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IRAN'S CONFUSED NATIONALISM IN GAMES

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to analyze Iranian video games with the purpose of asserting that the government has employed two distinct forms of nationalism as a means to validate its authority, and also has used its authority to suppress privately developed games that operate independently from the government's established ecosystem. We've used landmark digital games as case studies, alongside ethnographic approaches by interviewing developers and people who had relevant life experiences, to get a clear picture of cultural narratives and responses that have shaped the state of digital games in Iran. Based on the research we've done, we have made a

case for how the dichotomic nature of games in Iran has helped create a mismatched sense of nationalism, and how the government's role in this mismatch has become more prominent by forcing the independent side to flee the country.

KEYWORDS

Iran, Iranian video games, nationalism, independent games, propaganda games

INTRODUCTION

In July of 2022, Black Cube Games published *The Tale of Bistun* (Black Cube Games 2022), an action-adventure game with a Persian aesthetic. The game was made by Iranian developers, trying to show the culture of their homeland to a brand-new audience whose understanding of Iran might be overshadowed by either Orientalist views on Persian history, or Post 9/11 fears of Middle East (Shahidi 2022). Just a few months before *The Tale of Bistun*'s release date, *Mokhtar: Uprising Season* (Monadian-e-Basirat 2021) was developed by Monadian-e-Basirat, a government-funded organization in charge of "helping to advance the cultural and economic levels of Iranian entertainment," (Monadian-e-Basirat Homepage n.d.) with the goal of upholding certain political, cultural and ethno-religious views that are very much in line with the Islamic Republic's ideology.

This example is one of the last remnants of what would be considered the dichotomy of video games in Iran. This dichotomy has been established since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and has shaped the history of video game development in the country. The dichotomy dictates that developing video games in Iran has to end up on one of two routes: either "independent games" made by video game enthusiasts whose adoration of the medium made them want to see their own culture represented in it; or "propaganda games" made by organizations with government affiliations and budgets, that use video games as yet another means of progressing their political

agenda and worldview. The propaganda games used to be primarily focused on an Islamic understanding of Iran and the Iranian identity. However, we would argue that different elements forced the government to co-opt Persian nationalism which was almost always only represented in independent games to attract the youth. The dichotomy was well established from the start of video game development in Iran, roughly mid-1990s, and was in full effect until 2011. In 2011, one side of the dichotomy finally overpowered the other, disrupting both the industry and the view on video games in Iran.

The goal of this article is to use the journey that has led to the dichotomy, the effects it had on the industry, and its eventual death, in order to understand how nationalism in Iran mixes both a purely religious and purely ethnic understanding of the country. We will start from the beginning of Iranian video game development, discuss how products were created in the dichotomy and their cultural roots, and how the representation of Iran and Iranians in Western games led to the eventual destruction of it. In order to keep the structure of the article organized, we have chosen a few case studies. Playing those games, as well as researching their immediate effects on the world of video games around them, gives us a good reference point for the dichotomy. It is also important to realize that in a country like Iran, where cultural products are heavily supervised, it's impossible to discern the understanding of cultural history from an understanding of the political history. So, we will give an adequate background of the political scene at play when discussing the stages of Iranian video game history.

The importance of this work lies in its timeliness. People, including those we have interviewed – from developers to players, pass away, taking with them memories that change rapidly. To preserve this oral history that defines the modern video game phenomenon in the region, we have undertaken the task of documenting and publishing it. The archival situation in Iran, as we will explain, along with other reasons, we believe make this work a vital contribution to our shared cultural and digital history as human beings.

PREVIOUS WORKS AND THEORY

Though they are often seen as entertainment products, video games and politics have always been intertwined with the medium's history of being used as propaganda machines by the states or the status quo to push their political agenda, specifically regarding their understanding of the enemy, such as the U.S. Army's series of *America's Army* (United States Army 2002) games (Løvlie 2009). This phenomenon is extensively shown by Regina Seiwald (2021) which examines the deliberate effort that has been made in American and Western military games to spread anti-communist ideologies. So, it is not surprising to see political counter-narratives being produced by those who want to challenge the hegemony such as the Islamic Republic. One of those can be found in "Magic Nodes and Proleptic Warfare in the Multiplayer Component of Battlefield 3" where the author discusses Iran as a dehumanized entity, for the American military-industrial complex to achieve its aims (Höglund 2014).

There is research about Iran's video game industry and its political usage, such as the works of Melinda Cohoon (2021), which has aimed to "produce a nuanced view of international relations and hegemonic goals present within the video game entertainment industry," by mostly examining modern games about/or set in Iran, such as *Battlefield 3* (DICE 2011) and *Prince of Persia* (Ubisoft 2010). But when it comes to discussing the history of Iranian video games, or games created inside of Iran, the research is much less robust. Many of the scholars who discuss games in the Middle East, and not games set in the region, tend to look at the region as a monolithic entity with little regard for obvious cultural differences that shape these games individually.

