

Iraqis marvel at ancient Iraq in new 'Assassin's Creed' game

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A man plays the newly released video game 'Assassin's Creed Mirage' in a cybercafe in Baghdad on October 4, 2023.

Iraqi gamers celebrated the release Thursday of the latest installment of the "Assassin's Creed" action-adventure saga, set in ninth century

Baghdad during the Abbasid Caliphate.

In the [game](#), the hooded and stealthy hero fights his way through an ancient maze of alleyways, souks and rooftops, rendered in loving detail with what its creators say is the help of historical sources.

The central character, pickpocket turned master assassin Basim, speaks classical Arabic in "Assassin's Creed Mirage", the 13th edition of the wildly popular franchise published by France-based Ubisoft.

"We were waiting for a game that shows Arab and Islamic culture, the culture and history of Iraq and this region, which does not just consist of wars and terrorism," said one instant fan, Mohammed Bashir.

Sitting in a Baghdad internet cafe, surrounded by fellow gamers, the 30-year-old graphic designer marveled at the 3D depictions of ancient Iraq and Baghdad.

As the story unfolds and Basim bloodily dispatches a long lineup of foes, the real star is the setting, resplendent with turquoise mosaic domes, carpet sellers and lush oasis towns.

"There's Iraqi music!" exclaimed one young man in the room, lit dimly by screens and fluorescent blue neon lights, where other players were absorbed in football and other video games.



Baghdad's Abbasid Palace, one of the few remaining buildings from the Abbasid caliphate era.

'Bittersweet'

The game had already received a rave review last month from Saudi Arabia's Khaled Almutairi, who praised an advance version on his YouTube channel Gamer Snack, followed by over two million subscribers.

The game allowed him to "immerse" himself "in the Arab and Islamic environment," he said, expressing joy at hearing the Muslim call to prayer and the expression "salam alaykum", or "Peace be upon you", on screen.

His only quibble was that the Arabic "lip sync ... is poor".

For Bashir—who came of age as Iraq was rocked by years of conflict and chaos—seeing an artistic and beautiful representation of the country's ancient marvels provoked mixed feelings.

"It's beautiful to see Baghdad's glorious past," said Bashir, who also posts [video game](#) reviews on YouTube and Instagram.

He praised the game's designers for "recreating a lost city", because—after Baghdad was sacked by Mongol forces in 1258—the Abbasid Caliphate "did not leave any trace".

But Bashir said seeing Baghdad in all its former glory was also "bittersweet when we know what the city has experienced in recent years".



The spiral Malwiya Minaret, a mid-ninth-century Iraqi national monument built to symbolize the power of Islam during the Abbasid caliphate, at the site of the Great Mosque in Samarra, north of Baghdad.

'Excited to see Iraq'

Iraq has been rocked by repeated wars, most recently the US-led invasion of 2003 that deposed dictator Saddam Hussein and sparked years of sectarian conflict and the rise of the Islamic State jihadist group.

When Iraq has been the setting for video games, it has more commonly been in those of the first-person tactical shooter variety, such as "Six Days in Fallujah" launched this year.

That game, based on grueling urban combat in the city west of Baghdad, is billed as recreating "true stories of Marines, soldiers and Iraqi civilians during the toughest urban battle since 1968".

Haider Jaafar, who heads the Iraqi Federation of Electronic Sports, said the new "Assassin's Creed" game "will reach millions of people" and give foreign audiences "a positive image of the origins of Baghdad".



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In 'Assassin's Creed Mirage', the hooded and stealthy hero fights his way through the ancient maze of alleyways, souks and rooftops of the Iraqi city, rendered in loving detail with the help of historical sources.



The game is set in ninth-century Baghdad during the Abbasid Caliphate era.

Jaafar, who owns the Cooldown cybercafe, said he hoped it will also help promote the gaming sector and fan base in Iraq.

"When we participate in international competitions ... people usually ask us: 'Do you really have video game and internet centers?'," he said with a laugh.

Mustafa Mahmud, another gamer, said he had "impatiently" awaited the game after playing all previous editions, set in different times and places from ancient Egypt to revolutionary France.

"We saw the previous episodes in France, Greece, Egypt," said Mahmud, a student who also works as an IT support at the cybercafe. "We were excited to see Iraq."

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