

Jake Hensley

Playing the Middle East: An Examination of the Arab Gaming Market

The world today is dominated by a constantly evolving, media-centric culture. Ever since the 1980's the video game industry has been climbing the entertainment ladder, gradually overtaking its audio and video competitors in both revenue and social relevancy. In this post 9/11 era the societies of the Middle East and its Western counterparts have seen a rise in jingoistic virtual misrepresentations of foreign cultures. To prevent any further development of the divide that separates these distinctly disparate populations, the virtual gaming industry must find a foothold in the Middle East on a local and international scale. As a historically unexplored market, the Middle East offers a wealth of monetary and developmental opportunities. Though both communities have already made significant headway in this endeavor, there is still progress to be made. If the cultural and economic obstacles that plague such progress can be overcome, the world will see the next step in the evolution of videogames and global culturalization.

When told to think of the "Middle East", what images would the average middle-American mind conjure? A region of diverse cultural and political environments? A history of struggle, triumph and self-sacrifice? Perhaps a realm of undiscovered beauty teeming with interesting peoples and customs and arts? Or would there only be snapshots of dark caves, masked men, oppressive practices and violent, religious radicalism? Unfortunately, thanks to the environment following the events of Desert Storm and the 9/11 attacks, the latter is the most accurate choice. Western media, over the past two decades, has been plagued by an assault of crude, misrepresentative stereotypes revolving around Islam and its followers. The surface-level portrayal of the Arab world as a barbaric, morally misdirected cess-pool of violence has crept its

way into Western film, TV, and music. With the video game industry rising to the top of the media pyramid, it should come as no surprise that it too has been afflicted, perhaps to a greater degree than the aforementioned realms of popular culture. The gaming populations of North America and Europe have been subjected to a bombardment of distorted depictions of Islamic culture that only serve “to reinforce simplistic ideas of a collective Self and its hostile Other” (Sisler, Digital Arabs). Vit Sisler, founder and editor-in-chief of Digital Islam, noted in an interview with Patrick Haenni that the most prevalent instances of Arab and Muslim misrepresentation are found in strategy and action games, most notably first-person shooters, that involve some form of Middle Eastern context. In these instances, one will usually come across a situation in which the player controls American or coalition forces fighting against an enemy that “is depicted by a set of schematized attributes which often refer to Arabs or Muslims - headcover, loose clothes, dark skin colour” (Sisler, Digital Arabs). Though these games have already delved into the realms of Arab stereotyping, the xenophobic brainwashing does not stop here. In games such as *Conflict Desert Storm* (SCi Games), *Full Spectrum Warrior* (THQ), *Kuma/War* (Kuma Reality Games), and *Battlefield 2* (DICE) the player character can interact with the environment in numerous ways that include, but are not limited to, driving vehicles, manipulating objects, conversing with allies, etc. While this is immersive and impressive, the only interactions the player experiences with the Arab and/or Muslim characters begin with a hail of bullets and explosions and end with a body-strewn battlefield. Throughout each of these hellish incursions the Middle Eastern forces “fight in an undisciplined way, laugh mockingly after they kill someone or wave AK-47s above their heads.” After the smoke has cleared, the player is left with a message that portrays his/her “Middle Eastern” opponents as “unlawful combatants’ whose activities are considered to be criminal” (Sisler, Patrick Haenni interview).

While the aforementioned form of misrepresentation is certainly most notable in the more Westernized areas of the world, the trend is not isolated to these regions. Games such as Hezbollah's *Special Force* or the Jordanian game *Jenin: Battle of Heroes* "utilize the schematising and conflictual framework of Western action games, simply reversing it and replacing the Arab Muslim fighter with the American or Israeli soldier" (Sisler, Patrick Haenni interview). Hezbollah, an alleged terrorist organization backed by Iran, released the game in 2003. Prior to being placed in the role of a Hezbollah operative, players found themselves fighting through Israeli troops, clearing mines, and facing harsh weather conditions as they personally experienced several "different stages of Hezbollah operations against the Jewish state." In response to the games controversial release "Mahmoud Rayya, an official from the Hezbollah bureau, told the Daily Star that *Special Force* was designed to compete against foreign computer games that show Arabs as enemies and Americans as the heroes that defeat them" ("Trouble in the Holy Land: Hezbollah's New Computer Game"). In 2007, Hezbollah released *Special Force: Tale of the Truthful Pledge*, a sequel to *Special Force* based on the 2006 Lebanon War. The pattern is clear. The West seems to be perfectly content with its continued production of culturally and racially biased interactive products and, so long as this continues, forces in the Middle East will continue to either mirror or feed off of this offensively misrepresentative merchandise. For this cycle to come to an end, the pattern must be broken and a new one established.

