

# Made in Iraq

As western military shooters reduce their homeland to a backdrop, we talk to the **Iraqi developers challenging preconceptions**

People have been making games in Iraq for thousands of years. A popular pastime in ancient Mesopotamia – a region that enclosed much of modern-day Iraq and Kuwait together with parts of Syria and Turkey – was a strategy game in which players raced to move their pieces off a 20-square board. Rediscovered as ‘the game of Ur’ by British archaeologists, it predates chess and is a possible ancestor of backgammon.

Videogame development in Iraq, meanwhile, dates back to at least 1993, when a small team of Baghdad University students led by **Rabah Shihab** developed a roleplaying platformer, *Babylonian Twins*, for Commodore’s Amiga. Created against a backdrop of high unemployment and devastated infrastructure following the Gulf War, it is an attractive side-scrolling recreation of an age of relative prosperity and great architectural works. Playing as two fugitive princes in sixth-century BC Babylon, players explore levels ranging from the legendary Hanging Gardens to the blue-tiled Ishtar Gate.

With western game publishers variously hard to pin down or reluctant to work with an Iraqi team, *Babylonian Twins* never made it to shelves. Shihab and his colleagues left Iraq in the late ‘90s, pursuing careers across the globe, but they reconvened to update the game for iOS in 2009. The new version includes the game of Ur as a collectible – a reminder of its connection to one of the world’s oldest traditions of game-making. But as Shihab explains, the principal “trigger” for *Babylonian Twins* wasn’t that tradition but a videogame created outside Iraq: Electronic Arts’ *Desert Strike*, the Gulf War fantasy in which you rain



FROM TOP Naseer Alkhouri, Rabah Shihab and Samer Abbas

destruction on the Middle East from the controls of a US Apache helicopter.

Shihab was saddened by this brutal portrayal of his birthplace. He wanted to offer an alternative vision of Iraq, devoid of both gun-toting Americans and Saddam Hussein’s tyranny. “People don’t know Iraq, they don’t know the history. It’s thousands of years. Yes, we had a dictator, we had wars, we were in a mess, but people don’t know about what came before. I think the more people know about this, the more we can bring people together, and understand the problems,” he explains.

## If you’ve visited Iraq

in a game, it probably looks more like *Desert Strike* than *Babylonian Twins*. The list of videogames set in the country overwhelmingly consists of military shooters from North America and Europe, most of them based on actual wars in the Middle East led by the

US and its allies, and often created in collaboration with arms manufacturers and military organisations. These games prioritise the viewpoints of invading soldiers, carefully shorn of political context: they portray Iraqis as either interchangeable extremists or passive victims, and the country itself as a collection of bombed-out buildings. Iraq is hardly alone among Arab and Muslim countries in being represented this way, but thanks to Saddam Hussein’s notoriety and a coalition occupation that stretches back to 2003, it looms especially large in western fantasies of military adventure.

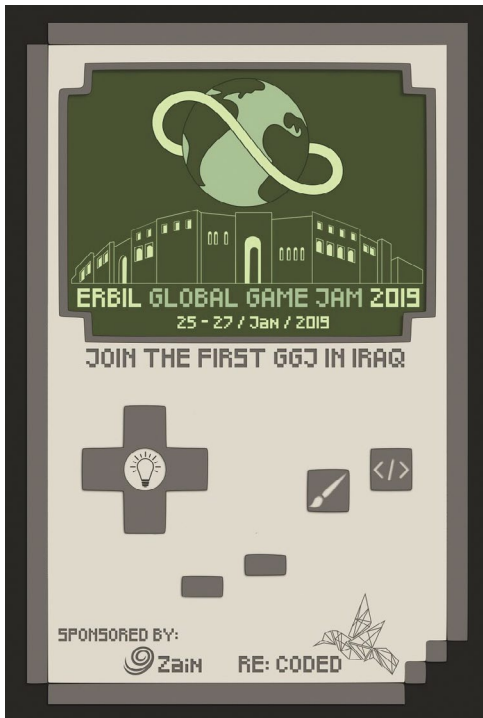
Iraqi game developers who live outside of the region must reckon with these portrayals as they carve out a place in an industry that is overwhelmingly Anglocentric, all the while dealing with complex feelings about a birthplace that has become a foreign land. “I spent eight years working at DICE on, among others, the *Battlefield* games,” Raw Fury’s **Naseer Alkhouri** says. “Never in an artistic [capacity], mind you, so I never felt I could affect or make an impression on the games. But it’s all very strange to me. I feel game developers are my people – I click very well with this group of individuals and I understand them.

