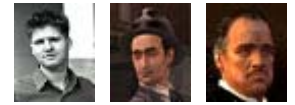


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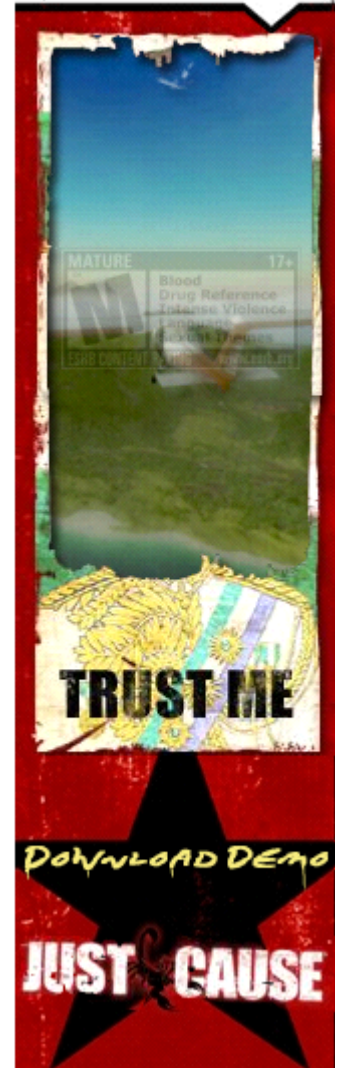


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"We started development for UnderAsh in 1999," Kasmiya says, "and finished it two years later. At that time most gamers around the world, including the Middle East, were playing **Delta Force, Medal of Honor, Counter-Strike**—the golden age of FPS games." None of these American games, of course, gave a Middle Eastern perspective. On the original website for UnderAsh, Afkar made its cultural position clear. "The main purpose of the game was to [offer alternatives in an area] previously filled with foreign games distorting the facts and history, and planting the motto of 'Sovereignty is for power and violence according to the American style.'" Kasmiya says that the game allows Arabs to support the Palestinian cause, albeit in a virtual manner. "The Arab street is very charged. They believe they can't do anything to help their brothers in Palestine," he told the BBC in 2002. "So I think they are playing because they feel that they can feel the experience of young Palestinian people living in Jerusalem." ("Like the game," the BBC reporter concludes ruefully, "the nature of Arab support remains largely virtual.")

Kasmiya says he has received some negative response to the game, but the positive response has outweighed it. "Even though I was sure of what I was doing, I was afraid that people would easily misconstrue it, especially as it deals with such a controversial concept, but wow...I didn't expect so much positive response from both the Middle East and Europe. Volunteers from all over the world stormed my mailbox with localization proposals." Beyond sales of UnderAsh on CDROM, the game's website drew more than a million downloads—an incredible number, Kasmiya notes, for a region where the average modem speed is still stuck at 28.8K. In a talk given at the Barcelona game developer conference "Game as Critic as Art" in 2006, Kasmiya told attendees that the Palestinian mother of a teenager who played UnderAsh called him to say how she had burst into tears at its conclusion, so powerfully moved at seeing her experience depicted by a game.

The game's more elaborate sequel, UnderSiege, is set in 2000 during the second intifada. Its narrative draws from true events experienced by Palestinian families during this time; though the release of UnderSiege throughout the Middle East remains stalled, Kasmiya hopes eventually to release it worldwide. "I just can't wait for UnderSiege to be published internationally," Kasmiya told an interviewer for selectparks.net, "so players can tell the difference between a history game based on lives of real people trying to survive [the] ethnic cleansing and [the] political propoganda that is trying to inject morals in [to] future marines to justify their assaults on nations far away from their homeland."

