



# **VIDEO GAMES AND THE IRANIAN GAMING INDUSTRY**

**MELINDA COHOON  
PHD CANDIDATE IN NEAR & MIDDLE EASTERN STUDIES  
2023**

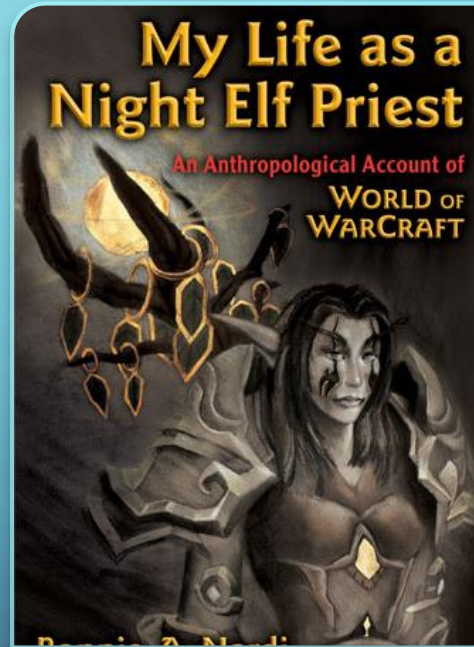
# INTRODUCTION

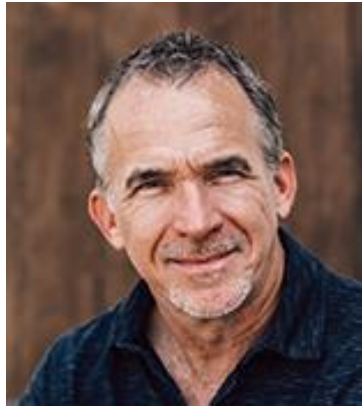
- Goal: understand the role of censorship in Iran and how it transforms Iranian life
- Defining ethnography and censorship
- History of the video game industry in Iran
- Examples of games, and gamer statistics
- Conclusion: video games as political



# MY JOURNEY TO ETHNOGRAPHY

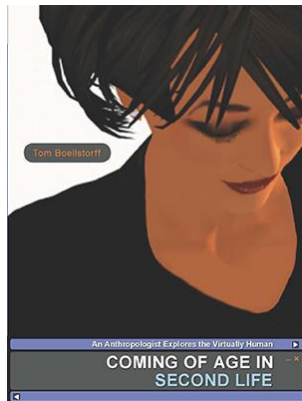
- Gamer turned games scholar
- Lack of studies on Iran
- Critical of available scholarship





“Virtual worlds are places of imagination that encompass practices of play, performance, creativity and ritual.”

— Tom Boellstorff, *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*





# ETHNOGRAPHY

- Study of a particular social or cultural group to better understand it
- Virtual ethnography is exploring the social or cultural interactions in virtual and digital environments

# WHAT CAN ETHNOGRAPHY LOOK LIKE?

- Ethnography
  - Doing the thing: field research method
  - Writing the thing: creating a narrative account
- What I do
  - Observe/interview online gamers, discussion boards, and participate in online gaming
  - Gather information from interviews, fieldnotes, video games, memes, gifs, and more, to write the narrative