And what I did see happen was that Iraqis, or rather the Middle East, were almost copy-pasted as the villains in those games. It wasn’t with bad intention, but rather something everyone did. And, of course, in games it’s always a splinter group, or a terrorist group – but we are effectively

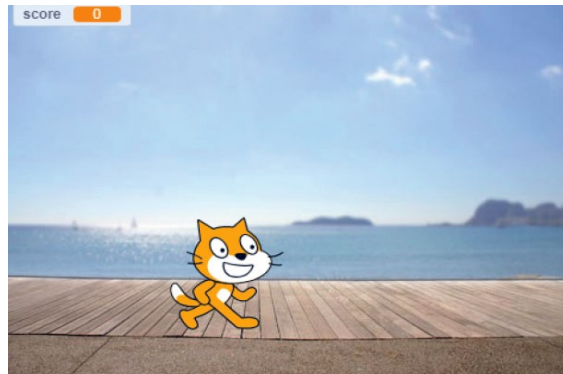
shooting Arabs in their home towns.”

Alkhouri, who now works in QA, project coordination and localisation, after a stint in game journalism, has more experience than many of this kind of violence. His mother and father were involved in a campaign to overthrow Saddam Hussein’s regime. “My parents were wanted for treason before I was even born, and our family was always on the run. My first memories are of reaching Kurdistan at around age four, where we stayed and actively fought the Iraqi army until 1988, when Saddam unleashed a chemical attack on Kurdistan. I was ▶

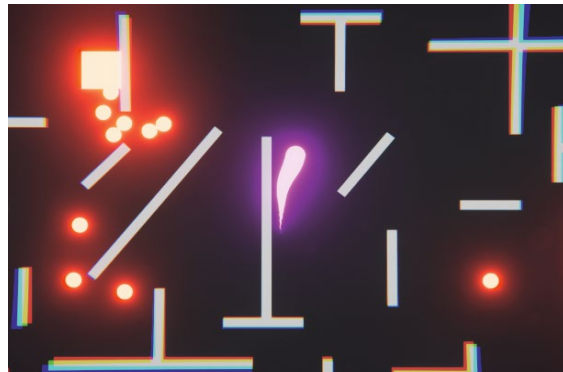
“It’s always a splinter group, or a terrorist group, but we are effectively shooting Arabs in their home towns”



Entries to Iraq's Global Game Jams include *The Cat Is Hungry*, a feline festival of doughnut collection, and *Red Neighbors*, a game about avoiding jealous locals on your way home



ABOVE *Babylonian Twins* is the most famous videogame property to come out of the region. Iraq has a wealth of artists, Rabah Shihab says. "More so than business applications, supply chains, all those enterprises – there's a big opportunity to build an industry around creative work"



## A FORGOTTEN EPIC

One of Shihab's collaborators on *Babylonian Twins* is Auda Hussein, a Canada-based independent developer who has worked with companies from Starbreeze to EA and is now completing a PhD in archaeology. Hussein is the creator of *Impulse GP*, a hover racer for iPhone set in an eco-friendly future. It's a far cry from the game he was once making in Iraq, an Amiga adaptation of the Mesopotamian epic of Gilgamesh, one of the oldest works of literature. Hussein wanted to equal or succeed *Shadow Of The Beast*, the foremost Amiga game at the time, but sadly it was not to be. "The project took much longer than I wanted it to take and by the time there was a fully playable level, the Amiga platform was dead and the prospect of publishing the game was fading out."

eight years old when I rediscovered electricity, TVs, cars and games. I had managed to forget that modern life was a thing." On reaching Sweden after two years as a refugee, Alkhouri worked hard to fit in. "I didn't want to be different, and although we spoke Arabic at home, I tried to make myself forget [Arabic writing]." He wouldn't return to Iraq until 2009, long after Saddam Hussein's downfall. Visiting was "an emotional and strange experience" at first. "I looked like everyone else, I spoke the language, but not well enough. I acted and dressed funny. I got nicknamed 'The Swede', so there was this feeling of not fully belonging anywhere."

Shihab has similarly complex feelings about Iraq today. Now a seasoned entrepreneur and software engineer based in San Francisco, he's keen to help other up-and-coming Iraqis find their feet. But between the ongoing occupation and the rise of ISIS, he has only been able to spend ten days in Iraq over the past 25 years. "I've almost lost all connection to that country – all my relatives are out, all my friends are out," he says. "And it's hard to even go back there. Like I have my aunt, my uncle, but when we talk about people my age, or with the same experience – engineering, coding, technology... I have lots of friends, they are all around the world, right? Canada, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, everywhere, [but] they are not in Iraq. So there's nobody to start a collaboration with. But it's still my passion. As I get older, I'm thinking about how I can do something [for people there], because I was in the same position. I needed help. I needed guidance from people outside."