Due to the journalistic and ideological barriers, the game scene inside of Iran has produced a skewed image in which only certain games are given publicity, either for their political aims or their resemblance to already established games. That also helps with the Orientalist view that Middle East and North Africa, as a region, are a hegemonic entity with similar goals and desires, and similar cultures

and histories. Even works trying to understand the region's relationship within the gaming industry tend to look at the whole region as an Arabic and/or Islamic system. Vit Šisler, with his work on Middle East games, despite it being extremely important, is particularly guilty of this aspect. When discussing the Tebyan development team within Iran and the video games made within the country, he completely disregards the cultural impact, and views Iranian games as "Islamic" products, not "Iranian" products (Šisler 2009). That makes for a misguided view of the cultural identity in Iran, because the ethnic differences make up a huge part of the Iranian identity, alongside its religious one. His arguments also fail to consider the political landscape of Iran outside of its religious identity. In his 2013 work "Video Game Development in the Middle East: Iran, the Arab World, and Beyond" he fails to consider gaming in Iran outside of localized propaganda titles, and consequently misses a huge amount of Persian identity that is present in the games of the era he is talking about. In his 2017s book chapter, Revolution Reloaded (Šisler 2017), he mentions the cultural dichotomy that we will discuss in this paper, however, his focus is less on Iran's video game development and its inner conflicts, and instead, more on the Western influence of games such as *Prince of Persia*.

Part of the reason for this research is to dispel the Orientalist view that the regions in the Middle East are hegemonic or culturally similar. Sadly, that view has been spread to most of the academic and journalistic approaches to games in Iran, and considering that counter-narratives to this view are sparse, the importance of creating a wholistic and in-depth analysis of video games in Iran outside of the few propaganda titles, and the evolution of those said propaganda titles, becomes more apparent. Having said that, it is important to note that because of this lack of resources, not many works in English were found that provide useful information. Due to this lack of resources our primary works are either interviews or Persian language material that have not been previously translated.

METHODOLOGY

Throughout the research, we used a digital ethnographic approach with a heavy focus on "participant observation" by immersing ourselves in the world of Iran's game industry (Atkinson and Hammersley 1998). Interviews have become the backbone of our approach. Our interview subjects consist of game developers working within and outside of Iran, narrative designers of the games chosen as game studies, and a few game streamers and journalists who worked from 2005 to 2011. The method of the interviews was through text, either email or through chat platforms. Due to scheduling constraints and lack of access, no face-to-face interviews were conducted. The interview questions varied from subject to subject based on their affiliations and their history, but they were within the subjects of their experiences working on video games, and their dealings with government entities and regulations; as well as their history within the industry or outside of it.

One of the biggest issues facing the video game industry within Iran and its historiography is the Islamic Republic's poor archival systems and a lack of government offices that deal with archival of publications. Many of the decrees within the government are also subjected to censorship due to their perceived sensitivity, so even community-based archival projects will not have access to them. That is why interviews became our primary source. Lack of access to official databases, and lack of access to certain government entities made sure that our scope would be limited, but we did take precautions to minimize personal bias when compiling the interview data. By cross-referencing the interviews and the few public documents available to us, we have tried to root out personal biases and self-grandiose statements in favor of more factual ones that have been reiterated and reinforced by interviewees other than the sole claimant.

It is also important to note that even though many of the interviewees have left Iran, some of the data regarding the inner workings of government agencies can still be considered as sensitive and would cause problems for people who expose them. Thus, when discussing

them it is prudent to keep that in mind for the sake of their safety. Our approach to this was to avoid pointing out specific instances that would incriminate individuals, and instead rely more on public documents backed by interviews. Although anecdotal evidence is not conclusive when discussing an issue such as the dichotomy of video games in Iran, when faced with the lack of concrete documentation it is our best hope to get a holistic picture of Iranian game development.

To define the dichotomy in which the industry operates, we primarily selected notable Iranian game developers as our interviewees: Amin Shahidi (director and game designer of Tales of Bistun), Amir Tavakoli (former director and game designer of Naser: Son of Man), Puya Dadgar (producer, director and game designer of the Quest of Persia trilogy), Arman Aryan (former writer and designer at Fanafzar and Dead Mage Studio), Alireza Fassihi (director and game designer at Dead Mage Studio), Mostafa Beikmorad (producer at Dead Mage Studio) and Ramin Zafarazizi (developer and game designer of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves). The interviews were conducted formally online by the methods mentioned above, and we explicitly communicated our intentions, seeking confirmation to use their information in our paper. Consequently, some developers, like Emad Rahmani (former director at Monadian-e Basirat), declined to participate, citing reasons ranging from religious and political concerns to a desire to avoid personal risk.

In conducting our research, we applied inductive thematic analysis to systematically examine qualitative data derived from interviews with key stakeholders in the Iranian gaming industry. Following the principles outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), we identified recurring patterns and themes within the interview responses, allowing us to uncover nuanced insights into the participants' perspectives of Iranian video games. To fortify the credibility and verifiability of our findings, we strategically integrated relevant references, drawing upon the works of scholars such as Saldaña (2016) in the thematic analysis context. This methodological triangulation, combining thematic analysis with scholarly and popular refer-

ences, served to strengthen the validity of our interpretations and contribute to a more robust understanding of the dynamics shaping Iran's gaming landscape.

