

Online Gaming in the UAE: Potentials and Challenges

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Online gaming has been developing in the region for several years and there are various online gaming companies locally and regionally which offer a range of online games including international titles (some of which have been localized for Arabic gamers), as well as growing local talent and many home-grown games in the pipeline. Some recent examples include:

-Semaphore (a Saudi based company) which has announced the launch of a new video game entitled "Unearthed: Trail of Ibn Battuta" which is purported to have a "unique mix" of platforming, melee, shooting and stealth action and will be released in episodic format and will be received on Xbox Live Arcade, PSN, WiiWare, PC, Mac and mobile platforms. It will also be featured in both English and Arabic language.

-Tahadi Games, a UAE based pioneer in the field of publishing Arabic online games has recently released the Arabic version of a major web browser online game "Heroes of Gaia" "Abtal Gaia". The game, which has over 2 million players worldwide, is in Arabic and has exclusively been launched for Arabic gamers with no download, no subscription, and can be played from anywhere using any flash enabled connected device.

-Jawaker is a multiplayer card game website for the Arab world. It is a free-to-play site with no download or need to install any software – gamers just create an account and start playing immediately. Jawaker also allows for any user to create a new game or join an existing one. Jawaker also has a unique application on Facebook which allows users to create private games with their Facebook friends only and notify their online friends to join the game.

The business models may vary but the industry is growing and focusing more on localization and home grown products that cater to the Middle East audiences with a direct relevance to Arab gamers, whilst still holding universal appeal.

Developments in the UAE

The gaming industry is growing rapidly in the UAE as well with bigger interest and investment taking place locally to develop homegrown talent and games.

TwoFour54, a content creation community based in Abu Dhabi that facilitates the development of Arabic media and entertainment content in the region, has recently teamed up with Ubisoft (a leading international developer, publisher and distributor of interactive entertainment products including games such as "Assassin's Creed" and "Prince of Persia") to establish a games development studio in Abu Dhabi and the first courses are scheduled for March 2012. This will allow the region to create its own games and develop a gaming industry base.

Working with the challenges

The next phase of growth lies with Arabic localized content. Localization and content translation is one issue. The other major issue is one of censorship.

In the UAE, the National Media Council (NMC) is responsible for monitoring the content of materials published in the country, including electronic games. In recent times:

-The NMC was considering censoring the game "Spec Ops: The Line" as one of the settings was Dubai after a massive sandstorm has ravaged the city. Basically, it visualizes a destroyed Dubai.

-The international success "Grand Theft Auto" was banned in the UAE for violent content.

-Local media commentators have been speculating on whether highly anticipated first-person shooter video game "Call of Duty Modern Warfare 3" will be banned as its final mission takes place in a Dubai hotel and involves a bloody shootout.

It is important though to put the issue of censorship within an international context. Although the NMC has banned several video game titles because of objectionable content, the UAE is not the only country where censorship of games occurs. For instance:

-Call of Duty: World at War was banned in Japan because of strong violence against Japanese soldiers.

-Fallout 3 was banned in India for featuring two-headed cows clashing with religious sensitivities.

-Mass Effect was initially banned in Singapore for featuring cross-species single gender relations but was subsequently released with M18 rating.

There are various others.

Censorship is applied across the MENA region as well. Iran has its own foundation that deals with games, the Iran National Foundation of Computer Games which, in 2007, established The Entertainment Software Rating Association (ESRA). The ESRA is a public video game content rating system that evaluates games and rates them 'age appropriate' based on their content. The rating system is reportedly based on the culture, society and the special values of Islam and rates the content of games based on parameters such as violence, promoting tobacco or drugs, sexual content or nudity and other values. Games that are not rated by the ESRA are reportedly considered illegal.

The position in the UAE is that content developers and publishers have to self-regulate within the cultural, social and legal restrictions of the country.

The legal Framework

Digital or online media content, like traditional media content, is the subject of extensive regulation in the UAE. The regulations are actively enforced by the authorities and also apply to businesses in free zones.

-The Publications and Publishing Law. This law governs content, irrespective of whether the content is published digitally or via traditional mediums such as newspapers or magazines. The Law regulates printing and publishing activities in the UAE and is broad enough to cover all forms of published content expression including television broadcasting. Matters that may not be published include matters related to religion and politics, national security, individual rights and public morals.