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**SPAWN
POINT**

Unpublished in Mesopotamia

The modern rebirth of the first video game from Iraq.

—WORDS BY
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Shortly after the launch of Apple's iPad, a game with a particularly rich history appeared on the iTunes App Store for both the iPhone and iPad. The game is of an unusually high quality to be the first title from an unknown developer. Its slick presentation would lead one to believe that a large team with a substantial budget was behind it, but the game was created almost entirely by just three men.

Although you've probably never heard of Babylonian Twins, it's something of a record-setter. The gap between the date of its inception and final publishing is one of the largest the game industry has ever seen: 17 years.

1993 was just one of many bad years for Iraq. The United Nations-imposed economic sanctions that had begun 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 U.N. 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 to import goods. One such example of a popular import was the Commodore Amiga, the

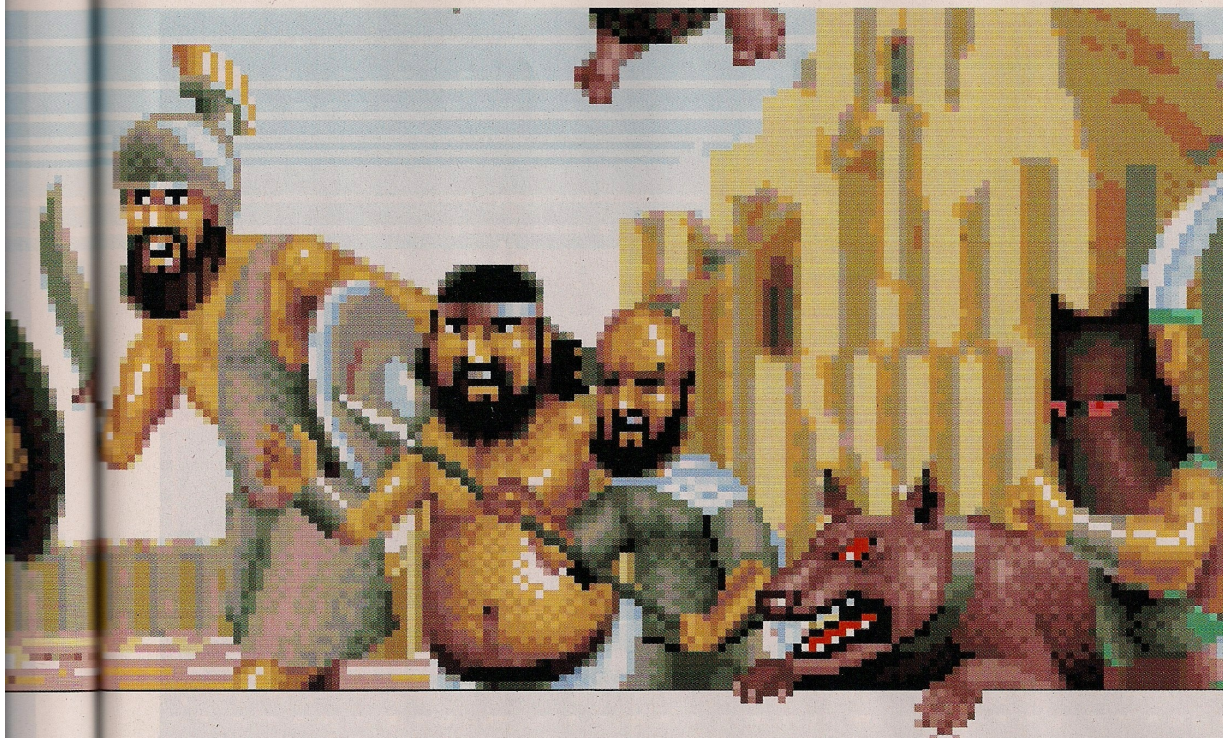
successor to the Commodore 64. In the late 1980s, Iraqis began importing the Amiga 500 (the low-end Commodore Amiga) in bulk, despite that bringing them over often cost three to four times more than the standard retail price for the machines.

