

Review - 1979 Revolution: Black Friday

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JANE KIRKPATRICK, FEB 11 2017

1979 Revolution: Black Friday iNK Stories 2016

Nearly 40 years have passed since the tumultuous events of the Iranian Revolution that led to the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty and the birth of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The revolution was one of the most influential political moments of the 20th century, resulting in profound social, economic and political changes in the country and the region. It significantly altered Iran's foreign relations, particularly with the United States which, along with Europe, China, and Russia, was against the revolution. The months of revolutionary fervour and its aftermath represent a complex transformation brought about by a broad alliance of opposition forces under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini. It is for these reasons, among many others, that the study of the Iranian Revolution still regularly features in International Relations courses today. 1979 Revolution: Black Friday is a narrative game that provides an alternative and entertaining way to learn and understand aspects of the revolution from the perspective of those involved.

Before the game was even released The National Foundation for Computer Games (NFCG) in Iran deemed the game "anti-Iranian" and "pro-American propaganda" and announced plans to block websites that sold the game. The game's creator, Navid Khonsari, was a young boy in Iran at the time of the revolution and formerly worked on Grand Theft Auto and Max Payne at Rockstar Games. Unlike those third person shooters, 1979 Revolution plays almost like an interactive documentary that highlights a wide range of historical, cultural and human aspects of the revolution as the player takes on the role of Reza Shirazi, a young photojournalist. Although Reza's story is fictional, the game draws heavily on historical details and includes real people and locations. The developers carried out in-depth research, including over 40 interviews with those who witnessed or studied the revolution.

The game opens in 1980 at a safe house, from which Reza is taken by police to the infamous Evin Prison. Here he is interrogated by prison warden, Asadollah Lajevardi, also known as the 'Butcher of Evin'. After the interrogation has begun the story takes Reza back to the chaos that engulfed Tehran in late 1978. Reza had just returned from his studies in Germany and is introduced to developments so far through friends and relatives. Reza is encouraged to take photos to document events, placing him in the middle of the action. The photos taken appear on screen alongside an explanation and an original photo taken during the revolution by French photojournalist Michel Setboun. The game's story is based on the events of 8 September 1978, a day referred to as Black Friday, which was considered a symbol of resistance by protestors and a turning point in the revolution. It was the day after martial law was declared and protestors defied the curfew and demanded the end of the Shah's rule. The military opened fire on protestors in Jaleh Square, killing hundreds.

The photos are just one example of the neat incorporation of original materials into the story. Throughout the game Reza finds letters and home videos and collects recordings of Ayatollah Khomeini's speeches that were secretly distributed on cassette tape. It is possible to access Reza's notebook which provides a background to events, people and Iranian customs that he comes across during the game. The notebook allows you to dip into the true background of the story if you are keen to learn more, which you may want to access every now and then so as not to interrupt the flow of the game or be overloaded with information. This attention to historical detail is one of the strongest aspects of the game, making it educational without quite being 'edutainment'.

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The game lasts just a couple of hours in which the player guides Reza through 19 tense and pacy chapters, taking in protests, the organisation behind them, and Reza's interrogation. The dramatic soundtrack and artwork helps immerse the player in the uncertainty of Tehran in 1978 and includes cultural symbols of the time such as films posters, the distinctive Paykan cars and anti-American graffiti. There are some quirks with the graphics, particularly in action sequences, which require quick responses to keep Reza alive. These scenes may have been included to increase the tension, but this is already inescapable throughout the game and these sequences seem slightly out of place.

Throughout the story Reza interacts with a variety of characters, which include the authorities, his family and organisers of the protest who bring a mixture of ideas from communism to political Islam. The complexity of these characters is portrayed well, and there are subtle nods to some of the contradictions and disagreements among the protestors. This gives the player a sense of the different demands, tactics and ideologies present, as well as the difficulty trusting those around you, including your own relatives.

One of the main gameplay elements involves the player choosing Reza's decisions and responses to conversations. These decisions, which range from saving a life to tactical choices, must be taken quickly and are often ones that players may be uncomfortable making: Who should you sacrifice? Is violence justifiable? These decisions, rather than dictate the direction of the story, appear to influence Reza's relationships with others. It is perhaps the process of making these decisions that is more important than the outcome. There is a moral ambiguity to the decision-making, which presents the opportunity to understand and empathise with those who participated in a way that other forms of media lack. So much so that the game is cited as one of those demonstrating the "vast potential that digital games hold for the work of peace education and conflict resolution" (p19) in a recent UNESCO MGIEP report.

The game succeeds in portraying events and characters as nuanced rather than stereotyped or clichéd and provides an insight into Iranian culture. 1979 Revolution is a stark contrast to the majority of video games set in the Middle East region, which usually involves players shooting their way through 'the bad guys' of the region. Instead, this game allows the player to gain a greater understanding of Iran and its vast complexities. Playing 1979 Revolution is an entertaining way to learn about the revolution from the inside and provides a sense of how individuals were involved in events, rather than focusing on mass protests or key figures, which those studying and teaching the revolution may be more familiar with.

About the author:

Dr Jane Kirkpatrick is a Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Relations at the University of the West of England, Bristol. She is also Director and Features Editors at E-IR. Jane's research interests include the use of videogames as a tool for teaching and learning, social movements and protest, and the UK Parliament. She is a co-author of *Watching the Watchers: Parliament and the Intelligence Services*. She can be reached via email or twitter.