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First Iraqi Video Game 17 Years in the Making

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Dave Thier

Contributor

(April 17) -- Thanks to the latest Apple technology, the iPad, a video game project that long seemed dead has been revived. And the story behind that game, "[Babylonian Twins](#)," goes back before the iPhone, before iTunes, even before Apple began putting "i" before anything at all. It took 17 years before it was published this month, but "Babylonian Twins" is the first commercial quality game to come out of Iraq.

In 1993, Rabah Shihab was an engineering student at the University of Baghdad. His country was still recovering from the Gulf War and the economic sanctions that the U.S. and other nations had enforced to prevent rearmament. Against this backdrop, however, he had an unusual dream: He wanted to make a video game.

At the time, there were many games being made about Iraq, but none being made in Iraq.

"There were so many games during the Gulf War that were airplanes blowing up Baghdad. So I was trying to counter that image, to show that this country has a history. The focus was to show the history of Iraq, the cradle of civilization," Shihab told

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Shihab had saved up to buy a Commodore Amiga, an early game system that had begun to trickle into Iraq. Most games came in pirated from Jordan or other Gulf countries, but Shihab fell in love with the system and began to study how its games were constructed.

He assembled a small team that included an architecture student and medical student/musician to work on their own title. They called themselves Team Mesopotamia.

The developers faced certain challenges that went well beyond normal game development. They only had one computer and an unreliable electrical grid, so they had to constantly save their work in case they lost power. They didn't have a hard drive, however, and used floppy drives throughout the entire development process.

"Even sending a disk drive across the border was not easy under Saddam, because they would think it was something else," Shihab said. "I was changing my floppy disks a lot."

Even the development language had an element of guesswork: sanctions banned the manuals they would have needed from entering the country, and so all they had to work from was a photocopy of a basic Commodore hardware reference manual.

To people struggling with economic sanctions, building a game seemed like a strange idea.

"People were just graduating, sitting on the streets selling cigarettes to survive. There was lots of debate about whether what I was doing was right or wrong. People were laughing -- 'What are you doing, are you building a real game?' Because nobody had done it."

They finished the game. For all the difficulty surrounding its production, it was fairly simple to play. The player took control of two brothers, Nasir and Blasir, who traveled throughout the ancient Mesopotamian world fighting an evil sorcerer.

Publication proved an even greater challenge than development. The Iraqi market was dominated by pirated games. Outside publishers were wary of taking on the project due to the sanctions. Simple correspondence could take months. Then, in 1994, Commodore International went bankrupt. The chances of Shihab and his team ever publishing "Babylonian Twins" seemed zero. Shihab sold his Amiga to pay off the government to avoid military service.

Still, the game wasn't dead. It sat on Shihab's hard drive (he had one at this point) for years as he moved out of Iraq to Jordan, Dubai and ultimately to Canada, where he lives today with his wife and two children.

In 2007, years after Shihab had given up hope of ever publishing "Babylonian Twins," his brother posted a few videos from the Amiga version of the game on YouTube. Shihab was shocked by the positive response he saw in the discussion threads, especially from the resilient Amiga development community.

In the mid-'90s, developers were completely reliant on publishers to get their games into the market. But Shihab's game now seemed to have a chance in an environment where new technology was quickly changing old distribution models.

He decided to give it a shot. The original team that had huddled around a single computer in Baghdad had since scattered to Canada, Australia and the U.S. But they got back together on the Internet and also got financial support from Telefilm Canada.



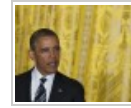
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They updated the game with high-definition graphics, new music and new levels, and then released it on the iPhone on April 8 and the iPad on April 10. The game reached the top 20 list of its category in its first week.

Shihab isn't sure he will make back the money he spent developing the game over the years, but he is glad just to see it in the world. He's also considering bringing "Babylonian Twins" to other ancient civilizations to make history-themed games, the kind he would want his children to play.

Shihab visited Iraq in 2004, and to him, his experiences in 1994 were nothing compared with the ravages of another decade of sanctions and war. His game is just a small creation from what he sees as a vibrant but downtrodden people, and he hopes that in America it can serve as a small indication of what Iraq is, beyond a deadly quagmire.

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