Furthermore, we conducted informal interviews with a total of eight Iranian video game journalists and 36 players to enhance the rigor of our assessment of each historical period and situation. Most of these interviews were conducted online, and surveys were administered to gauge players' current attitudes toward Iranian-made games.

We have also played the notable games mentioned in this paper, subjecting them to a comprehensive analysis. Employing a shot-by-shot approach, we scrutinized the audiovisual aspects of the games. For the examination of in-game narratives and additional paratextual materials such as booklets, websites, and manuals, we conducted textual analysis.

DEFINITIONS

It is essential to establish what we mean by Persian or Iranian, since the definitions are somewhat nebulous, especially in the West. Contemporary Iran, slightly similar to its pre-Islamic empires, is a heterogeneous, multiethnic (if not multinational), and multilingual country. This becomes paramount when discussing nationalism in Iran. As a result, many people of Iran with distinct ethnic backgrounds would identify themselves as Turks, Kurds, Arabs, Armenians, etc. (Mojtahed-Zadeh 2007). Even though Persians are only one of many ethnicities in Iran, and Persia (which is modern day province of Fars in contemporary Iran) has been only one of many provinces in greater Iran, Greeks used the terms Persia and Persians to refer to entire Iranian empires and their subjects. Because of that, in modern-day Iran, Persia and Persians are only used in historical, ethnic, and other specific contexts. Most often, Persian-speaking people would translate Western usage of these terms to Iran and Iranians. For example, *Prince of Persia* series is known in Iran as "*Shahzad-ie Irani (The Iranian Prince)*" (Chobin 2021).

However, in English literature, Iran is mostly associated with the political and national nature of the country. When English-speaking people would like to discuss Greater Iran's culture and history, they often use the terms Persia and Persian. Since this paper is written in English, we also use the term Persian interchangeably with Iranian. And by Persian, we are not referring to the ethnic majority of Iran but Iran's varied culture, history, and society as a whole; which includes those of ethnic and religious minorities.

Persian culture, much like the terms we've discussed, is also nebulous due to modern political borders, which inevitably exclude many peoples, nations, and cultures from the discourse. When people discuss Persian culture, they mainly refer to the culture of Iran, which encompasses a phenomenon much more significant than Iran's modern borders. The complicated history of Persian Empires, Persianization, Persianate societies, etc. demonstrates the humongous Persian culture that can be found in Greater Iran, Asia Minor, South Asia, and Western Asia (Mojtahed-Zadeh 2007).

It is also important to understand what we mean when we refer to nationalism. Reactionary thoughts in Iran are categorized by Ali Ansari (2012) into four groups of "dynastic nationalism," "religious nationalism," "secular nationalism," and "the left (jebhe-e moghavemat)." We primarily focus on dynastic nationalism, which is a powerful form of ethno-nationalism that adheres to Iran's glorious past before the Muslim invasion and religious nationalism or Islamism, which aims to uphold the Islamic ideals of Ayatollah Khomeini (Ansari 2012). In the paper, we will refer to dynastic nationalism as Persian nationalism because of its focus on ethnic Persians and the racial tenants of it that are prevalent in the game.

Another matter that will be discussed more thoroughly throughout the article is the dichotomy of the Iranian games, which is very well defined inside the country and among both players and designers. The characteristics of the dichotomy can be summarized this way:

1. The focus of the games, in terms of content and even audience, is often drastically and visibly different. While privately made games such as *Quest of Persia* or *Garshasp* are third-person action-adventure games set in historical Iran, games made by government organizations (e.g., the Basij) such as *Valfajr 8* and *The Enemy's Nightmare* are FPS titles set during the Iran-Iraq war.
2. The aims of the games are often different. Throughout our interviews, we were able to establish that every lead designer, to some extent, wanted their game to succeed financially and internationally in order to promote Persian culture. However, government-made games often have different aims. "We aim to combat the Western and the Zionist propaganda that has become rampant inside the country and to let our children know who the real enemies are," as stated by Jafar Jozani, the producer of *Mokhtar: Uprising Season* and the *Ambassador of Love*, in an interview with Bazinegar.ir (Jozani 2021). It is noteworthy to mention the fact that every privately-made game discussed in this article, as well as many that are not discussed, became available on Steam and other international platforms. However, the government-made games are only available inside the country. The distribution is also different inside the country, as the government-made titles can only be found in stores affiliated with the Basij or the government.
3. Another matter that is very self-evident is the fact that privately-made games tend to avoid direct commentary or reference to contemporary politics. This is in sharp contrast with the government-made games that are defined by Tasnim News Agency as 'Games to combat the Western influence with the right politics' (Tasnim News Agency 2023), in response to an article written by Ghorbanpour in WIRED (Ghorbanpour 2023).

There are other issues that can be discussed about the dichotomy, such as their funding and their economic aspect, however, that may open up issues that are way beyond the scope of this paper, so, in this definition section, we believe these four characteristics suffice to define what we mean by the dichotomy in the article.

