ISIS lures with video game themes

by Lauren Markoe

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(RNS) The footage, to gamers who like to play *Grand Theft Auto*, looks familiar. From the point of view of a gunman looking for targets through the speeding car's window, unsuspecting people take bullets in the chest and crumple to the ground.

But it's not *Grand Theft Auto*. It's propaganda created by the group that calls itself the Islamic State, also known as ISIS. And the people lying motionless on the ground are real. Then they die many times over on social media, after the Islamic State posts these executions on Twitter and elsewhere online.

Javier Lesaca, a scholar who has spent hundreds of hours studying ISIS videos, said the terrorist organization has masterfully mimicked not only the look and feel of popular, violent games such as *Grand Theft Auto* and *Call of Duty*, but television shows—*Homeland*, *Saw*, and *Person of Interest*, to name a few—which, like the video games, feature strapping young men in cool sunglasses who kill without mercy.

"This aesthetic is not bin Laden sitting in a cave," said Lesaca, a visiting scholar at George Washington University, referring to the static video released by al-Qaida after 9/11. "This is not the old, dusty terrorist without teeth. Nobody wants to be that."

ISIS knows that disaffected young people who love playing the gunman in *Grand Theft Auto* may take interest in a real brotherhood that promises to bring the world on the screen to life.

ISIS possesses a level of cinematographic sophistication—coined "Hollywood visual style" by communication experts Cori Dauber and Mark Robinson—that simulates the high-quality production values expected by viewers raised on American movies. Its skill, many academics and counterterrorism officials agree, presents a uniquely modern challenge to those trying to combat the terrorist group.

“By producing video products that largely meet industry standards ISIS is doing something no terrorist group we know of has ever done before,” write Dauber and Robinson, in a piece on ISIS’s videography. Working at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, they have dissected Islamic State videos to understand their use of color, camera angles, special effects, graphics and composition.

ISIS puts cameras on its fighters so that its videos have that first person perspective, making the viewer feel that he experiences the action for himself. It’s the same technique used in popular and often violent video games, but also for televised sport events, Dauber said. The NFL, for example, attaches small cameras to players’ helmets. The result—as anyone who watched the last Super Bowl knows—is a visceral experience of the action that raises heartbeats and draws spectators to the edge of their seats.

From Lesaca’s vast library of videos, he pulls out one on a typical theme: battle. It opens like a television drama, with the camera panning across the group, and then closes in on individuals—attractive, smiling tough guys wearing military garb and brandishing automatic weapons. Each seems to have an identifying characteristic—a bright scarf, a gold tooth. The viewer follows them through battle as if he or she is one of them. The story ends in victory, set to rousing music. Within ISIS propaganda, familiar images pop up—a man in handcuffs, for example.

Sitting with his laptop in a classroom of GWU’s School of Media and Public Affairs, Lesaca—who presented his findings to United Nations counterterrorism officials in December—clicks on image after image of propaganda set alongside visuals from American-made television shows and video games.

“It’s the same! It’s the same!” exclaimed the Spanish researcher, who is preparing a thesis on the comparisons for his doctorate, from Spain’s University of Navarra. He said he has studied more than 800 Islamic State videos produced between January 2014 and September 2015, and that 15 percent of them are inspired by Western movies, video games or other entertainment.

“No religious imagery,” he said, still clicking. “Do you see any?”

The images Lesaca studies glorify the Islamic State and its fighters but show no mosques, Qur’ans, imams, or people at prayer. Young men attracted to ISIS often have little knowledge or interest in Islam, according to those who have studied their motivations. These visuals appeal not to piety but to a thirst for adventure, or

a longing to identify with something bigger than oneself.

But some scholars question whether such videos—even the most professional-looking among them—have as significant an impact as many suspect.

“The research that I had read on ISIS’s use of social media suggests that the emphasis on slick video production is overemphasized,” said David Schanzer, director of the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security, adding that the more crucial element is the intimate relationship that is now possible to cultivate online between a recruiter and a vulnerable young person.

“ISIS’s real power is the ability to make personal connections between Muslims in the diaspora and those in the Middle East through social media,” he said.

And as Dauber notes, no studies have established a causal link between the videos produced by terrorist groups and the radicalization of would-be terrorists. Still, she said, the potential of these videos cannot be dismissed.

“There is a mountain of social science research on the power of visual images relative to words,” she said. “And in every case I’m aware of where someone was arrested in the West for participation in or conspiracy to commit acts of violence linked to Islamist ideology, these types of videos were in their possession: clearly they have some impact on people.”

Other experts question whether Lesaca has broken any new ground, and whether the videos he has studied are actually produced by Islamic State supporters as opposed to the Islamic State. Lesaca said the videos he has studied were all produced by the Islamic State itself.

“Some may be surprised that ISIS is producing propaganda that resembles American-made video games and television programs, but we shouldn’t be at this point in 2016,” said Lt. Col. Bryan Price, who heads the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. “The group has spent a lot of time and effort to tailor its propaganda to a variety of audiences, both internal and external to the caliphate, so it is not necessarily a new threat. To be fair, however, I think directly tying some of these products to specific games or television programs is a bit of a stretch, and not necessarily the work of ISIS’s official propaganda machine.”

Alberto M. Fernandez, the State Department's coordinator for strategic counterterrorism communications from March 2012 to February 2015, agrees that Lesaca is not the first analyst to seize upon the similarities between Islamic State propaganda and American-made entertainment.

"For those who have the misfortune of having to watch this stuff for a living, that's not new," said Fernandez, now vice president of the Middle East Media Research Institute. "But he certainly is presenting it in a very powerful and compelling way."

Shown side-by-side by Lesaca, the striking likeness of two images—that of a purported IS state fighter with his head bowed and fist upraised and of a warrior from the video game *Call of Duty*—can impress. What a challenge for those who hope to stop the Islamic State, Lesaca said, when such familiar images serve the enemy.

Lesaca said this work of the Islamic State needs to be countered by equally powerful videos exposing the group for its brutality, and exalting the courage of those fighting against it.

Why, Lesaca asks, did no one make a compelling video of the story of the Swedish teenager held by the Islamic State, who was freed in February by Kurdish forces? Or, Fernandez suggests, the October rescue by Kurds and Americans near Hawija, Iraq, of 70 Iraqi soldiers and civilians whose graves had already been dug?

"There was footage!" said Fernandez, referring to video from a camera attached to a soldier's helmet. "But it was cold," nothing like the "emotionally, aesthetically and psychologically satisfying" material the Islamic State produces.

The problem, he continued, is that the West hasn't figured out its own counter-narrative—an Islamic narrativeor a nationalist narrative.

"It could be many things," he said. "But you have to have something against something … you have to stand for something."

This story is part of a series on religious tolerance and combating hate speech online, with support from Google.