



Spirit of '79

By Ben Sailer

President Donald Trump's election has left the public struggling to understand how it happened. Indeed, these difficult times seemingly defy rational analysis. With the media fumbling to offer concrete conclusions, art may be our next best refuge for not only catharsis, but also context and understanding. While videogames haven't occupied the same space for cultural criticism as other art forms, the time has come for that to change. One recent videogame in particular, *1979 Revolution: Black Friday*, has shown us how games may be uniquely suited to communicate complex ideas in a way that resonates with audiences.

Developed by Iranian indie game developer Navid Khonsari's iNK Stories, the narrative-driven adventure places players in the role of a photojournalist named Reza Shirazi during the Iranian Revolution (a time during which Khonsari was born). In just over two hours, it delivers a powerful examination



of the period, weaving narrative threads through the complex relationships of the numerous sides and power brokers vying for control of the nation. In doing so, it succeeds not only as entertainment, but also as a moving and educational experience, putting complex events into context by applying an almost journalistic-style of interactive storytelling that connects by aiming for both the head and the heart.

We need more games to do the same.

Videogames have ventured into historical themes before. Rarely, however, have they sought to tell complex political stories with a firm commitment to truth and accuracy. *1979 Revolution: Black Friday* is a well-researched piece of work, incorporating real-world photographs and audio snippets to pull players into a true-to-life narrative. It is also careful to present events as they were; the aim is to inspire change by fostering understanding, rather than pushing propaganda.

That's exactly what one right-wing newspaper accused Khonsari and his team of producing, however, leading to iNK Studios' virtual exile from their home country. Rather than halt work on the game, the company relocated to New York City. The urgency and drive required to pursue this project against the odds lends added weight to its experience, which relies on fast-moving scenes to maintain a sense of confusion (as being in the middle of a full-scale

revolt might be), card-based explanatory backstory pieces and real-life photos and audio snippets to carry a complete narrative.

1979 Revolution: Black Friday wastes little time throwing players into the fray. The game opens up with police officers breaking into the main character's apartment while he's working (developing photographs the ruling Shah would prefer the world not see). After a brief fist fight,

players find themselves tied to a chair in an interrogation room, grilled by a prison warden named Asadollah Lajevardi. Clicking an on-screen prompt for more information reveals that Lajevardi was a real person responsible for murdering 2,500 people under the auspices of religious authority. On-screen prompts guide you through dialogue trees that require quick thinking and wit; move too slow and you fail, but too many smart-ass answers will get you killed.

Later on, the player and his compatriots flee the scene of a peaceful protest-turned-riot, sparked by the Cinema Rex fire (an arson attack that killed 470 people and played a primary role in setting off the Iranian Revolution). When a

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man approaches full of glass shards from a shattered car windshield, the player is asked to remove each piece one by one and clear the blood off the man's torso. When played a phone or tablet, physically swiping your finger to pull out the glass and clean up the blood is enough to make one feel sick. Shortly thereafter, the player enters a safe house where a supposed ally immediately assaults you. It effectively illustrates the sensation of not quite knowing what's happening around you or who you can trust, but being required to make decisions regardless.

This is the pace *1979 Revolution: Black Friday* maintains throughout its duration. By bringing tense atmosphere and detailed historical accuracy together, iNK Stories' work shows videogames potential to tell stories that stick in ways other mediums can't. Literature can tell you what happened. Films can help bring that imagination to life. Games can do both while adding interactivity, like watching a friend get shocked with a cattle prod because you weren't forthcoming with compromising intel about the actions of your revolutionary compatriots. Scenes like this make it easy to feel a palpable sense of guilt and, by making players feel complicit in a true-life story, it connects on a personal level.

While Roger Ebert once famously said games could not be art because of their interactive nature, *1979 Revolution: Black Friday* shows that the element of player choice is precisely what makes games so powerful an art form. In its most basic sense, art is anything creative that delivers an emotional impact or affects change on its viewer. When iNK Stories' work asks players to choose between protecting their cause and protecting the man getting electrocuted directly behind them, it shows the full artistic potential of games.

It also does so in a way few other games have attempted, and lays out a clear framework for other developers to follow: research the hell out of situation or political event, place players in the middle and force them to make moral decisions under morally ambiguous circumstances. If developers truly want their work to be considered art, following iNK Stories' lead here could be their best and most vital opportunity to state their case. As it so happens, we need them to, more than ever.

Trump is threatening to tweet America into World War III. The United Kingdom just left the European Union. The number of Westerners who

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really understand what's happening in Syria is likely slim. The world is rich with source material for inspiration and an audience that needs to hear and understand these stories. If a small indie studio could produce something like *1979 Revolution: Black Friday*, what could a triple-A development team with publisher backing do with the same approach? The odds are something more meaningful than the latest *Call of Duty* (a fine series in its own right for pure entertainment purposes, if not greater social value).

If money is a necessary motivator (as it so often is), there is commercial precedent for politically driven games succeeding. Indie successes like somber World War I adventure *Valiant Hearts*, survivalist sidescroller *This War of Mine* and border crossing simulator *Papers, Please* have shown there's a market for games with brutal geopolitical themes. Looking further back at more mainstream titles, the *Metal Gear Solid* series has long warned against the dangers of nuclear proliferation and the threat of mutually assured destruction and across each of its three installments, the *Bioshock* series has critiqued both self-interested laissez-faire capitalism and collectivist socialism alike.

So, how does this relate to our current condition in America today? We now have a set of political circumstances no one is fully capable of getting their head around, a market that has shown a willingness to embrace politically inspired games, and a public has shown growing distrust of the news media. Further compounding this issue is Trump's adversarial approach toward the press. Distressingly, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a man who has jailed 144 journalists and shut down 150 media outlets, praised Trump's conduct toward the press corps according to a report from the *Washington Post*.

The window of opportunity is open for games to fill a necessary gap in creating relevant and revolutionary art, and iNK Stories may have shown the industry how. No one knows what will happen under Trump's administration, but we can be certain there will be stories. We will need media and art that can deliver them effectively and empathetically. For Khonsari and his team's part, his company reportedly plans to continue producing more historically based titles tackling different situations, showing that the studio's debut has had enough success to validate their approach. Here's hoping more developers follow their lead. Our understanding of our own democracy may depend on it. 🇺🇸

There will be stories.

