



THE UNIVERSITY of NORTH CAROLINA  
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This is an External Examiner (“opponent”) Report for the habilitation dissertation titled *Hybridity, Authenticity, and New Media: Video Game Development and Gaming Cultures in Iran and the Arab World*, which was written by the associate professor, Dr. Vít Šisler, who teaches and researches in the branch of Information Studies and Book culture.

I am Dr. Gregory Price Grieve, a Professor, and Head of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro’s Religious Studies department. I am a founder and one of the leading experts in Dr. Šisler’s field of study. I have known Dr. Šisler as a colleague for over ten years. It was wonderful to be able to read his whole oeuvre in one place! He is an internationally known expert and innovative researcher in the field of digital religion, specializing in video gaming, the Arab world, and qualitative methodology. I have never published or co-written with him. We have, however, given conference papers together on various panels.

While some chapters in the habilitation dissertation were co-written with other researchers, the vast majority is Šisler’s original work. Also, in all the co-written chapters (6, 7, 8, and 9), Šisler is the main senior scholar and innovator of new and original ideas.

The quantity and quality of Dr. Šisler’s research output is equivalent to a Full Professor in the North American Academy. A Full Professor is a senior-level professor, the highest rank a professor can achieve. According to my institution’s promotion and tenure guidelines, the usual expectations for promotion to professor include a record of sustained scholarship of high quality and having received a positive peer review. An individual must have a substantial publication record since being promoted to associate professor. A substantial record exceeds, in quantity and impact, the record that the department expects one to compile for promotion to associate professor. In evaluating the research record, both quantity and quality are important. A smaller number of high-quality articles may be considered superior to a larger number of lower-quality articles. The publications should be recognized as important contributions to the field. Furthermore, the individual should have a sustained record of research that indicates that the individual will continue to conduct research and publish actively after promotion.

Dr. Šisler’s work surpasses all the hurdles for the equivalent of a Full Professor. He is a successful and innovative scholar with international impact, working in a significant and original area. This can be seen in this habilitation dissertation. As he writes, “[t]his habilitation thesis aims to map the complex spaces of video game development and gaming cultures in the Arab world and Iran”(pg .9). He builds his map on a theoretical background that consists of five perspectives. First is the perspective of information science that studies video games as a dynamic information representation system. Second is the critical trans-culturalism perspective that pictures video games as hybrid media

texts. Third is the game studies perspective, which understands video games as economic, cultural, and political structures. Forth is the perspective that sees video games as material, software, and cultural artifact. And finally, the gameenvironments perspective integrates the four proceeding approaches.

The habilitation thesis consists of five parts with a substantial introduction and conclusion. Šisler's work is important and impactful because he works in the original area of videogaming, religion, and the Islamic world. In the introduction, Šisler argues that while they are often posed as a scandalous medium, "video games are capable of transmitting complex and emotionally-loaded human experiences, even those related to displacement, conflict, and war" (pg. 3). Šisler goes on to show, contextualizing his research in recent scholarship, that video games and religion are an important site for the exploration of current culture and our changing society. Video games are an important aspect of postcolonial studies. He then argues that we should concentrate on the Middle East because it is one of the fastest-growing regions for gaming. "This growth is driven by the region's young, fast-growing population of active gamers, a high penetration of smartphones and the internet, and an increasing supply of localized content by regional and global game publishers"(pg. 7).

The habilitation thesis consists of five sections. Part I, "Historical Overview," consists of the 2013 book chapter "Videogame Development in the Middle East: Iran, the Arab World, and Beyond." This section focuses on the historical circumstances that have influenced regional video game production. It examines the cultural, socioeconomic, and political factors influencing video game development in Iran and the Arab world. The section seeks to go beyond the disjointed nature of previous research and offers a theoretical framework for contextualizing regional video game production. The section overviews the crucial facets of Arab and Iranian game creation. It outlines several issues covered later, chiefly cultural norms and values influencing how digital information and communication technologies are adopted and the consideration given to religious representations in regional game development.