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 was able to play one of his own games, such as *Superfrog*, as an outlet for his creative nature.

The absence of the right laws for Iraqi computer software at a high price in the country made it difficult for developers like Shihab to purchase the hardware they wanted to import into the country. The Amiga was relatively affordable compared to other computers.

Shihab, an engineering student at the University of Baghdad, began developing other games. He created *Superfrog* and *Galious*, which experienced success in creating a game for the Amiga computer. Shihab was 13—met his fellow student Salman and set out to create his own game.



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 such as Speedball and KickOff as an outlet for their competitive natures.

The absence of hard copy-right 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 other than to purchase pirated games if they wanted to play. Large-scale imports of the Amiga continued into the early '90s, and by 1993, the Amiga's market penetration was relatively high compared to other computers in the country.

Shihab studied 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 experience programming and creating games on his MSX computer from the age of 13—met with his friends and fellow students, Murtadha Salman and Mahir Alsalman, and 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 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

Murtadha Salman, a student of architecture at the time, created the game's graphics using Deluxe Paint on the Amiga. Considered a talented artist by his peers and teachers from an early age, Salman had no experience with graphic design on a computer, making his work on the project a challenging but rewarding experience. Salman

addicted to it at once. Before that I used to sketch and paint on paper, but after learning Deluxe Paint, I just forgot about them. I was so obsessed with it that even when I drew on paper and made a mistake, I automatically tried to press 'undo.'"

Mahir Alsalman, a talented musician, composed the game's soundtrack, which is influenced by traditional Iraqi music. The med-school student already owned an Amiga and was familiar with music-creation software, making his part of the creative process a bit easier. Alsalman still describes the ordeal as trying. "We had fun, but the overall situation was frustrating," he explains. "I used to call Rabah and exhibit the music for him by holding the phone up to my speaker, and he would tell me what he liked and what he wanted to change."

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 only had one book, the *Amiga Hardware Reference*

"People have told me that this is the fastest-moving game on the Amiga.... That's unfortunate, since it didn't come out for the Amiga."

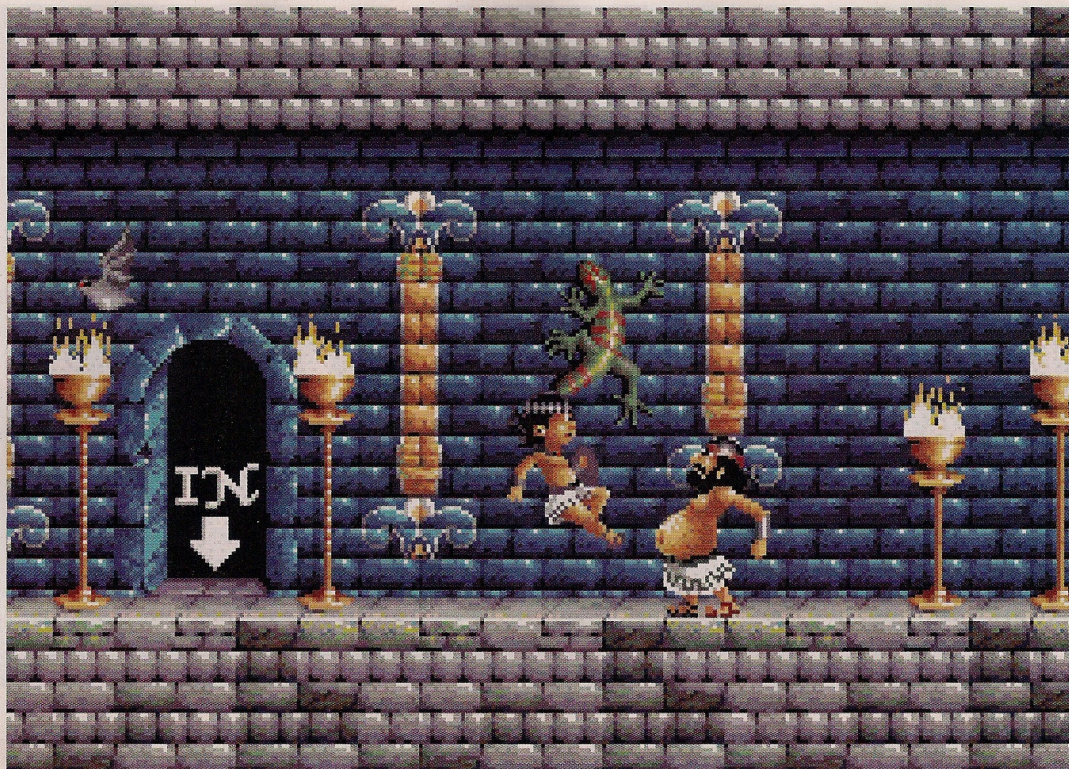
—Rabah Shihab, lead designer for Babylonian Twins

