



Babylonian Twins Premium

Platform: iPhone/iPod Touch (iPad version available separately)

Price: \$1.99

Developer: Cosmos Interactive

Released: April 8, 2010

What Is It?

Babylonian Twins is a defiantly old-school platformer for people who crave a challenge. The game stars a pair of Iraqi princes on a quest to stop an evil wizard from destroying their kingdom. You won't be able to control both princes simultaneously, but you can switch between them at any point. This turns the inactive prince into a stone statue, which players can then hop onto (with the other twin) in order to reach previously inaccessible goodies or areas.



There's something oddly tricky about keeping track of both princes. Many puzzles require you to send the two boys to opposite ends of a level to trigger switches or collect items that will allow them both to progress. Levels are often quite spacious, both in height and width, making exploration and even backtracking a lot more fun than in other two-dimensional platformers in the App Store.

There's a rudimentary one-button combat mechanic (one twin wields a club, the other has a mace), but enemies are often extremely dangerous, and mace-happy players are likely to find their health drained very quickly.

Despite my insistence on calling *Babylonian Twins* a "platformer," the game really isn't about hopping from one floating platform to another; it's about exploring a beautifully designed artistic throwback to ancient Iraq. The fact that you get to listen to a wonderful soundtrack and solve fun puzzles while doing so is just a bonus.

Behind the Game

One of the many bad years for Iraq was 1993. Economic sanctions that had been implemented by the United Nations in 1990 were in full force, and the effects were devastating. The Iraqi literacy rate plummeted, the infant-mortality rate skyrocketed, and an embargo on the manufacturing and importation of chlorine (which the UN worried could be used to create chemical weapons) left the citizens of Iraq desperate for clean water.

Throughout these tough times the Iraqi people did what they could, and some found ways around the sanctions restricting imported goods. One example of a popular import was the Commodore Amiga, the successor to the Commodore 64. In the late 1980s Iraqis had begun importing the Amiga 500 (the low-end Commodore Amiga) in bulk, despite a cost of three to four times more than the standard retail price for the machine.

One early adopter of the Amiga was a young Iraqi named Rabah Shihab. After seeing a home video of the Commodore Amiga running *Defender of the Crown* and *Deluxe Paint* in 1988, Shihab saved hard-earned dinar for a full year before he was able to purchase an Amiga of his own. He and his brother played constantly, using games like *Speedball* and *KickOff* as an outlet for their competitive natures.

An absence of hard copyright laws at the time allowed Iraqi companies to pirate software and sell the copies at a high price, effectively making the country a no-man's-land for developers and leaving Iraqis like Shihab and his brother with no alternative to purchasing pirated games. Large-scale imports of the Amiga continued into the early 1990s, and by 1993 the Amiga's market penetration was relatively high compared to other computers.

Shihab went on to study computer engineering at the University of Baghdad. Inspired by other games, such as Team17's *Superfrog* and Konami's *Maze of Galious*, Shihab—who had been programming and creating games on his MSX computer since the age of 13—met with friends and fellow students Murtadha Salman and Mahir Alsalman, and together they set out to develop their own game. Shihab's goal was to create a game rich with Iraqi history, culture, and art that, as Shihab now

Statistics

- Estimated number of times **Cosmos Interactive** has raised/lowered the game's price: 150
- Times downloaded (free): 460,000
- Times downloaded (paid): 40,000

reflects, “presented an image of Iraq as a country of something more than just wars and sanctions.”

“Most people don’t know much about Iraq and its history,” Shihab says. “It is unfortunate that the small percentage of bad people affect the image of the greater majority, all of whom are peaceful, educated, smart, passionate, compassionate, and generous. We rarely hear the good stories from the media.”

Because of his programming experience Shihab led the team of three, who informally referred to themselves as “the Mesopotamian team.” Shihab designed the game, coded it using AsmOne, and fell into the role of project manager.

The game was created with very limited resources. “Imagine [having] no hard drive,” Shihab says. “We had to constantly swap disks during each compilation. Add to that the fact that we had to save work constantly in case of power interruptions. We had to swap floppy disks many times.”