HOW IT STARTED

Before starting our journey through video games in Iran, it's of utmost importance to discuss the 1979 revolution and more importantly, the Cultural Revolution and how it shaped the entertainment industries in Iran. The Cultural Revolution was a great political movement for the modern Islamic state. During the cultural revolution, the newly established Islamic Republic sought out to create a cultural identity. This identity was a mixture of Shia Islamist views that were further radicalized by the Iran-Iraq war, a Persian-centric view on language and ethnicity that was a remnant of the deposed monarchy's political agenda (Yarshater 1989), and an enemy rhetoric that painted the West as the enemy of both Shi'ism and Iran's history and culture. These narratives were then pushed through the newly-constructed Ministry of Culture (M.ibrahimn 1979). However, the Cultural Revolution alienated a great many teachers, scientists, economists, technocrats, engineers, etc., and forced them to leave the country because of their more "moderate" views on the issues of relationship with the West, and freedom of expression.

Due to mass immigration combined with scare tactics that silenced the opposition, the Cultural Revolution drastically affected the state of culture and technology. Electronic companies inside Iran closed because of a lack of supply from outside Iran, and relations with the United States and its allies became dire, which resulted in Iranians not being able to legally import American products or have their own official localized versions of them. It also cemented a process for cultural products in Iran. When we are discussing products that are created and published or released in Iran, these prod-

ucts have been cleared by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (Fazeli 2006).

That means that there is effectively no official way for works of art to be published unless, in some sense, they follow the state-approved guidelines. In Iran, the state controls the media and cultural products, but products that are clearly propaganda get a budget from the state to expand on the narrative that the state approves. Independent works, even though they are following the guidelines, are not necessarily used to promote those talking points, but they are still hampered by those guidelines. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance often removes controversial elements from games during the pre-approval process (Fazeli 2006). In this political and cultural climate, the first steps of the Iranian video game industry were taken.

Unfortunately, there are very few sources that describe or document the early history (from the 1970s to the early 1990s) of the video game industry in Iran, especially considering that many attempts to document the details of the industry were lost due to poor archival or being safeguarded from public view by the Islamic Republic. As a result, we mostly rely on Arash Hackimi, Saeed Zafarany and Brandon Sheffield's (2020) work titled "*Iran video games timeline: from 1970 to 2019*". Due to the listed limitations and lack of evidence, the timeline is not extensive nor absolute; and it is hard to double-check or cross-reference the findings of the authors. However, as of writing this article, this is the best source of information on the early history of the video game industry in Iran.

Regardless of the worsening relationship between Iran and the United States, in 1985, the Atari 2600 was smuggled into Iran (Hackimi et al. 2020), which was extremely difficult for the average Iranian to buy due to the rise in US dollar after the Revolution and the Hostage Crisis. The situation changed when the Cultural Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war ended in 1988. During Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency and his more moderate policies in favor of development, some trade relationships were established, and personal computers slowly became part of the Iranian household.

This was the first step into video game development in Iran, and it was the first step in cementing a national identity through games.

Ali Baba and the Tank Hunter

In 1995, a 29-year-old independent developer released a video game called *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (Ramin ZafarAzizi 1995) based on a tale from "1001 Nights," commonly known as "Arabian Nights" (Hackimi et al. 2020). *Ali Baba* is a side-scroller platformer reminiscent of *Prince of Persia* (Broderbund 1989). It uses the same mechanics and the same gameplay loop, and shows a clear trend in independent video game development in Iran. Because of the isolationist political views of the Islamic Republic, interactions between Iranians and non-Iranians were slim for most of the population (Sreberny and Torfeh 2013). For game developers in Iran this meant a lack of connections and materials to develop their ideas organically, so many independent game developers started their quest for creating more Persian-centric atmospheric pieces, by using other games as their baseline. In the case of *Ali Baba*, that game was *Prince of Persia*. The game is effectively a re-skin of the 1989 *Prince of Persia*, with an explicitly Persian aesthetic that wasn't as muddled with some Orientalist elements of the original.

Around the same time, the other side of the dichotomy started. *The Tank Hunter* (Honafa 1996), funded by the Ministry of Culture, was produced for DOS (Hackimi et al. 2020). *The Tank Hunter* is a gallery shooter about the Iran-Iraq war in which you control an Iranian soldier in a 2D environment and destroy Iraqi tanks. It was similar in flow and gameplay to Western gallery shooters of the time, such as *Tin Star* (Software Creations 1994), but it was built from the ground up instead of relying solely on those games. This is evident from their new UI and their attempts at mechanics that use gallery shooters as inspiration, despite having no direct comparison with other games of the genre.

Unlike independent developers, institutional game developers had access to tools and services that were closed off to most of the

general public. This, together with assigned budgets, meant they could look at it as their career instead of a hobby. It also meant that their product could have its own look, even if they were still using genre conventions. *The Tank Hunter* also forwarded a narrative that, at the time, needed to paint Iraq as an invading force and tout the bravery of Iranian soldiers. Iraq is a primarily Sunni nation, and that also played a big role in creating an identity where Shi'ism was threatened by these outsiders of the creed (Rezamand 2011).

