

Youthful, gaming-obsessed Saudi seeks homegrown hit

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Saudi trainees attend a training course at the Saudi Esport Academy in Riyadh.

Young Saudis wander through a museum of video game history stretching from the original Pac-Man to PlayStation 5, a project intended to inspire them to create their own blockbuster titles.

The display of consoles and arcade machines from the past half-century is part of Gamers8, an eight-week festival of eSports tournaments in the capital Riyadh, with a prize pool totalling \$45 million.

Saudi Arabia has made no secret of its passion for gaming and eSports, which is believed to come from the very top, with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said to be an avid Call of Duty player.

Last year, the 38-year-old de facto ruler announced a \$38 billion investment strategy for the oil-rich Gulf kingdom's Savvy Games Group, owned by the deep-pocketed Public Investment Fund.

As it gathers momentum, the national gaming and eSports strategy is placing growing emphasis on local game production, vowing in its official document to turn the kingdom into "an Eden for game developers" that can produce new titles "promoting Saudi and Arabic culture".

That's where the museum and adjacent "game labs" come in: Throughout Gamers8, around 3,000 people, the majority of them Saudis, have flocked to the site for crash courses in skills like coding and animation.

"In the past, Arabs were only buying games, not developing games," said developer Mohammed al-Fakih as he honed his skills in a lab one night this week.

"Now there is an opportunity to develop games, design your own ideas and make them a reality, according to local customs and traditions."

Early days

Youthful Saudi Arabia appears ripe for the video game market, with nearly two-thirds of the non-immigrant population aged under 30.



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But so far, no one has solved the riddle of how to design a breakout gaming hit that also showcases Saudi culture, acknowledged Faisal bin Homran, chief eSports officer at the Saudi Esports Federation.

There are 25,000 Saudi and foreign developers currently grappling with the challenge, he said.

"With the expertise coming from outside and the knowledge being transferred, we will notice some games that can really go internationally," he said.

One source of inspiration, he noted, comes from Saudi characters already featured in global franchises, like Shaheen in the Tekken fighting games or Rashid in Street Fighter. Rashid is said to be from an unspecified Middle Eastern country, possibly the United Arab Emirates or Saudi Arabia.

Officials like Homran, though, are dreaming bigger: the national strategy targets 30 globally competitive games produced in domestic studios by 2030.

Already, some unpolished Saudi-made games have resonated with Saudi fans, among them Khaled Alghaith, a Rocket League enthusiast who spent his summer vacation at the Gamers8 labs learning to code.

The 14-year-old said he had particularly fond memories of a game titled "Khashem", or "Nose" in Saudi Arabic, about a character who lost his memory and had to complete a series of challenges drawing on his sense of smell to get it back.

"Every game that is made by a Saudi, I always play it and really enjoy it," Alghaith said.

"I say, 'Wow, this is the work of a Saudi' and I get so proud."



Saudi Arabia has made no secret of its passion for gaming and eSports.

A new path

Despite its oil wealth, Saudi Arabia has not always been welcomed with open arms on the global gaming scene.

In 2020, backlash from LGBTQ gamers who condemned Saudi Arabia's prohibition of same-sex sexual acts led Riot Games and the Danish tournament organizer BLAST to scuttle deals with NEOM, a \$500 billion futuristic megacity on the Red Sea.

But Riyadh's gaming push has continued unabated.

This year Savvy completed a \$4.9 billion purchase of Scopely, the California-based mobile games company, and the Public Investment Fund now owns more than eight percent of Nintendo. The potential rise of Saudi Arabia as a game development powerhouse could bring concerns about censorship, much like China's rise did, said Tobias Scholz, an eSports expert at Norway's University of Agder.

"We will see an unconscious shift in development and fewer games that have a critical view," Scholz said.

"We will not see a negative tone, because the developer will think, 'Those are my bosses.'"

These worries are far from the mind of Abdulaziz Maher, 23, who took classes during Gamers8 on sound design and how to move characters through a three-dimensional landscape.

The experience has spurred him to consider work in development, something he didn't previously realize was possible.

"All the ideas in my mind were in chaos, but now they are in order," he said.

"Like there is a path you can walk on."

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