

# Cat and the Coup

Donyaye bazi's Exclusive Interview with KuroshValaNejad and Peter Brinson; Developers of "Cat and the Coup"

Interview by Arash Hakimi & Taha Rasooli

Could you tell us a brief summary of your previous works for our readers?

KuroshValaNejad: During the last 20 years, I have applied my computer graphics skills to a variety of disciplines, including architecture, fine-art, animation, virtual reality and now, video games.

(Here is a link to my animation "When Summer Falls," which was inspired by a poem by Persian poet Sa'adi.

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_5QRD\\_n0OBU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_5QRD_n0OBU)

And tell us how did you become interested in game developing?

KuroshValaNejad: It's not games specifically, but the broader field of interactive media that interests me - for the possibilities it offers in

Coup?

KuroshValaNejad: The idea was started by Peter Brinson. I saw him working in the lab and felt a responsibility to help. At first, I simply wanted to make sure the game looked authentic; for the set-dressing to reflect 1950's Iran. As an American-Iranian (Iranian father, American mother) I know his game could be dismissed by Iranians for such inaccuracies. But as we developed the project, his vision for meaningful mechanics and my interest in narrative architecture synergized into the current form of the game.

Why did you choose "Mossadegh" and the coup in Iran?

Peter Brinson: War has been on the minds of Americans this past decade. Most of us are new to thinking about

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storytelling.

What do you usually do in game innovation lab at USC?

KuroshValaNejad: The Game Innovation Lab is a design research center that has produced influential projects in the emerging field of independent games. I serve as the art-director.

What are the most famous projects of the game innovation lab?

KuroshValaNejad: In Iran? -Hopefully, our game! Our grant-funded and student thesis projects cross many genres. Zen games "Cloud" and "fOw" by Jenova Chen are very popular. "Darfur is Dying" a Serious game by Susana Ruiz, has been played millions of times. And in fine-arts "The Night Journey" a collaboration with media artist Bill Viola, is unique.

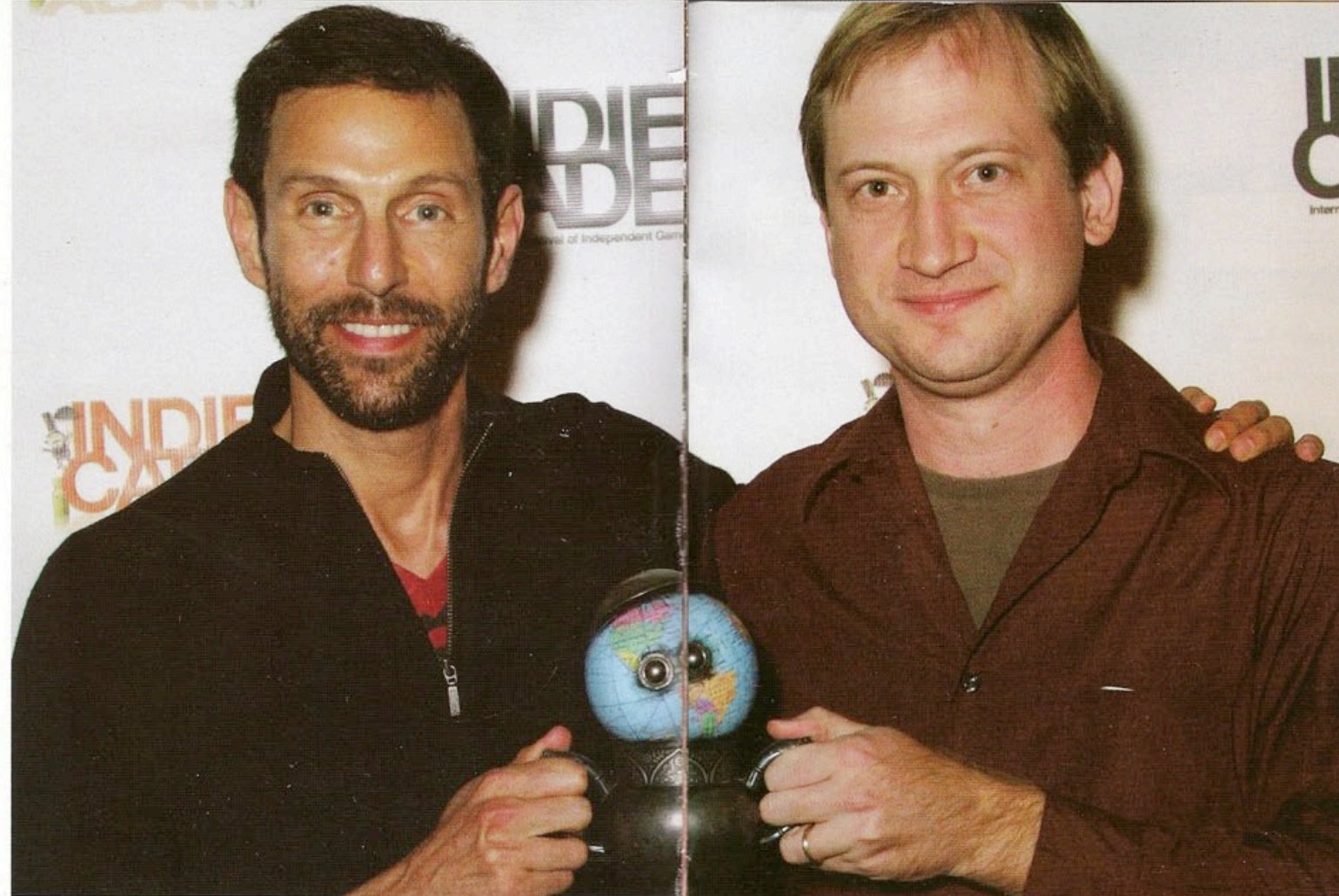
How did you come up with the concept idea for The Cat and the

