and videos provide a coherent guideline that is used and respected. However, it must be noted that the graphical violence addressed by AQ as well as the purely virtual mode of violence hosted by the GI is different and remain distinct even if some icons and pictures may suggest a greater relationship – material that AQ exploits for its own purposes and within its specific strategic settings. Contrary to the fact that both groups have intersecting elements, the sympathizing online jihadists are the ones exposed to extreme forms of real violence – with a real-life ideological jihadist agenda and actual battle zones portrayed in romantic pictures⁶⁰. A such, it is the jihadists who, unlike the gamers of online or multiplayer games, are propagating the various forms of shown violence within a tight radical ideology (Prucha 2010; al-Batash 2009; Bonney 2004) using similar practical and technical methods as the gamers. Gamers are consumers of legal content. This may naturally include so-called “first person shooters” (FPS), or “killer games” and are neither exposed to real forms of violence and bloodshed and do not advise to commit such acts in real life (Williams et al 2005). Nevertheless, such games have a certain reputation, despite various studies and assertions.

“A longitudinal study of an online violent video game with a control group tested for changes in an aggressive cognitions and behaviors. The findings did not support the assertion that a violent game will cause substantial increases in real-world aggression” (Williams et al 2005)

It may be asked, how jihadist sympathizers approach games, which are played by most gamers simply for fun. For, as described, the indoctrinated and virtually radicalized armchair *Mujahid* does indeed understand violent games and even racing games (Need for Speed) as training. Confined to the virtual realms of the Internet, where the individual has been recruited by AQ’s worldviews, games may serve as a shallow boundary between virtual fantasy and would-be reality.

The overwhelming majority of the consumers of the GI simply enjoy various

60 Part of this “romance” is the extensive portray of killed Mujahidin in battle, the *shuhada’*. The *shuhada’* are a vital center of AQ’s ideology and propaganda. Pictures of deceased Mujahidin are frequently shared and countless *as-Sahab* and other AQ videos are purely dedicated to the element of the *shuhada’*.

games and genres although some controversial games have been publicly branded as having inspired or enabled real forms of crimes, such as the worldwide school shootings.⁶¹

Conclusion: The best of all worlds – the broad bandwidth of contemporary online jihadists

It may be true to best describe the situation as AQ having the best of all worlds online, as they may freely use, modify or simply propagate specific ideas and concepts within a framework the contemporary jihadist see fit to use in order to further their cause. Again, the main promotional tool and platform for the armchair jihadists as well as for real-life battle-hardened leaders are the online forums, and perhaps will remain so over the coming years. Facebook, YouTube and blogs are free, easy to use⁶² and provide a practical add-on to spread what the RAF termed “leaflets and graffiti” to reach out for the hearts and minds of a younger generation. While the GI is of course – like other cultural circles – influenced by the current political conditions of the world, the followers of AQ have the freedom to choose what products may seem useful for their jihadist endeavors and what deserves to be condemned and thus banned. Gaining practical experience in military training is a divine command according to AQ’s ideology and so it may be natural that some armchair jihadists in their fantasy world play online games. Besides the consumption of mostly Arabic handbooks on mines, sniper-rifles, grenades, guerilla and urban warfare tactics, some elements freely roam the GI’s product scale, using whatever games and mindsets suits them.

61 <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/0,1518,614558,00.html>.

62 All you need is an e-mail address – which can be obtained very quickly and anonymously.