Short teaser videos for UnderSiege have the air of a brutal documentary. In one, after a child is gunned down in the street, an Israeli soldier jumps from his tank, apparently to rescue him. When he arrives by the child's side, the soldier appears to finish him off by pounding him with a cement block. In another teaser, a Palestinian religious service is interrupted by an Orthodox Jewish gunman, who mows down the congregation with a machine gun. The latter scenario appears to depict the 1994 attack on a Hebron mosque by Baruch Goldstein, which killed 29 and wounded 125 and has historical distinction as the bloodiest attack on Palestinians by a lone Jewish extremist.

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- Conflict: Desert Storm** (PS2)  
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release date: 09/30/2002
- Counter-Strike** (Xbox)  
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- Conflict: Desert Storm** (GC)  
rank: 2398  
release date: 04/22/2003



Kasmiya contrasts the aims of *UnderSiege* with American games based on real-world conflicts like **Conflict: Desert Storm** or **Delta Force: Black Hawk Down**. "What is the goal of those games?" Kasmiya asks. "Is it that gamers kill all the bad 'different-looking' guys, and thereby bring peace to the world? I don't know. I think such games don't provide the player with more than a couple hours of fun, plus some information about the conflict. And the feeling that he is best—that he belongs to a civilization that depends on arms to solve its conflicts. In *UnderSiege*, three out of the five main characters die. We simply are telling a history of real people who are trying to live in a world full of violence. No heroes are allowed in—facts only. I believe that, through this type of game, we can reasonably balance out the one-sided views as they're written by the victors."

Producing the strategy game *Quraish*, Afkar's most ambitious game to date, has presented its own unique problems. The history game takes place during the first century of Islam's existence, and players can take on the role of a Bedouin sheik, an Arab warrior, a Persian, or a Roman. Kasmiya believes the game will impart a deeper respect for the history of Islam beyond the image of "[the] Crusades, oil, and terrorism" that dominates Western media representations. However, the game has also been controversial to radical fundamentalist Muslims, who fear it might not give the version of history they endorse. "They are afraid that we can't view Islam in the right way," Kasmiya says flatly, "or might make fun of spiritual characters. This topic is very sensitive in the Middle East—remember the Danish cartoon crisis [of 2005]." Kasmiya says his company is "fighting on two frontiers," trying to counteract the effects of negative images from the West and attempts by Muslim "extremists" to control the public image of Islam.

Kasmiya also contends that many Western countries would not allow Afkar to purchase rights to gaming engines. "What really bothers me is that they are judging us before even trying," he says. "But on the brighter side, that forced us to develop our own engine and use it for *Al Quraish*. Looking at how things are now, I think it was better for us. It made us more independent."

## GAMES AS A DIALOGUE

Eddo Stern, an Israeli artist and designer who lives in California and who's becoming well known in the art world for political, sometimes prankish projects using modified or original games, is sympathetic, but a bit more skeptical, of the value of Afkar's games. One of Stern's own works, *Sheik Attack*, used footage from a variety of games to retell the story of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; otherwise anonymous images from **Age of Empires** or *Counter-Strike* take on a disturbingly emotional, moral weight.

Even games like *UnderAsh* or *UnderSiege*, Stern thinks, might merely be "tit for tat"—replacing the typical Arab enemy with an Israeli one. "When consumed by their target audience," Stern says, both Western and Middle Eastern games "serve only to bolster prejudices and preconceptions. What's probably more useful is the moment when gamers are exposed to both sets of games and perhaps feel empathy, or at least start to see how absurdly propagandistic and intolerant these games are. But again, these moral questions are so slippery since the Palestinians most often see themselves as victims in an asymmetrical political situation—as do many Israelis. And the idea of an end justifying the means extends from political and military choices to some of the game design choices made in *UnderAsh*—a familiar strategy of overt stereotyping of the game villains, Israeli soldiers, and settlers in this case."

Still, by moving beyond the first-person shooter and into more complex strategy gaming with Al Quraish, Afkar appears to be pushing Middle Eastern games to the next level of sophistication. As the company states on the Al Quraish website, "There must be somebody to do it, and if not us, nobody will care!" ❌

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