the Middle East, and if you look at video games about war, most of them are about World War II. It seemed like it was time to make a game about US warfare after World War II but before the two wars going on now (Iraq and Afghanistan). The foreign interventions of the CIA could provide subject matter for many games, as there were plenty. We decided to focus on the first one.

How was the media reaction in US to The Cat and the Coup? Since you were directly mentioning the role of CIA in the coup?

Peter Brinson: We have received nothing but positive responses in the United States. Even though very few have ever heard of Mohammed Mossadegh, Americans are never surprised to learn that their country has meddled in other country's affairs, as the war in Iraq is simply the most blatant example of going to war for oil. It's important to make

The elements of 2D Persian Miniature paintings are the formalistic tools supporting content of the game



left KuroshValaNejad right Peter Brinson

art (like video games) that continues discussions about the wisdom of our foreign affairs.

The first thing that stands out in The Cat and the Coup is the stunning visuals. Having Persian miniatures as the visual style was a great decision according to the story the game is telling.

KuroshValaNejad: I explain why we chose Persian miniatures as the primary visual influence for the environment design in the following article: "Moving Forward by Looking Back; Documentary Videogame Illuminated by Persian Miniatures" by KuroshValaNejad, ARTillery Magazine, May 2009, <http://interactive2.usc.edu/blog/?p=3252>

how did other members of the team react to this decision?

KuroshValaNejad: Once we identified the style, it seemed like the obvious choice.

What were the main challenges for using Persian miniatures in a video game?

KuroshValaNejad: The biggest challenge at first was finding high-resolution facsimiles of Persian miniatures. Images on the web are too small, and books with large color reproductions are rare. We made an appeal to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which houses one of the most significant collections of Islamic art in the world. Linda Komaroff, head of the Art-of-the-Middle-East department, was immediately helpful. She gave us access to the museum's library and even books from her office.

As the original miniatures are usually still and there is no sense of perspective in this kind of artwork, it should have been a difficult task to settle on a fine art style

KuroshValaNejad: Persian miniatures became a significant art form

in the 13th century, before artists understood the rules of perspective drawing. Their impossible architecture is ideal for moving the player through our game space, which also represents the story's timeline. The further down you go in the game, the farther back you are in time.

What was the western gamers and game critic's reaction to The Cat and the Coup's art style?

KuroshValaNejad: Here is one of my favorite reviews of the art style: "How does the game manage to bridge the gap between information and gameplay? The Cat and the Coup's solution is contained in its distinctive style. It is an experience to play: highly abstract, compressed, and symbolic....The visuals and the play are thus deeply linked. ... The game is visually arresting and beautiful. I can envision it as a harbinger of some future symbolic political game--perhaps the truest conversion of the