Despite both games having simple mechanics and graphics, even considering the time, they clearly show the dichotomy at the very start of video game development in Iran. *Ali Baba* was trying to adapt a popular game into Persian aesthetics and present it to a generation that was starting to find their way into video games (Zafarazizi 2023). On the other hand, *The Tank Hunter* had an explicit political agenda to push, and regarded video games as more of a means to that end, rather than a medium worth discussing in and of itself. Both sides realized the importance of video games as a new cultural product, but their goals, as well as their roots, were separate. The dichotomy would evolve with the games representing the different sides.

Quest of Persia and Garshasp

For a better understanding of the dichotomy and the brands of nationalism, it's good to look at a significant game event in Iranian video game history. In 2005, an indie studio in Iran published the first ever Iranian 3D game called *The End of Innocence* (Puya Arts 2005). This is an adventure game about an archeologist and engineer who aim to uncover the mysteries of ancient Persia, with the backdrop of the Iran-Iraq war. The selling point, at the time of release, was that it was a game about Iran, with Persian voice acting, that closely resembled the games that the Iranian public was already familiar with (Quest of Persia F.A.Q. n.d.). The game was made without involvement from the government, either financially or systemically, to the point that, according to Puya Dadgar (2023), the lead developer and designer of the game and its two sequels, were even forced to create

their own engine, because they lacked the funds to license an official one. This can be seen in the game itself as it lacks many of the UI elements that would help it be more mainstream, and would've been easily available through licensed engines. The studio then went on to turn *The End of Innocence* into a trilogy known as "Quest of Persia," which encompasses three anthological games, with the main connection being stories about Iran, and stories about historical events (Quest of Persia F.A.Q. n.d.).

The End of Innocence's use of the Iran-Iraq war raises an important distinction in the dichotomy. The Quest of Persia series is regarded as independent games made to give players the chance to relive historical events (Dadgar 2023). This will become more apparent in the second game in the trilogy, *Lotfali Khan Zand* (Puya Arts 2008), and the third game in the trilogy, *Nader's Blade* (Puya Arts 2009). Both of these games have historical tales as their centerpiece, and use an already established understanding of Iran's history. However, these games, much like *Ali Baba*, are heavily reliant on Western counterparts, and use their gameplay loop as a template for creating their own experiences. They attempt to be a-religious, as none of the main characters in these games are influential religious leaders, and neither do they believe in religious doctrines, at least not explicitly. However, they still push a narrative that places the Iranian national identity at the forefront. In the case of *The End of Innocence*, they even depict Iraqis as enemies. Although it seems like the games are promoting the official government position, they are still not propaganda games. "It was a foundational step to create games about Persian culture in later entries," mentioned Dadgar (2023) himself when questioned on this issue.

Propaganda games in Iran are not alone in promoting a political message. Games of all types, even when made without government interference, do have a political agenda and political thought behind them (Seiwald 2021). When we discuss propaganda games, we're discussing games that are made through government mandates and decrees. "Quest of Persia" promotes a political narrative and a political identity, but it is doing so of its own volition. Although the effects

of the Cultural Revolution of the 1980s made sure that explicit counter-cultural narratives were seriously hampered, this doesn't mean that all games outside of the government system were made with counter-cultural narratives in mind. The main difference between the two sides of the dichotomy is how they view the medium, and how they approach it.

A great example of this is *Garshasp, the Monster Slayer* (Fanafzar 2011). This fantasy action-adventure game was developed under the original name "Saoshyant" by the Iranian company, Fanafzar. It was released in 2011 in cooperation with Dead Mage Studios, which is based in Pasadena, Texas (Lewis 2016). This game deliberately challenges the Anglo-Saxon mythological canon that has dominated the fantasy game genre by translating an ancient Iranian epic poem into the realm of virtual entertainment. A showcase of their ambition was that they engaged Arman Aryan, a notable young adult writer, to write the script for the game (Aryan 2022).

Engaging Aryan to write the story was an obvious attempt to present a nationalistic view of Persia. Aryan's works often mix mythological Persian entities and stories with modern times, and they tout the importance of learning about these entities and stories, over their Islamist equivalent (Aryan 2022). Despite pushing this seemingly counter-cultural narrative, *Garshasp*'s main role in the dichotomy is how it approaches video games as a medium. The game uses hack-and-slash mechanics and builds itself on top of those mechanics and their already popular fanbase. It's a game made from the love of video games (Fassihi 2022), and tries to push for an already familiar aesthetic to go with the medium that has become more prominent in the past few decades. The game's main political identity is one of Persian, without any religious overtones or undertones. By creating a mythical world, the game harkens back to a time before the Arabic Invasion, which is a point of pride for many Iranians (Rafiee Rad 2021).

The Art Book of Garshasp (2011) articulates this phenomenon in a dramatic manner:

> 'The treasure trove of Persian mythology contains within it some of humanity's oldest and most profound myths. They recount a rich and ancient culture, meaningful literature and exciting legends that bring to life the excitement of Iranian civilization in all its glory – an experience often lost in the daily travails of modern life.'

