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5/13/2019
Essay 2

<u>The Iranian Video Game Industry</u>

With the recent E3 conference, upcoming video games were exhibited for gamers by big software developers such as Nintendo and Sony, who are based in Japan, Microsoft and Activision who are based in America, and Ubisoft from France. Independent game developers, or indies, such as team cherry from Australia and Villa Gorilla from Sweden, have recently found the spotlight for their great quality and innovation. Indies also allow gamers to play games from less represented countries, but recognition for games at an international level is still unbalanced. Iran is once such country worthy of gamer attention.

For many western gamers, Iran is not a country that comes to mind. Though Iran brings to mind the *Prince of Persia* series, that's about it. A few modern war shooters do depict the Middle East, but in terms of war. *Battlefield 3,* which portrays a fictional invasion of Tehran by Americans, was banned in Iran (Tommy, 2018). However, some games expand perceptions of Iran. In 2016, a lesser known game, *1979 Revolution: Black Friday* was released by New York City based iNK Stories and directed by Navid Khonsari.

The game has won numerous awards and nominations including a BAFTA nomination and Facebook game of the year (Batchelor, 2018), but it too has faced criticism from the Iranian government. Despite most of the development team being Iranian, the Iranian government labeled the game "pro-Western Propaganda." Iran then accused the director of espionage, banned the game from the country and Khonsari is now afraid to return to Iran for the sake of his and his family's safety (Lien, 2012).

Despite this, Iran has a big and growing gaming culture. Just ask game developer Amir-Esmaeil Bozorgzadeh, "Iran [is] filled with some of the most hard-core gamers the world's ever

seen" (Lewis, 2016) or Karimi Tar a cinema and game writer, "Iranians will go to the airport to welcome [Japanese game developer Hideo Kojima], even more than they do their national soccer team" (Elmjouie, 2016). But no one has helped Iranian based game development as much as Ahmad Ahmadi. Ahmadi is the chief business officer at the Iran Computer and Video Game Foundation, or "Bonyad" in Persian. It's a non-profit, non-governmental group started in 2007 that supports and promotes game development. With its help, there are now over 95 game studios in Iran. It even has its own rating agency. According to Ahmadi, sports games are the most popular and, as of 2016, almost a quarter of Iranians played video games (Elmjouie, 2016).

Garshasp: The Monster Slayer, one of the most famous games in Iran, was one of the many games financed by Bonyad. It's a hack and slash game based on Persian mythology. Other popular Iranian-made games include, *The Dark Phantom* and *Parvaneh* which was nominated for best "hardcore" game in 2014 at Games Connection Europe. Many of these games have noticeable influence from popular western games, but arguably so do all games including modern games made by big developers.

Iran has unique challenges for game developers both inside and outside of the country. Iran is one of many countries that face censorship. Nudity, sexual content, violence, and representation of Iran in negative ways, such as the previously mentioned Battlefield 3, are banned (Tommy, 2018). Another issue is the late introduction of credit cards in Iran. Mobile and online games, which are some of the most accessible games, rely on users having credit cards and many games can only be purchased online through the app store, google play, or steam. This wasn't an option for Iranians until credit cards were recently introduced into the country in 2016 and they are still not widely used (Elmjouie, 2016) (Reuters, 2016).

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A big challenge for Iranian developers is foreign competition. Foreign games still greatly outcompete Iranian games in sales. According to Mehrdad Ashtiani, game developer and Production Deputy at Bonyad, "when you have two products, one of them a triple-A international title developed by 200 people in which millions of dollars have been spent, and the other an Iranian game developed by 15 people...but their prices are similar, this makes for unfair competition" (Lewis, 2016). The reason that the prices are so similar is the lack of copyright laws. Triple-A games can be pirated and sold at market price which makes it difficult for smaller Iranian developers to compete. Not only do Iranian developers struggle with sales, recognition is also an issue.

Aria Esrafilian is the head of the studio Raspina that made *E.T Armies* which takes influence from the famous western *Halo* and *Killzone* series. Esrafilian drained his savings to make the game. The staff worked on the game for six years all the while learning programming from online tutorials and forums while simultaneously learning English. Yet while demoing their game at the Tehran Game Expo, 30 percent of visitors believed the game was a foreign or the team had just dubbed it. Gamers are also shocked by how long the game development took to create. Esrafilian responds, "because we were in Iran with limited resources and we were sanctioned, there was a lot we didn't have at our disposal. It was a grind" (Elmjouie, 2016).

In this way, Iranian game developers share a lot in common with indie developers around the world, yet they often experience unique struggles as well. The tough competition with triple-A titles, lack of funds and struggle to learn game making skills lead them to often create original, unique games. *41148* is an Iranian made point and click game that begins with a man who wakes up in a dilapidated church surrounded by dead bodies and can't remember who he is. The game,

made by Iranian middle school art teacher Mahdi Fanaei, has unique visuals-the game is entirely in silhouette. Unfortunately, some of the symbolic elements, such as bloody sacrificial altars and horned monsters, caused some players to believe the game promoted satanism. This almost resulted in Fanaei being imprisoned. Luckily, public opinion swayed and he finished the game in a series of episodes. The final episode was even voted "best Iranian game of the year" (Fang, 2017). Another game, *Engare* (انگاره)*,* made by Mahdi Bahrami, is a puzzle game based on Islamic art and sacred geometry. The game has won multiple awards both nationally and internationally. *Engare* isn't alone when it comes to games with Persian influence. The previously mentioned *E.T. Armies* has "architectural homages to the ancient city of Persepolis" (Elmjouie, 2016) and the Shahnameh is referenced in *Garshashp* as well as in the games *Seven Quests*, *Jonoun-e Siah,* and *Siavash* (Lewis, 2016) (Elmjouie, 2016).

Japan, the U.S. and Europe currently dominate the game industry with Nintendo, Sony and Microsoft being the big names. Yet with the recent rise of indie games reaching international fame, it seems likely that international game developers will as well. Iran is growing and learning fast. Their huge gaming community likely means a growing community of Iranian game makers who will keep learning and improving their craft. With the Tehran Game Convention just 7 hours away at the time of this essay, I am excited to see what new innovations Iran will bring to the gaming community.

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