In order for such a feat to be accomplished, the game industry must find a foothold in the Middle Eastern market, a market that has, for all intensive purposes, been left relatively untouched regardless of its potential. Vincent Douvier, operations director of Ubisoft's Abu Dhabi office, reportedly spent three years examining the world's gaming market and found the

Middle East to be a largely untapped resource filled with potential (Underwood). By the end of 2013, the global games industry is expected to top \$93 billion in revenue, a steep climb compared to the \$79 billion at the end of 2012 (Gartner Inc.). In 2011 Mahmoud Khasawneh, founder and CEO of the UAE games development studio Quirkat, projected that “the Middle Eastern gaming industry is likely worth somewhere between \$1 billion and \$2.6 billion in terms of revenue across software and hardware.” The Middle East’s current demographic is predominantly comprised youths with those under twenty years old representing 44% of the regional population. This has led to a startling internet penetration record of 125 million users, 53 million of which actively access social networking sites (European Travel Commission). In 2012, the Arab World faced a population of an upwards of 350 million people, 60% of which were under the age 25, a group that has been the target market for game developers and publishers since their inception (Merza). Vit Sisler, in his interview with Patrick Haenni, stated that youth “as a social group is of growing importance in the contemporary Middle East.” In 2011 there was an estimated base of around 8.5 million game consoles in the Middle East (Khasawneh). It is agreed across the common channels of the game industry that “developers and publishers have the chance to successfully enter and influence a very green and receptive market, ready to be engaged” (Khasawneh). With such a lucrative and culturally engaging market it should come as no surprise that the industry has already taken the first steps towards the next chapter in the evolution of gaming, both on a local and global scale.

The local gaming scene in the Arabic speaking world has seen a steady rise over the past couple years. This is particularly apparent in the “suq Saruja area, where the main computer and video game market” of Syria is located. It is here that games such as *Under Ash*, a Syrian product developed by Afkar Media based around the first Intifada, are produced, managed, and

distributed (Sisler, Patrick Haenni interview). Thankfully, Afkar Media is not the only developer to emerge from the Middle East's previously underground gaming industry to attempt to reverse the direction game culture seems to be headed. Emad al-Doghaiter, founder of the Saudi e-publisher Semanoor, stated that videogames "are being used to ruin the image of Arabs. We went into games because we want to reach the youth who use them and show them a different picture" (Guttridge). Semanoor released their first ambitious project on May 29th, 2013. Titled *Unearthed: Trail of Ibn Battuta*, players take control of Fares, a man in pursuit of a stolen chapter of Ibn Battuta's manuscript documenting his 14th century travels across Africa and Asia, as they battle their way through Middle Eastern locales on an adrenaline fueled treasure hunt. *Unearthed* represents a notable milestone in the Arab gaming industry as it is "the first major Arabic-language video game developed for Playstation 3 and Xbox by an Arab company." Following closely behind Semanoor is Saudi Arabian start-up Kammelna, a developer that focuses on an online version of the card game Baloot. The company stated in 2012 that "it had around a million registered users and about 50,000 users per day." Kamemelna was also just bought by Turkey's Peak Games, "the first cross-border acquisition of an Arab video game development company", in February of 2012. Along with these two major breakthroughs in the Arab gaming industry are numerous other developers and content providers that find themselves slowly climbing the industry ladder. The Saudi investment firm N2V just recently invested money in a Saudi platform called Game Tako, whose description page on their website states that they aim "to facilitate social interaction between online gamers and promote regionally created content." In correlation with these content producers come sites such as the Saudi Arabia-based gaming news portal SaudiGamer.com and the more Western friendly counterpart TheArabGamer.com (Merza).

Though international blockbusters such as *Call of Duty* and *Halo* certainly find wide-acclaim in the Arab world, demand for more familiar characteristics is rising, a demand noted by Peak co-founder Rina Onur who stated that people “want to see their national days, special dishes reflected in these games -- people who look like they’re from the region” (Merza). This message has been echoing throughout the Middle Eastern gaming community and large international companies such as Sony, Ubisoft, and EA Games have taken notice. Being the first to recognize the economic and cultural value of the Middle Eastern game industry, Sony reserved its spot in the market “when it introduced *This is Football* in Arabic for the PS2” in 2004 (Khasawneh). The massive electronics company has stayed true to its Arabic-speaking audience and in 2011 became “the only console producer with Arabic content for its motion control platform with the release of *Start the Party!* in Arabic” (Khasawneh). Following this model of the more globalized release of major titles, U.S. sports games tycoon EA Sports released an Arabic version of its FIFA soccer franchise in 2012 (Merza). While these attempts are both notable, Ubisoft has made the most significant power play in this aspiring market environment. The company set up a hub-office in Abu Dhabi, the 26th of its kind, that serves 18 countries in and around the Middle East and North Africa region. Currently staffed with about 30 employees (a number they hope to increase to 100 in the next 3 to 5 years) the office has already made headway in converting many of its games, including the *Prince of Persia* and the *Assassin’s Creed* franchises to Arabic. The company is taking into account the flow of Arabic (read from right to left) and the culture of the regions they are distributing to as they tailor games towards their audience and avoid releasing games that counter the social traditions of the area. While this is all exciting, it isn’t necessarily something that hasn’t been done before, an observation taken into consideration by the French company. Not only is Ubisoft working