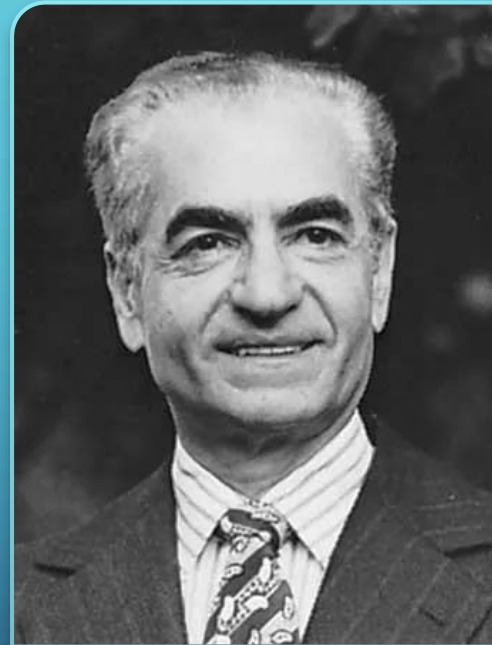




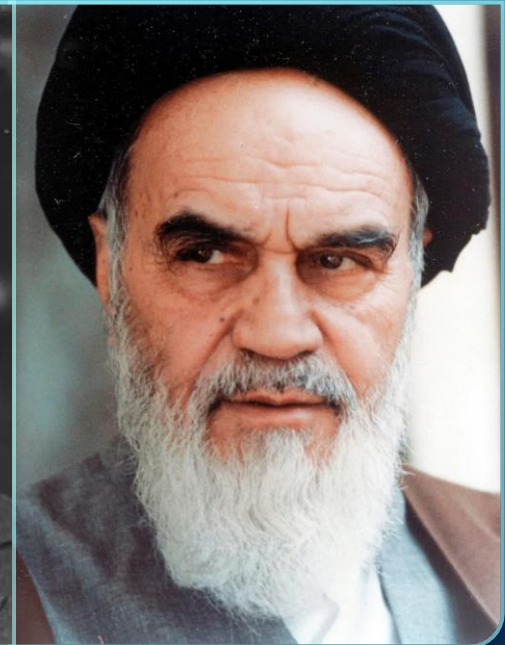


# CENSORSHIP IN IRAN

- Pre-revolutionary Iran, the Shah and SAVAK
- 1979 Revolution; “Khomeini’s Revolution”
- Establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979
  - To control factional politics outside the status quo



Mohammad Reza  
Pahlavi, the Shah



Ayatollah Ruhollah  
Khomeini



# CENSORSHIP GOALS: SOFT WAR

- *Soft War (jang-e narm)*: prevent the spread of foreign ideas, culture, and influences through information and communication technology into Iran.
  - Games, internet, online platforms, texting, etc.
- Discourse in video games and the game industry:
  - Games present knowledge of places
  - Games present social practices
  - Games are away to challenge power relations
  - Games are both in discussion with and challenge Western ideas

# PROACTIVE CENSORSHIP

- Active state promotion of control over technological development services to create new state media content
- Goal:
  - To build perceptions, behavior, and sentiments that foster state legitimacy
  - To marginalize alternative opinions and views to state narratives
  - To surveil citizens and affirm state domination over the public sphere
  - Therefore, favor state power through persuasion

# VIDEO GAMES AND GAMING

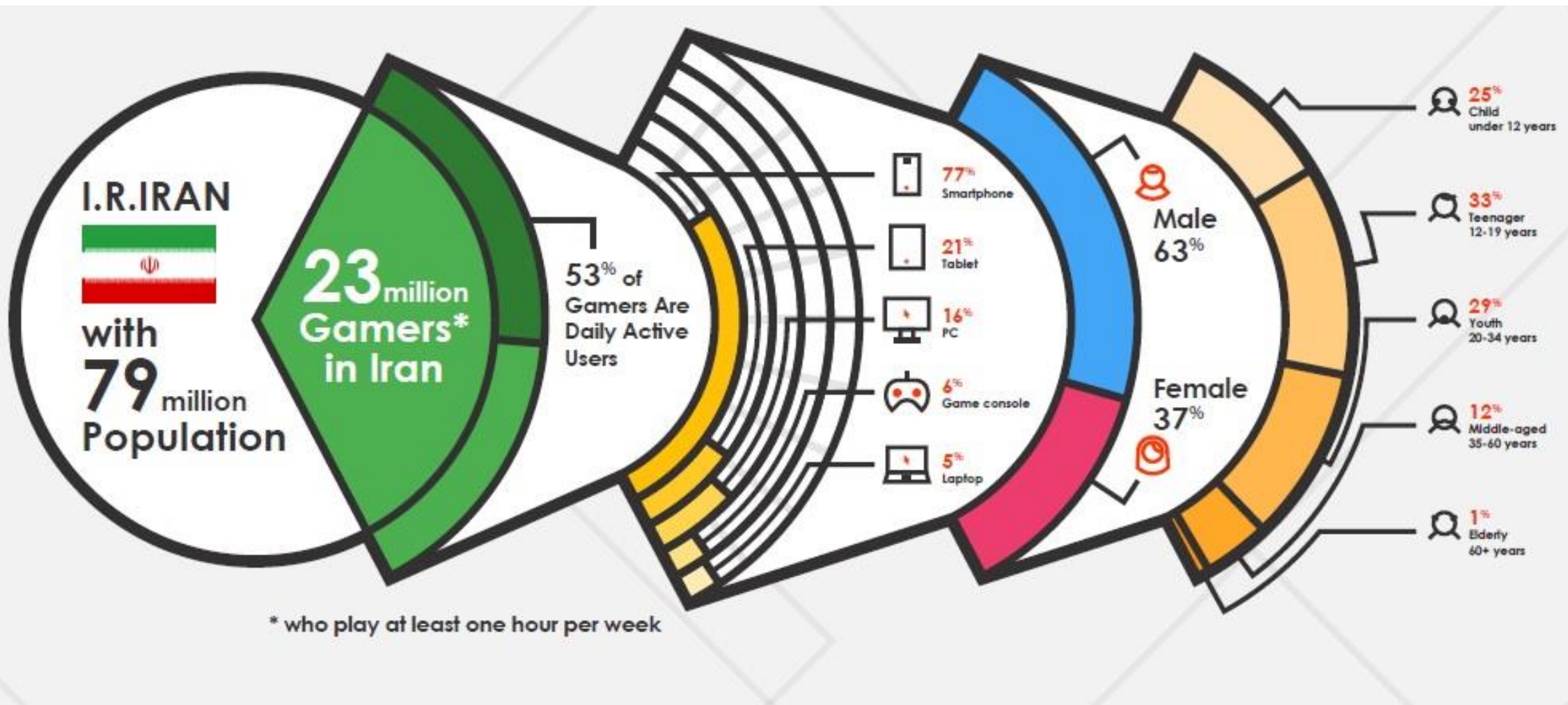
- Video games: an electronic game which includes online console or PC games and even arcades
- 3.24 billion gamers worldwide
- 1.7 billion PC gamers worldwide
- PC Games
  - Persistent worlds (i.e., World of Warcraft, Second Life, Dark Age of Camelot etc.)
  - First Person Shooters (i.e., Battlefield 3, Call of Duty: Cold War etc.)
  - Puzzle-based (i.e., Engare)
  - Turn-based (i.e., Civilization, Total War etc.)