This could be considered a counter-narrative to what the government would push, but at this point in history, the "Iranian" identity was also creeping into propaganda works, though still heavily submerged in religious identity.

Garshasp was praised in Iran, and gained a lot of attention before its release, though if one looks at the reviews of the game, one might assume it was a failure (VanOrd 2011). The hype surrounding the game meant that more people were looking forward to it appearing at the same level as a multi-million-dollar AAA Western game, when in fact it was more akin to Indie games of the genre. Consequently, after the game's release, it was met with harsh criticism over its lack of polish and presentation by the international press. Fassihi (2022), the director of *Garshasp*, told us that, "We weren't really able to represent Persian mythology, culture, and history in the game the way we intended. Too much of our effort went into creating a game that would match the likes of *Prince of Persia* or *God of War*" (Santa Monica Studio 2005). Aryan (2022), who seemed more pessimistic, believed that the developers and the director had butchered his script, which resulted in its global failure and its failure at representation. He believed that the game he intended to make was much better than what we got.

The Other Side Of The Coin

The success and attention given to *Quest of Persia* drew the attention of the government. In 2007, Iran Computer and Video Games Foundation (IRCG) was established by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance to support video game development in Iran (IRCG About Us 2016). The Establishment of IRCG was an official decree from the

government that video games, much like movies and TV shows, were a proper tool to be utilized by the government to push a very specific narrative. This also meant a subsequent rise in the development of propaganda games, which were intended to grab the attention of the gamers that were intrigued by *Quest of Persia* and *Garshasp* (Tavakoli 2023).

The nationalistic dichotomy of games became obviously apparent during this time, when games such as *Valfajr 8* (Tebyan Cultural Institute 2011) and *Saving Harbor: Defense at the Enemy Line* (Tebyan Cultural Institute 2007) were produced to take political stances against the United States of America and the State of Israel. They took similar approaches to Western propaganda games, such as *America's Army* (Løvlie 2009). *Valfajr 8* is an FPS shooter that, much like *The Tank Hunter* before it, uses the Iran-Iraq war as its backdrop. The game has the effect of dehumanizing the Iraqi soldiers by reducing them down to fodder for the player to shoot at. It is the same tactic that was used for years in American FPS shooters to vilify communism (Seiwald 2021).

In the mentioned games, Islamic nationalism is not only reflected in the thematic elements, but also in the gameplay mechanics. For example, players may be rewarded for acts that align with Islamic values, such as reciting religious prayers or performing virtuous actions. The integration of Islamic symbolism and aesthetics, such as mosques, calligraphy, and religious chants, further accentuate the Islamic nationalist sentiment within the game. By employing Islamic nationalism in video games, the Iranian government aimed to reinforce a collective identity rooted in Islamic values, and promote a sense of pride in Iran's Islamic heritage. For them, Iran is not a Persian country with a religious identity, it is an Islamic country with an ethnic identity. So, Islamic iconography and Islamic identities are seen as paramount for the creation of identity in Iran. However, that narrative began to change when the popularity of ethnic-based media became more apparent. The narrative began to consider Iranian ethnic background as parallel, if not wholly compatible, with religious background.

At this time, the dichotomy is on full display. In contrast to *Quest of Persia*'s attempts at creating an independent sector that can develop games that have Persian aesthetics and tell historical tales to a relatively younger audience (Dadgar 2023), there is a similar effort by the state to court the same audience with the explicit intent of feeding them a political narrative through gameplay. Despite this, the dichotomy did not mean the overpowering of one sector over the other. Propaganda games were being made and pushed by the state, but at the same time independent games were given a voice through game magazines and even television ads. Even though the propaganda games could have benefitted from a steady stream of budgeted funding that wouldn't be reliant on their success in the market, neither side overpowered the other. *Valfajr 8* and *Nader's Blade* had equal opportunities to find their own audiences that were already familiar with the genre or the inspiration games (Beikmorad 2022).

The Vilification and the Backlash

In the 2000s, when the *Prince of Persia* series was huge in Iran, many Iranian intellectuals, think tanks, and consumers of Western pop culture sensed an attack on them and their country in the form of a cultural cold war. Electronic Arts' *Battlefield 3*, and movies like Zack Snyder's *300* and Oliver Stone's *Alexander* are prime examples of what was perceived as being parts of this cultural cold war. The post-9/11 policies of George W. Bush's presidency also did not help this outlook on the West, and with the Islamic Republic already pushing an anti-West narrative, Bush's actions were seen as proof of that narrative and an animosity towards the region (Sreberny and Torfeh 2013). Since the 2000s, extensive research has been done in the West regarding the relations between video games and politics due to the militarization of the content of games after the war on terror.

For a clearer understanding, we have examined Johan Höglund's works. Höglund (2014) writes about how popular military FPS games in the early 2000s constructed the idea of the Middle East as a perpetual theater of war. He claims that this is a result of a general

neo-Orientalism in American popular culture. In particular, he points out the problems that arise when military shooters try to pass themselves off as "authentic" and "realistic". Höglund (2014) also examines *Battlefield 3* within the context of post-war-on-terror narratives and neo-Orientalist attitudes in games. He argues that "*Battlefield 3* obviously, and predictably, charts current American geopolitical anxieties about Iran, Islamic extremism, terrorism, the rise of new Russia, and the spreading of WMDs. The predominance of Iran suggests that this nation is at the center of such conflict."

