



Our War Games: The Desensitization of Lebanese Youth to the Sociopolitical Reality Around Us in Beirut

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Militancy was an unfortunate fixture of life in Beirut in the early 2000s. The assassination of Rafic Hariri, the July War, and the 7 May Clashes were just a few of the many security incidents that took place during that era, and they invariably rattled the Lebanese who had survived the brutality of the Civil War. And yet, we growing up amid this strife were not fazed by the carnage broadcast on our TV screens in the way our parents and their parents before them had at that tender age. Compared to decades prior, the 1990s were a period of relative calm in Lebanon, so, entering the 2000s, these uncharacteristic acts of aggression should have shocked and awed us, but we were oddly apathetic to resurgent tensions. Simultaneously, we were the generation introduced to unprecedented realism in video games with the advent of 3D graphics to the extent that

they mimicked real life in the way cinema had, but with an interactivity that allowed us a sense of agency within their fantastical scenarios. As internet culture has entered the mainstream, I have come to the conclusion that these occurrences are unfortunately interlinked. Even as a lifelong fan of the medium, it is clear to me that titles that tackled military and warfare as a subject were a significant reason for the desensitization we experienced by reframing our perception of the turbulent reality around us in a way that distorted how we processed sociopolitical violence in Southeast Asia and North Africa.

At the onset of the decade, real-time strategy (RTS) series such as Age of Empires, Total War, Civilization, and Command & Conquer became popular with tweens in private schools. It was a marked shift from the fantastical platformers such as Super Mario





Bros. or Sonic the Hedgehog that we had been raised on. In these new games, skirmishes were glorified chess matches that had us hurling units at each other for minor advantages, collateral damage be damned, as if these pixelated soldiers were mere pawns for power grabs. Not only did it trivialize the real-world conflicts that the franchises tried to recreate virtually, but it also placed us in the position of the generals who commanded these battles, in turn, skewing our perception of their priorities from protecting the homeland to taking down the enemy, no matter the human cost. It reached a point where we would have heated debates at school, hashing out how we would have overseen the operations, comparing and contrasting them to what we could accomplish in the digital realm.

Worse was yet to come, however, as technological advances meant that a new subgenre was starting to dominate the scene as the decade progressed. First-person shooters (FPS) date back to the early 1970s, but id Software's Wolfenstein 3D, published in 1992, would become the archetype from which subsequent releases



were based. Then, inspired by the competitive multiplayer of Street Fighter II and its ilk, the developer's follow-up, Doom (1993), permitted matches between multiple players, successfully achieving it on a large scale, popularizing the feature en masse. Slowly but surely seminal games were released which introduced voice acting, complete interactivity with the environment, and urban settings to the genre, reaching the logical conclusion of these design elements with releases like 1999's Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six which adopted a tactical approach aimed at simulating spec-ops that 2000's Counter Strike and 2008's Call of Duty: Modern Warfare would then lift and launch the concept into the stratosphere. It was these FPS titles, which were far more accessible than RTS, that drew us in droves to the cybercafes in





our neighbourhoods, where for a fistful of liras we would sink hours coordinating strategem to take each other out. Instead of childhood memories of carefree adventures in the nooks and crannies of our villages or the parks and beaches of our cities, we shared vague reminiscences of gamified terrorism and counterterrorism operations that were indistinguishable from one another.

Outside of these hacker caves, the Levant was vulnerable to seismic shifts that were slowly but surely upturning our existence as parents fretted about what to do if the worst came to pass and spillover from foreign instabilities would reach our borders. Of course, we were impacted by these stressors, but playground back-and-forths on hostilities that had erupted from them were strangely detached from the severity of the situation, with public spats between followers of opposing factions discussed as if they were deathmatches between Red Vs. Blue. We were just too caught up in treating each of these vicious confrontations as if we were cheering on e-sports teams for their performances in that round, rather than acknowledging them as clear signs of the collapse we would suffer from in a matter of years.

Thankfully, my friends and I did not have to live through the Civil

War, nor were we affected by its ramifications. Still, we eagerly exchanged a simplified narrative of it—one that envisioned an unimaginable tragedy as a fierce competition, regardless of who we championed. It was instilled in us by this computerized roughhousing that always rewarded the ‘strong’ at the expense of the ‘weak.’ And it was hard to shake it, because we observed events they imitated at arm’s length on our smartphones, disengaged from them in the way we were disconnected from the cacophony of sight and sound on our PCs.

But the Beirut Blast of 2020 was a rude awakening. Much like the motion blur effect you would find in F.E.A.R., I remember it as a psychological puncture that shattered whatever was left of my juvenile notions as I escorted my sister to refuge underground, avoiding the broken glass and our distressed neighbours, all the while the piercing screams of our mother echoed in the background. After dozens of hours of lobbing hand grenades in Medal of Honor, detonating charges in Team Fortress, and dropping bombs on urbanscapes in Battlefield, I was now overwhelmed by the disorienting devastation of an explosive, the same disruptions I had inflicted on countless ‘enemies’ as a gamer in order to win. In a





flash, everything had changed, and I had felt the unbridled terror our elders had to endure day in and day out, unable to flee, incapable of retaliating, like indiscriminate non-playable characters that are unceremoniously slaughtered in a standard mission whose objectives I once proudly cleared. None of this was 'fun.' It should never be.

During the 2024 Israel invasion of Lebanon, I lost a relative of mine in one of the airstrikes in the South while I watched each side cheer on the streamed exchanges of fire, calling for more bloodshed, as if combatants were notching kill streaks in an online battle

royale like PUBG: Battlegrounds or Fortnite. It is no surprise that we are so willing to support militias, and I wonder if we will recover from this scarring to our collective psyches, because I think that the impact of this phenomenon is different on Arabs than it would be for Americans. It is one thing to pantomime this mayhem from the comfort of an affluent suburb in a coastal city than it is to play them in a desecrated apartment in a wartorn sprawl, where the levels are recreations of people and places you know, the crises that fuels the action-packed narrative has directly hurt you and your loved ones, and the threat is very, very real.