# HISTORY OF THE GAMING INDUSTRY IN IRAN



- First generation systems during the Iran-Iraq war (1980s)
- Kanoon, a semi-governmental cultural and educational organization (1995)
- Iran Computer and Video Games Foundation (2006)
- Current Game Expo and Competitive Esports in Tehran



# VIDEO GAME CENSORSHIP AND PROPAGANDA IN IRAN

- The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance
- Soft War
- Economic Sanctions
- ESRA Rating System



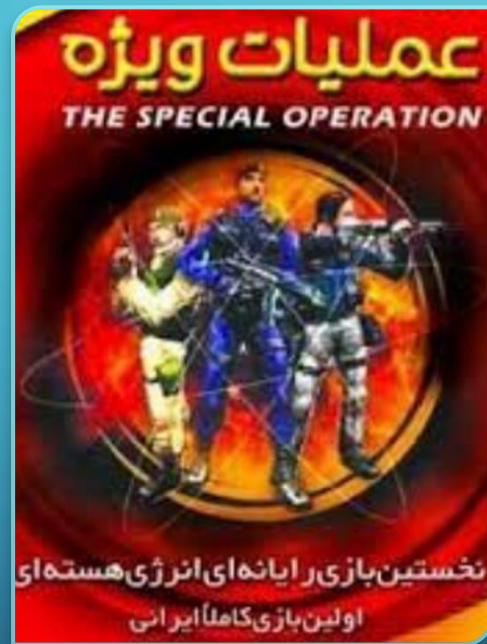
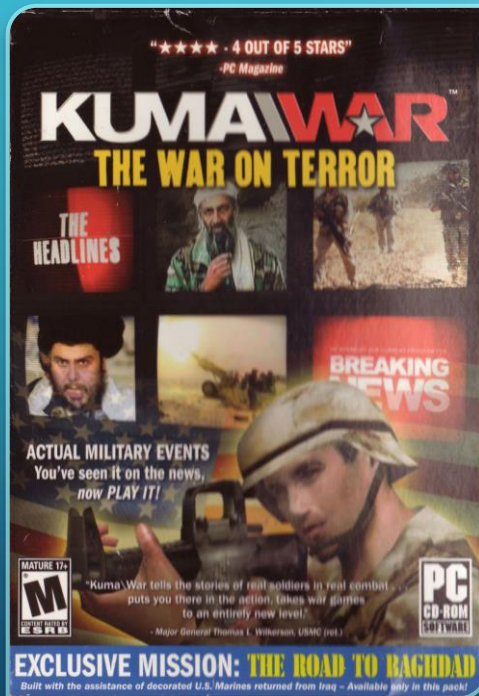
# THE ESRA RATING SYSTEM

- Iran's Entertainment Software Rating Association (ESRA):
  - Displays of harm and impact on mental experience (violence)
  - Prohibition of social taboos (tobacco and drug, sexual stimuli)
  - Vulgar actions (sexual stimuli)
  - Atmosphere of insecurity and pessimism (fear)
  - Violation of Islamic principles such as displays of gambling and sacrilege (religious values violation)
  - Vulgar language that impacts youths (social norms violation)
  - Despair and sorrow (hopelessness)