The dichotomy of games in Iran was only possible because both sides of it were able to get adequate publicity from the traditional media (Dadgar 2023). That began to change after the release of *Battlefield 3*. The game's decision to make Iran one of the main areas of conflict was met with harsh backlash from the Islamic Republic, and to them it cemented the need to place more focus on state-sponsored games. More shooters with the explicit idea of pushing an anti-US agenda began development in the aftermath of *Battlefield 3*, and with the state controlling traditional media, it was seen as a culturally important move for these games to get most of the attention (Beikmorad 2022). This coincided with an economic crash that meant doom for many of the independent game magazines and studios that didn't have government backing to rely on. The independent sector saw its market share shrink in real-time, because of both fewer outlets that would cover their games, and the push from the government to promote more specific propaganda games.

Parvaneh (Bearded Bird 2014), released in 2014, marks the last time a fully independent game in Iran received any publicity from the traditional media (Hackimi et al. 2020); and with its poor return of profits and lackluster reviews, it signaled the end of independent game development in Iran. Despite that, government-sanctioned games like *Epic of Alvatan* (Tebyan Cultural Institute 2012) were still being produced and released with the same quality as games like *Valfajr 8*, but because they were seen as tools to promote the Islamic Republic's political agenda, they weren't hit by the closure of game publications. Because of that, the dichotomy of games inside Iran

ended with government-sanctioned propaganda games remaining as the only vestige for Iranian developers to see any profit or recognition.

Propaganda games are still being produced at the same speed and with similar concepts as their predecessors. In 2020, the Trump administration assassinated Qasem Soleimani, the head of Quds forces in Iran and an important military figure for the Islamic Republic (Gan 2020). After that, a cultural response was published by the name of *Commander of the Resistance: Amreli Battle* (Monadian-e-Basirat 2022), which sought to glorify Soleimani as a noble force against ISIS, while still forwarding the narrative of a "brave Iranian soldier fighting an outsider ideological enemy" that could be traced back to *The Tank Hunter*. *Commander of the Resistance* is again an FPS, but this time uses fully-voiced cutscenes and a narrative that could work in and of itself.

The Persian Muslim

With the release of *Ambassador of Love* (Monadian-e-Basirat 2020) and *Mokhtar: Uprising Season* in 2020 and 2021, an evolution of the mentioned narrative of Iranian and Muslim identities merging began to show itself. Both games were some of the first big-budget government-funded titles that took place in a historical setting before the Islamic Revolution of Iran. By retelling a story about the death of Imam Hussein, a famous heroic tale within the Shi'a orthodoxy, these two games aim to provoke a sense of nationalism that encompasses many different appealing elements that will bridge Iranian Nationalism and Shia Supremacy. Mihran, the protagonist of *Ambassador of Love,* is a fictional Persian character, and most of his comrades in his quest against the Umayyad Caliphate are Persians who converted to Shi'a Islam. There are apparent anti-Arab and anti-Sunni sentiments throughout the games, which can be seen as a form of deconstruction of Persian nationalism in the domain of the Shi'a orthodoxy. As some of the counter-narratives in the face of the Islamic Republic's push for an Islamic identity took an "anti-Arabic" form, this game uses the

already established counter-narrative, but twists it to shape it into an "anti-Sunni" form, and draws a parallel between the Sunni Caliphate of the old and the current Arabic world leaders.

In an early segment of *Ambassador of Love*, the play meets with the protagonist's significant other whose official history (Monadian-e-Basirat 2020) from the game's glossary is detailed as follows:

> 'Parvane is the daughter of Darius. After the conquest of Rey, she was imprisoned by the Sunni Qirza. She was later released and was restricted from any political activity. However, after meeting with Mihran (the protagonist), she saw the light and converted to Shi'a Islam.'

As demonstrated in the text, the game doesn't shy away from bold implications regarding sectarian as well as ethnic conflicts. The characters and storyline are intentionally crafted to portray Arab Sunnis as conquerors who seize control of Persia, imprisoning virtuous Zoroastrians. This portrayal aligns closely with the secular and ethnic nationalist narrative concerning Arabs and Islam (Litvak 2017). Interestingly, the game presents Shi'a Islam as a continuation of the Zoroastrian tradition. Persian characters like Mihran, Parvane, and other followers of the Imams in the game show no hesitation in joining the sect. To convey this revisionist interpretation of history, the game introduces fictional Persian characters and notably omits any villains who are either Persian or Shi'a.

Mahdi Jafari Jozani (2021), the recent mastermind of Iran's government-funded games, who was responsible for both of these as well as the Qasem Soleimani title, is a high-ranking member of the Basij, a paramilitary organization created with the fundamental goal of upholding the Ayatollah's regime. During an interview with Bazinegar, a Middle East games website, in 2021, Jozani expressed that he perceived himself not only as a producer but also as an integral participant in a new discourse on games. Despite the controversies surrounding *Ambassador of Love*, he considered the fact that Iranians were engaging in conversations about an Iranian game as a signifi-

cant accomplishment. While Jozani mentioned that the games have achieved good sales, independent verification of this claim is not available (Ghorbanpour 2023).