“We had only one book, the *Amiga Hardware Reference Manual*,” Shihab adds. “We had no Internet or game-developer reference books.” The Amiga that Shihab used to create the game had only 512 KB of memory, an amount so small he had to use risky programming tricks to squeeze out all the power possible. This often led to crashes.

The finished product was *Babylonian Twins*, a title considered by many to be the first commercially viable video game created in Iraq. A puzzle platformer, the game follows twin princes of Babylon in a quest to protect their father’s kingdom from an evil magician. Salman based the visual style of the game on art from history books, and Alsalman’s soundtrack drew inspiration from traditional Iraqi music.

Shihab’s coding prowess served him well, and the methods that he used to create the game made it run smoothly on the Amiga. “People have told me that this is the fastest-moving

game on the Amiga,” Shihab says proudly. “That’s unfortunate, since it didn’t come out for the Amiga.”

They completed the game, but Shihab couldn’t find a publisher. The UN sanctions were serving effectively as a legal blockade that prevented publication, so even if Shihab had found a company willing to publish the game, the likelihood of *Babylonian Twins* finding its way out of the country would have been extremely low. Shihab eventually negotiated with a Canadian publisher (he wasn’t willing to name the publisher during our interviews), but that deal fell through as well. *Babylonian Twins* was a doomed project.

Years passed, and the Mesopotamian team moved on with their lives. Shihab moved first to Jordan, then to Dubai, where he started Cosmos Software with Auday Hussein, a longtime friend who had previously worked with the *Babylonian Twins* team. The compa-

Fun Facts

- *Babylonian Twins*’ music lead, Mahir Alsalman, had to share his music samples with the team by calling them and holding a phone up to his speaker.
- There are three hidden bonus levels and several hidden treasures to find in *Babylonian Twins*. The treasures are based on real artifacts from Mesopotamian history.
- Murtadha Salman created all of the original game’s art using *Deluxe Paint* on the Amiga.

ny saw success with projects like virtual museums, and the pair moved to Canada. In the meantime, Salman had moved to Australia to continue his career as an architect, having spent a few years working on high-rise buildings in Dubai. Alsalman had finished medical school and became a brain surgeon in Baghdad before moving first to Jordan and then to the United States.

In 2007, Shihab's younger brother posted a gameplay video of *Babylonian Twins* on YouTube. The video went largely unnoticed until 2008, when members of the English Amiga Board discovered it. The online forum's members loved the game, and their positive response motivated Shihab to post a demo. The demo received huge praise and got Shihab thinking: the Apple App Store had recently launched and was successful, so he decided to begin work on an iPhone version of the game by himself. It didn't take long before he realized he'd have to take the project more seriously in order to see it come to fruition.

Shihab applied for funding from Telefilm, a Canadian government-funding agency that had cash and was willing to support him. With his new backers, he contacted Salman and Alsalman and asked them to work on the remake. "I got other team members involved," Shihab says, "but the core team remained the same." These other team members included programmers, a sound tester, and an artist, all of whom made it onto the new game's credit page.

Salman was taken aback and excited about the prospect of reviving *Babylonian Twins*. "When Rabah called me to tell me about reproducing the game, I was really in shock," he says. "I forgot about it completely. It was 16 years ago, but suddenly, all the memories of the Amiga days came back, and I found myself drawn to the idea of bringing our old work to life."

The newly reformed Mesopotamian team used email, instant messaging, and occasional phone calls to collaborate on the high-definition remake. After just a year, *Babylonian Twins* and the iPad-specific *Babylonian Twins HD* launched on the App Store. Critical and consumer response to the new *Babylonian Twins* was overwhelmingly positive.

Eurogamer praised the game's level design. The iPhone news and reviews site TouchArcade.com called the art "stunning" and the music "terrific," adding, "There are no outward signs that this is in fact a port, beyond a grand style of gameplay that harkens back to the golden age of the Amiga." Many iTunes users gave the game five-star reviews too. At the time of this writing, *Babylonian Twins* has enjoyed over half a million downloads.

After the game was finally published and the dust settled, the general feeling expressed by the team members was one of relief. "I spent all my spare time and weekends working on it for about eight months," Salman says, "but after we finished, it felt great. I would love to do it again."

An extended version of this story originally appeared in GamePro Magazine's November 2010 issue as "Unpublished in Mesopotamia." You can also find the story online at GamePro.com.