Part II: "Representation of Islam in Video Games," comprises two book chapters. The first, "From Kuma\War to Quraish: Representation of Islam in Arab and American Video Games," (2014) explores American and Arab video games and assesses how the former create virtual representations of Islam and Muslims and convey these representations to their viewers. After 9/11, there has been an increase in US-produced first-person shooter video games with Middle Eastern, Islamic, and Muslim themes. These often contain Muslim characters, who are generally portrayed as enemies in narrative frames of international terrorism and/or religious extremism. The second chapter, "Petri Net Modeling: Analyzing Rule-Based Representations of Religion in Video Games," (2018) focuses on the methodological challenges of video game analysis. It introduces Petri Net Modeling (PNM), a qualitative method, as a methodological and interpretative framework for examining rule-based representations in video games. This chapter suggests that PNM is especially useful for critical reading and/or comparative study of various rule-based representations of religion in video games.

Part III: “Video Game Development in Iran and the Arab world,” consists of three book chapters and shows that while games may be a global phenomenon, where they are produced is a crucial element. The first chapter, “Digital Heroes: Identity Construction in Iranian Video Games.” focuses on gaming culture and video game manufacturing in Iran. Until recently, the Iranian market was dominated by games from the United States, Europe, and Japan. As a result, in 2006, the government founded the National Foundation of Computer Gaming in Tehran, overseen by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Affairs. As a result, many freelance developers are active in this expanding business. This chapter studies how modern Iranian video games express various conceptions of identity to players. The second chapter, “Revolution Reloaded: Spaces of Encounter and Resistance in Iranian Video Games” (2017), studies Iranian video games' virtual environments and ties them politically and historically to their production sites. This chapter examines video games as encounter and resistance sites, as diverse cultural and identity imaginaries, and as assemblages of myths, ideologies, and gaming logic. It investigates video games as one of the visible vehicles for the newly developing opportunities and risks that accompany disjunctures in global cultural flows, in accordance with the main issue of this habilitation thesis. Although video games are essentially global, they are designed, developed, and played in specific contexts. The third “Breaking Barriers: The Emergence of Video Game Culture and Industry in the Arab World,” (2023) shifts the focus back to the Arab world and explores the video game culture and industry in the region in greater detail. It discusses in particular recent developments and trends. With increasing global exposure and knowledge transfer, the Arab video game industry has the potential to emerge as a growth engine for the region. Nevertheless, this potential has not yet been fully realized, and Arab video gaming is still struggling with “breaking barriers.” These barriers include political instability, economic uncertainty, lack of foreign investment, missing know-how, and fragmented gaming communities. This chapter analyzes the above-mentioned barriers and the emergence of casual games, sustainable business models, trans-local and global professional networks, and communities of Arab players translating and localizing existing games.

Part IV: “Gaming Communities” consists of two book chapters that center on groups of players. The first, “Normalized Social Distance: Quantitative Analysis of Religion-Centered Gaming Pages on Social Networks,” is an exploratory study of religion-centered gaming pages on social networks. It proposes a quantitative method for determining distances between social groupings known as Normalized Social Distance (NSD). These distances are based on the opinions exhibited by group members' social network activity. According to the findings, there are multiple religiously focused gaming site groups on Facebook whose target audiences are significantly close with comparable attitudes. The second chapter, “Video Games and the Asymmetry of Global Cultural Flows: The Game Industry and Game Culture in Iran and the Czech Republic,” builds methodologically on the use of the NSD approach to evaluate and compare Czech and Iranian online gaming communities. Beyond the social, political, economic, and cultural dimensions of video game creation discussed in earlier chapters, this chapter empirically examines the manifestation of Czech and Iranian gaming cultures on social networking sites and their links to global game culture.

Part V: Bridging Perspectives is the final section and consists of the book chapter, “Virtual Worlds, Digital Dreams: Imaginary Spaces of Middle Eastern Video Games” which links the various elements of the habilitation thesis and provides a summative analysis. It investigates and systematizes the disjunctions in the complex, overlapping, and contentious environment of video game production and gaming cultures in the Arab world and Iran within a new theoretical framework of imaginary spaces. Global cultural flows, nation-state media policies, private entrepreneurs' ambitions and engagements, and the migration and appropriation of Western gaming genres and rule systems are all entwined in these virtual spaces. Although some of these regions have already been examined by previous chapters and existing research, this chapter introduces a new, overarching, and unified theoretical framework.

In conclusion, and for all the reasons given above, **I recommend the habilitation dissertation for further procedure.**

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