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 called themselves "the Mesopotamian team." He designed the game, coded it using AsmOne, and fell into the role of project manager.

caught a ride over to Shihab's house one day and played with the Amiga, and he began teaching himself the ins-and outs of the system.

"I had no idea about graphics software in general," Salman says. "We're talking about the early '90s here—so when Rabah introduced me to the Amiga, and I experimented with Deluxe Paint, I was so excited. It was like magic to me, and I became



Manual," Shihab adds. "We had no Internet or game-developer reference books." The Amiga that Shihab used to create the game only had 512 KB of memory, an amount so small that he had to use risky programming tricks to squeeze out all the power possible. This could've led to crashes.

The finished product was Babylonian Twins, a title considered 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 game's visual style on art from authentic 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,

"Most people don't know much about Iraq and its history.... It is unfortunate that the small percentage of bad people affect the image of the greater majority.... We rarely hear the *good* stories from the media." —*Rabah Shihab*

since it didn't come out for the Amiga."

They completed the game, but Shihab couldn't find a publisher. The U.N.'s sanctions built an effective legal blockade against the game's publishing, so even if Shihab found a company willing to publish the game, the likelihood of Babylonian Twins finding its way out of the country was 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. It seemed 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 previously worked with the Babylonian Twins team. The company saw success with projects such as the creation of virtual museums, and the pair moved to Canada. Salman moved to Australia, continuing his career as an

architect after spending a few years working on high-rise buildings in Dubai. Alsalman finished med 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, an online forum dedicated to the old hardware, discovered it. The forum's regulars loved the game, and their positive response motivated Shihab to post a demo. The demo received huge praise, and that got Shihab thinking. The Apple App Store had recently launched and was immediately successful. Reinvigorated by the positive feedback from the English Amiga Board members, Shihab began 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.

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Shihab applied for funding from Telefilm, a Canadian government-funding agency with the cash and willingness to support him. With his new backers, he contacted Salman and Alsalman, asking them to work on the remake. "I got other team members involved," Shihab says, "but the core team remained the same." The other team members Shihab references include programmers, a sound tester, and an artist, all of whom made it into 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 e-mail, instant messaging, and occasional phone calls to work together on the

"I had no idea about graphics software in general.... I used to sketch and paint on paper, but after learning Deluxe Paint, I just forgot about them. I was so obsessed with it that even when I drew on paper and made a mistake, I automatically tried to press 'undo.'"

—Murtadha Salman, lead artist for Babylonian Twins

high-definition remake. After 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 has been overwhelmingly positive.

Gaming website 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." A number of iTunes users gave the game 5-star review scores as well. At the time of this writing, Babylonian Twins has enjoyed sales north of 300,000.

After the game was finally published, 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, it felt great. I would love to do it again."

According to Rabah, the Mesopotamian team will likely stay together. "People are requesting [Babylonian Twins] for the DS, PSP, and Xbox 360," he says. "The 360 will probably be our first launch, since we have it ready for that platform—we are just finding the best way to publish it."

Shihab adds he's open to the idea of working on brand-new projects, too. He hints at the possibility of a Babylonian Twins sequel or another game with a similar retro feel.

Ultimately, Shihab is immensely grateful for finally getting their game made after so many years.

"We're just glad people finally heard our story and are enjoying our game."