**The state of** game development in Iraq today is bound up with the state of game development across the Arabic-speaking world, as Kuwait-born **Samer Abbas**, regional manager for the Middle East and North Africa at Lockwood Publishing, explains. Perhaps the most important trend during the past 15 years has been the spread of Internet-capable phones and, with them, free-to-play business models for mobile and web games. These shifts have created a new market for studios in other regions. Hyper-casual games – that is,



During the 1980s, many budding Arab developers got started with the Sakhr line of microcomputers, based on various iterations of the MSX format, with Arabic software. "It defined our generation," Samer Abbas says

cheap-to-make ad-supported disposable games with simple graphics and controls – have become especially popular among Arabic players, with publishers such as Voodoo Games commissioning many at once in the hope of a single game going viral.

Where Shihab had to write his own level editor, arrange for demos to be smuggled out of the country, and learn English from BBC news broadcasts, young game creators in the Arabic world today have access to the Internet, free game engines such as Unity, and digital storefronts such as Google Play, albeit often with significant regional limitations. "All of these things lowered the barrier to game development, and kind of democratized the process," Abbas says.

But if more people in the Arabic world are playing games, local development success stories are still thin on the ground. Arabic developers are, after all, competing with more established peers overseas; in particular, Abbas suggests, they have less expertise and fewer resources with regard to monetisation, promotion and managing live operations. There is little in the way of industry lobbying groups such as UKIE, or academic routes into game development. As such, many budding game designers

and programmers never move beyond tinkering at home.

"It's not the 1980s, when everybody's experimenting from their bedroom and everybody's starting from a level playing field," Abbas explains. "We're now part of an industry of super-high-quality, very expensive productions. So most of the

attempts to do game development [during the past 15 years] failed. Not all of them – there are outliers, and there are small-scale successes, where you create a game cheaply and maybe make enough money to buy a car. But the big studios that got investment, most of them closed down. It

happened in Jordan, in the United Arab Emirates, in Egypt."

To all this, add setbacks due to ongoing wars and political machinations. In August 2019, Iraq's parliament voted to ban *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* and *Fortnite* due to their "negative effect" on young people. What opportunities exist are shaped by broader social factors, such as gender inequality. Despite increased political participation and awareness of women's rights, many Iraqi women face discrimination and harassment in the workplace, assuming they're employed at all. According to a

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2019 REACH report, only 12.3 per cent of working-age women in Iraq were either employed or looking for work as of 2018. As in the western industry, the bulk of Iraqi game developers appear to be men.

Abbas thinks that Arabic game development needs a big hit for other studios to rally around and learn from. "Not having this kind of anchor creates a situation where there's no chain reaction of knowledge sharing," he says. He's spent years trying to create a community of MENA game developers, first as the co-founder of Play 3arabi, a Kongregate-style Arabic games portal, and more recently as one of the organisers of the Game Zanga game jams. Together with training events such as those organised by international non-profit Re:Coded, game jams have become important resources. "You suddenly have tons of people who speak your language from nationalities you've never met before," Abbas says. "It really creates a feeling of unity, and the communities start learning about each other. The people who were doing ROM hacking and Arabic localisations, some of them were in

Morocco, and the game developer community didn't know about them, but they connected on a local level because of Game Zanga."

Iraq itself has hosted Global Game Jams in 2019 and 2020, both organised by Abbas' friend Danar Kayfi, who hails from Iraqi Kurdistan. These jams often have social themes: the 2019 event, for example, explored the concept of home and community. One of the standout entries is *Chains Bonds*, a novel spin on *Pong* created by Saif Mohammed Hakeam and Ahmed Mohammed Khalid. Players are joined by a line, and must intercept incoming balls to add them to a structure without breaking their bond.

**While he has** moved away from game development, Shihab would like to be more involved with communities like these. He is planning a Zoom-based forum for Iraqis around the world, letting people pitch their ideas and receive feedback from mentors in Silicon Valley. He also has ideas for a 3D virtual recreation of Iraq's history, building on the educational elements of *Babylonian Twins*

and his later work creating educational software in Dubai. This would be aimed at Iraqis who have never spent time in Iraq, including Shihab's own children. "That passion not just to create an image of Iraq, but to show that Iraqi people can also build and create, as they used to create in the past, is still inside me."

Alkhouri has his own ideas for games set in Iraq, drawing on his growing intimacy with the country. His return in 2009 may have been tentative, but it was also formative: he met the woman he would later marry. Rather than Iraq's past or its current state as a nation, Alkhouri would like to play a game focusing on the lives of people who are seldom granted much personhood or agency in western entertainment media. "A stranger letting everything go just to help you find your way. A dirt-poor family preparing dinner for you and offering you a bed while sleeping on the floor, because that's how you treat guests. People involving you in a debate over a cup of tea just because you happened to step into a tea house. Basically, normal Iraqi people being social, generous and friendly." ■

**Variations of the game of Ur were still being played in India in the 1950s, but the rules for the Mesopotamian version had to be reconstructed from clay tablets in the '80s**