Through an online investigation of forums and websites, we found out that this new mismatch of nationalism that combined both elements of Persian ethnocentrism and Islamism at least worked to an extent. Using a survey of 48 Iranian gamers who were engaged with international modern titles, 83% of them said that they had heard of these titles and knew of their significance. Views on them have been, as mentioned by Jozani himself, controversial. Using the same survey, 37% of people who were aware of the titles said that overall, they had a positive view of the games, while 50% had a negative view and the rest neutral. Fassihi (2022), the developer of *Garshasp*, showed a positive attitude to the first game's release, while other developers didn't share the same sentiment (Dadgar et al. 2022-2023).

The results are in sharp contrast with previous titles such as *Valfajr 8*, when 0% of the participants in the same survey had a positive view, and almost no independent developer had shown support for it. The historical approach, as well as the inclusion of Persian nationalism, while contradictory in nature, were among the reasons people seemed to have liked these titles more than the previous ones that were only representative of religious nationalism or Shi'a orthodoxy.

The act of absorbing and co-opting Persian nationalism into Shi'a orthodoxy is something that the Islamic Republic has been concerned about since the days of Ahmadinejad's presidency (Fozi 2016). However, since the surge of Persian nationalism in recent years, the Islamic Republic's concern has become ever more prevalent, especially with the rise of Reza Pahlavi as a nationalist oppositional figure (Elhan 2021). Some examples of this imminent concern are billboards that were installed after the democratic and anti-compulsory hijab movement, *Woman, Life, Freedom,* which stated that, even in pre-Islamic Iran, women wore the hijab. The attempt seemed to be around the idea that Ayatollah Khomeini's Shi'a orthodoxy was not

something that was enforced on Iranians, but also part of the Persian ethno-nationalist narrative. *Ambassador of Love* and *Mokhtar* are prime examples which have arguably had some success in propagating the state's new ideals.

CONCLUSION

To understand the dichotomy of video games in Iran, is to understand the political nature of how identities in Iran have formed and spread through government efforts and independent movements. Video games in Iran are the newest form of entertainment to get approval from the government, as their constant crackdowns on social media has shown a distaste for that form of interaction (Green 2022). Though it is not feasible to completely disregard personal beliefs and personal biases, especially when it comes to creating artistic work within an ideological system, it's important to reiterate what creates the different sides of the dichotomy. Independent game developers were mostly trying to recreate what they enjoyed in their gaming experience, as was told through interviews, but with a veneer of their local culture and aesthetics. That doesn't mean they were exempt from pushing the narratives designed by the Islamic Republic, but it did mean that they weren't ordered to do so. On the other side, the institutional sectors and propaganda game developers had a mandate from the government to push specific talking points. These talking points were often secret, or didn't show until a pattern emerged, and they viewed video games as yet another propaganda arm that already included movies, TV shows, and literature.

Through each side's preservation, an identity was formed for the Iranian gamer. This identity was both of a Persian person and a Muslim person. The idea was that for gamers in Iran, each side would create video games for each part of that identity. Though it was not mutually exclusive, as seen in the war narrative of *The End of Innocence*, propaganda games once fully embraced an Islamist view on identity and pushed that constantly. This was changed after 2011 in what the Islamic Republic viewed as an ideological war against its

values. Propaganda games now had more resources and controls, and easily pushed independent sectors out of the picture, as they were reliant on word of mouth and minimal advertising space given to them by the government. With the crackdowns on social media and the breakdown of the economy, independent games were crushed and the dichotomy became a de facto government-sanctioned supremacy. This, however, did not mean that the products that the government created and pushed were positively received by the intended audiences.

The pushback of the games meant a change in identities enforced by these games. Since 2011, the propaganda sector, as well as the Islamic Republic as a whole, has seen the issue of Iranian identity as a clear distinction between Islamic supremacy and ethnic history (Azizi 2024); but that did not need to be the case. With the popularity of games with a-religious or secular views of history, the Islamic Republic decided to merge its preferred identity with them (Dadgar et al. 2022-2023). The result was an amalgamation of identities that needed to link Persian and Shi'a Muslim together. With this new identity, there was no need for a division between Shi'a and Islamist backgrounds and ethnic backgrounds; so, they were mingled together. Islamic and Shi'a values were mixed and used interchangeably with Persian and Ancient Iranian values. Values like hijab, monotheism, loyalty to leadership, and traditionalism became known as both Islamic and Persian in nature.

Creating a sense of nationalism that within itself housed a paradox that needed everyone adhering to it to both consider themselves fully Persians from the ancient times and yet staunch Muslims with a strong religious root; and that nationalism was pushed through games such as *Ambassador of Love* and *Mokhtar: Uprising Season* for a new generation, through better gameplay and smarter narratives; retroactively folding in both sides of the dichotomy to mean one single goal.

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