# ECONOMIC SANCTIONS

- Foreign economic sanctions against Iran
  - Nuclear Deal and Trump Administration
- The Iranian government says this prevents the development of information and communication technology
  - Companies do comply; however, Iranian government back peddles during current protests when platforms become available again to citizens

# KUMA\WAR'S ASSAULT ON IRAN AND SPECIAL OPERATION 85 HOSTAGE RESCUE



- FPS
- “Assault on Iran” episode: theoretical US military attempt to shutdown nuclear capacities
- *Special Operation 85*: rescue a nuclear scientist





**Amir Mirza Hekmati, developer for Kuma/Wars, imprisoned/death sentence, released.**

# BANNED GAMES

- 1979 Revolution: Black Friday (2016) created in the diaspora
- Documentary, interactive drama game
- Banned in Iran; why?
- Other games that are banned:  
Battlefield 3, Pokémon GO!, Clash of Clans, Call of Duty: Mobile



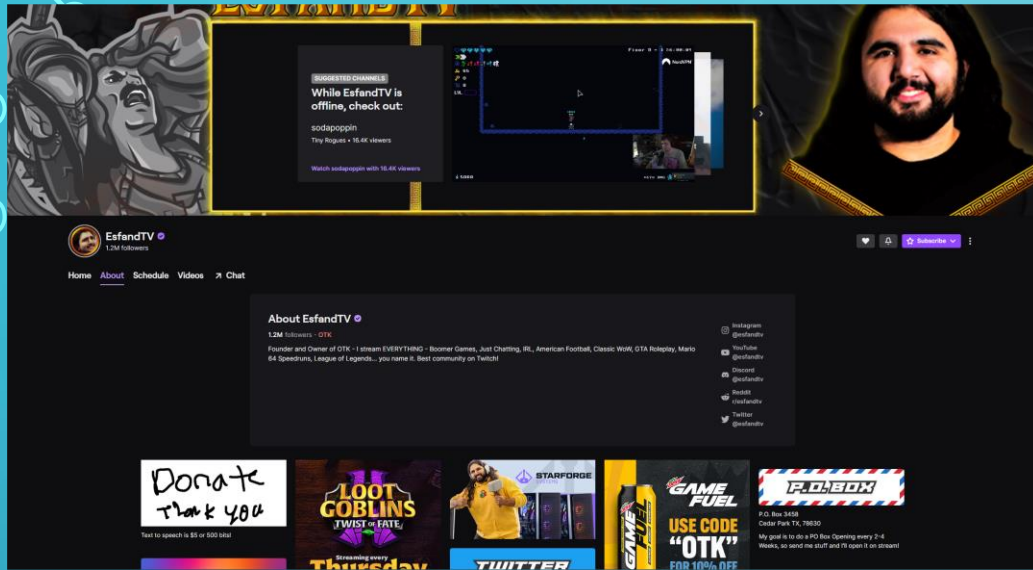
# RSK ENTERTAINMENT

- Iranian video game study
- Games are accessible to US citizens on <https://store.steampowered.com/>
- Propaganda
- Difficult or impossible to play through with lack of updates