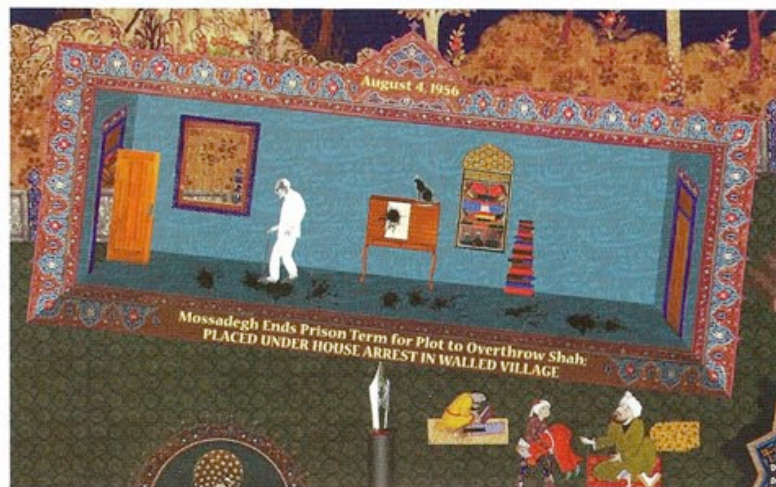
political cartoon to game form." (From "Expressive Reality: The Cat and the Coup" by Brian Hertler, Newsgames, November 12, 2010 <http://newsgames.gatech.edu/blog/2010/11/the-cat-and-the-coup.html>)

Are we going to see more games with Persian miniature art style?

KuroshValaNejad: Persian miniatures are very expressive. It is our hope "The Cat and the Coup" will engender an appreciation for this graphic narrative device.

Environmental and character design is explicitly strange and trans-lative. Why?

KuroshValaNejad: During the first half of the game you coax Dr. Mossadegh back through his life. I wanted this part to feel like a dream. Game critic, Jeff Mattas compares it to "Alice in Wonderland." He says "The feeling I got while play-



ing The Cat and the Coup was one of unease and wonderment." (From: Indie Games Channel, October 20, 2010 <http://indiegameschannel.com/wp/2010/10/20/review-the-cat-and-the-coup-by-peter-brinson-and-kurosh-valanejad/>)

Don't you think such design and idea is a little bit sophisticated for a video game?

KuroshValaNejad: At our lab, we are trying to push the boundaries of games.

Why did you thank "ArdeshirMohasses" at the end of the game?

KuroshValaNejad: He is, of course, Iran's master political caricaturist. I am thankful for his imaginative and satirical drawings, which influenced my art direction - especially in the character design. For example, Churchill's floating hat is directly stolen from Ardeshir Khan's vocabulary.

How long did it take to develop the game?

We made this game in our spare time over a 3 years period.

Why did you choose simple game mechanics for the gameplay? Why didn't the gameplay become something more challenging? Like letting the player "fail" or achieving "score"?

KuroshValaNejad: Games for Change

*Americans are never surprised to learn that their country has meddled in other country's affairs, as the war in Iraq is simply the most blatant example of going to war for oil.*

Advisory Board Member Alan Gershenfeld recently said this about the simple gameplay: "While one can debate the depth of gameplay (slight, but intuitive and fun) - the designers did a great job of tightly integrating the gameplay, narrative and visuals in a way that makes the game genuinely memorable. Since I believe one of the goals of the designers was to ensure that the historical event is not forgotten (we still feel blow-back from the coup to this day) and that the player develops some context for why it happened, I think the design choices were ultimately effective in accomplishing those goals. (From: "2010 Favorites", Games for Change, Jan. 6 2011 [try/1128/\)](http://www.gamesforchange.org/main/newen-</a></p>
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It seems that the project could be an animation or a graphical novel instead, why did you choose video game?

Peter Brinson: When an American gamer begins playing The Cat and the Coup, they comprehend the story as separate from their own life and they see the cat as an abstract character driving an unfamiliar chain of events. When the player learns of the United State's direct role in Mossadegh's downfall, they realize that the cat's actions are not abstract, but a stand-in for a manipulative America. We call this "retrospective responsibility" and believe it is best realized in a game.

When is the game going to be officially published?

KuroshValaNejad: We are currently showing the alpha version at Games conferences; IndieCade (August, 2010), Meaningful Play (October, 2010); and IGF (March, 2011). This is where we can get direct feedback from our peers. It also gives us an opportunity to extend our user-testing outside of the lab, but still in the controlled setting of an exhibition.

We are planning to release the beta version online for free in June, 2011 - to coincide with the Games for Change conference. We hope to attract a broad audience, and are excited to hear how it is interpreted

worldwide. The release of the final version depends, in part, on the feedback we get from the beta release.

Since the game is greeted with so much positive reception, is there any chance we see similar games or sequels in the future?

KuroshValaNejad: Not from me. My interests are too varied.

Don't you have any plan to come to Iran?

KuroshValaNejad: I was invited last August to "the Grand Conference of Iranians Living Abroad" in Tehran. Unfortunately, the invitation came too late as I already had plans to attend the IndieCade conference.

The puzzles in many scenes of the game, makes the gameplay