closely with twofour54 Abu Dhabi on a 16 month gaming academy to try to produce culturally aware game employees, but the company “already has a team of designers and developers beavering away in its Abu Dhabi studio, working on a ‘top secret’ project that is due to be announced later this year” (Underwood).

With any realm of unexplored marketing territory comes a series of obstacles that must be overcome on both a local and international scale and the Middle East is no exception to this rule. On the ground level, local gaming companies face a myriad of issues as “Arab game developers lack the deep pockets, marketing muscle and much of the technological sophistication of huge rivals in the West and Asia” (Merza). Chief executive of the Abu Dhabi-based company AlphaApps Ayham Gorani says “it can be difficult to attract the investment needed to kick-start an industry at the beginning” (Underwood). This is due to the fact that the majority of potential investors are “extremely risk-averse” and do not wish to invest in a company that doesn’t already have a golden record, making the task of obtaining such a record that much more difficult (Merza). In addition, many companies are finding it difficult to obtain reliable local talent. Peter Shawki, a community manager working with Ubisoft, believes that the “main problem is families don’t really see games as potential work” and feels that in order for the industry to grow, the populace needs to understand that gaming is a real industry with great potential (Merza). Though this picture seems bleak, there are measures being taken to overcome these obstacles. Thanks to the recent aid lent by the investments made by companies such as Peak Games and N2V, as well as programs such as twofour54’s gaming academy, the localized Arab gaming industry will hopefully be seeing boosts in its economic sectors and workforce.

While the local industry battles with the aforementioned obstacles, larger companies such as Sony and Ubisoft face a completely different set of problems. Historically, international game

ventures in the Middle East have not fared well. THQ was one of the first western publishers to learn the importance of cultural relevancy with its release of *Wall-E* in Saudi Arabia, a country with hardly any cinemas. Another instance of failed Middle Eastern market penetration can be found in the release of several “Arabized” MMO (Massive Multiplayer Online) games that came to the Middle East sporting nonsensical Google-translated text, technical flaws such as the lack of Unicode text, zero right-to-left support and no support websites (Khasawneh). When facing such a culturally rich market, international developers need to adapt their usual Western approach to marketing and game design. Clearly elements such as “sex, gambling, alcohol and nudity are obvious subjects to avoid.” Unfortunately for these Western gaming powers, the list does not stop with the obvious “as approaches to topics such as family, workplace ethics, politics and war” must be delicate and thought out to avoid misrepresentation in the game environment (Khasawneh). Luckily companies such as Ubisoft have already taken this into consideration. Local general manager of the Abu Dhabi studio Yannick Theler stated that the company’s goal is to try to “understand how the Arabic people play games and try to localise the games if we can...They play games and buy games already, but localising the products will bring us closer to the people” (Underwood). This mission is not only the primary reason for the establishment of Ubisoft’s Abu Dhabi office but should also be the business model for any triple A developer looking to invest in the Middle Eastern gaming market.

The realm of video gaming culture has been plagued by racially biased depictions of foreign culture for several decades. This issue has been most prevalent in the Arabic-speaking world and the predominantly English-speaking regions of the West. I postulate that, in order to halt the spread of these xenophobic misrepresentations, the gaming industry must find a culturally aware presence in the Middle East’s local and international business sectors. The

development of this presence has already begun in areas such as Saudi Arabia (with the rise of companies like Semanoor) and Abu Dhabi (after the establishment of Ubisoft's Middle Eastern studio). The select few gaming corporations currently embedded in the Middle East have already begun tearing down the wall of dilemmas, ranging from low employment and lack of investments to the need for cultural flexibility and insight, that stands betwixt them and their establishment of a globally recognized industry. If these organizations, and others like them, can give rise to a welcoming, affluent, and socially relevant market they will pave the way for a new era of enriched and wildly profitable game development.

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