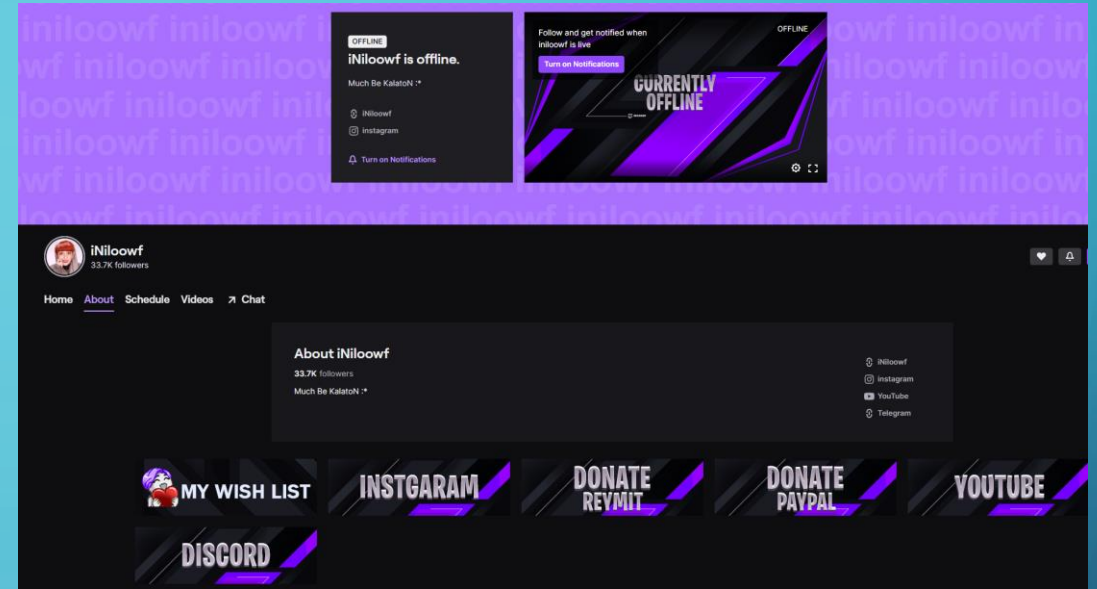




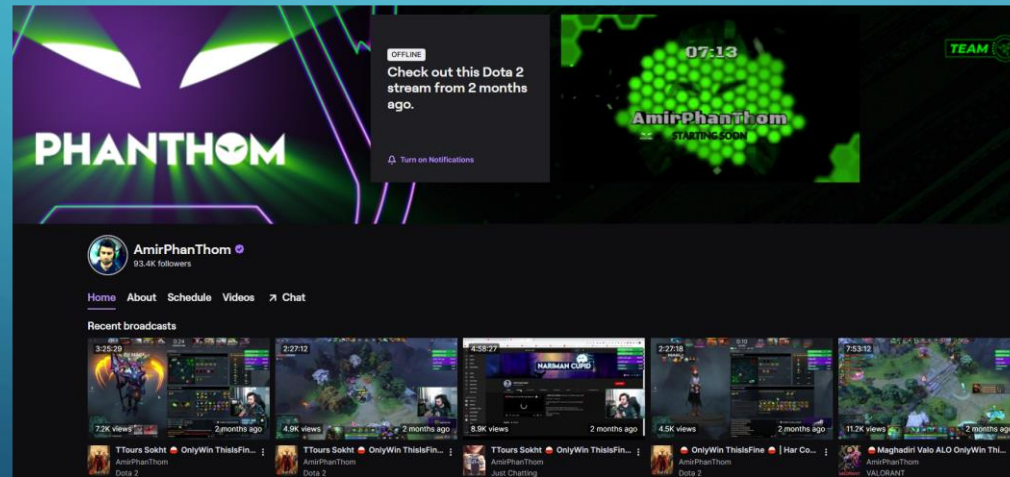




EsfandTV



iNilowf



AmirPhanThom

# CONCLUSION

- Games are political; propaganda, empathy etc.
- Games are digital artifacts of soft war
- Gamers do what they want; when there's a will there's a way



# RECOMMENDED SOURCES ON CULTURAL ASPECTS OF IRANIAN VIDEO GAMES

- Ahmadi, Ahmad. (2015). "Iran." *Video Games Around the World*, edited by Mark J.P. Wolf, 271-291. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Cohoon, Melinda. (2021). "Digital Iran: Soft Power and Affect in Video Games." *Interdisciplinary Digital Engagement in Arts & Humanities*, 1-23. doi: 10.21428/f1f23564.3d7610e0.
- Malekifar, Siavosh and Mahdi Omid. (2016). "Innovation in the Computer Game Industry in Iran." *The Development of Science and Technology in Iran: Policies and Learning Frameworks*, edited by Abdol S. Soofi and Mehdi Goodarzi, Palgrave MacMillan, 171–187.
- Shahnahpur, Saeedeh. (2021). "'Destruction Operation': Iranian-Made Digital Games of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1989)." *International Journal of Persian Literature* vol 6(1), 75-102. doi: 10.5325/intejperslite.6.0075.
- Šisler, Vit. (2013). "Digital Heroes: Identity Construction in Iranian Video Games." *Cultural Revolution in Iran: Contemporary Popular Culture in the Islamic Republic*, edited by Annabelle Sreberny and Massoumeh Torfeh, I.B. Tauris, 171-192.

# RESOURCES

- [McNair Scholars Program](#)
- [Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowships](#)
- [Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures \(MELC\) Departmental Scholarships](#)
- Look out for other departmental scholarships once you choose your major
- [MELC Courses](#)
- [MELC 485: Digital Media, The Middle East and Central Asia](#)

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How are video games different from other types of online, digital, or news media? What makes it different from say movies, for example?
- What cultural and censorship aspects did you learn today about video games? What are other countries in the world with censorship?