



The player as cat solves a room as puzzle. This allows Dr. Mossadegh to escape house arrest and continue the reverse chronological retelling of his life.

THE CAT AND THE COUP

A NEW GENERATION OF GAME DESIGNERS BELIEVE THAT IF millions and millions of people are going to immerse themselves in video games, why not make them worthwhile? Peter Brinson and Kurosh ValaNejad created *The Cat and the Coup* with that very philosophy—it is what is called “serious games”—and it’s downloadable online gratis. It’s a short game, lasting perhaps 15 minutes, and the points you earn will be to learn a bit of history about Iran, and maybe gain some consciousness as a world citizen. I met with the game’s two authors at the School of Cinematic Arts on the campus of the University of Southern California. Brinson teaches in the Interactive Media Division and ValaNejad is art director at Game Innovation Lab.

How did the project get started? “For years I was mad about the Iraq war,” Brinson recalls, “and as an artist I kept thinking I wanted to make something about war and America.” At one point he considered putting together a compilation of post-World War II American interventions abroad, then he thought it better to focus on one relevant example that has been well documented—the toppling of Dr. Mohammed Mossadegh, the first democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran, in a coup engineered by the CIA in 1953.

According to the graphic adaptation of *A People’s History of American Empire* by Howard Zinn, Mohammed Mossadegh wanted “to create a parliamentary democracy, to reduce the Shah’s power, and to wrest control of Iran’s oil from the British.” The American government saw this as veering too left, and decided to take him down. Responsible for the plot was Kermit Roosevelt, Jr., grandson of Teddy Roosevelt, our President who famously said, “Speak softly and carry a big stick.”

Brinson started working on the project in late 2007, and soon brought in ValaNejad, who has personal knowledge of this history, since he was born in Tehran of a Persian father and an American mother. “This is relatively recent history,” ValaNejad says, so he has heard family members talking about it.

The idea of using a cat to propel the action came quickly—a clandestine character that seems sinister and manipulative. “The whole idea of indirect influence is key,” Brinson says, “and you’re not even

sure whether he works in Mossadegh’s interests or against them.” The opening screen sets the stage and tells the player how to move through the game with the directional keys: Kitty goes up, down, left or right and the space bar makes Kitty take a swipe at things. Sometimes the cat tilts the room by running back and forth, and sometimes knocks things off shelves—naughty Kitty!

The story opens upon the bedroom of Mossadegh, its interior taken from Persian miniature paintings of the 15th and 16th century with their beautiful patterns and architecture. These are used throughout as background, making the visuals a real delight. ValaNejad thought it appropriate to appropriate them, and consulted with Linda Komaroff, curator of Islamic art at LACMA, who made available their research facilities.

So it’s March 5, 1967 and the elderly Mossadegh has passed away in his bed—but move Kitty around to the grandfather clock, swipe the pendulum, and time begins to run backwards! We tumble through a series of scenes that trace the fall of Mossadegh from power, thus learning something about Iran’s history, and America’s involvement in it. (Yes, Kermit makes an appearance.) The story is told in broad strokes, and those who want to know more can check out the reading list—sources as varied as a TIME magazine story on Mossadegh and declassified CIA documents.

Admittedly, *The Cat and the Coup* “is not typical in terms of the industry games sold, but for years people have made documentary games, or ‘serious games,’” says Brinson. “Most video games are violent because that’s the easiest thing to do—but what if you could do something else with the technology?”

As of last count, over 80,000 people have downloaded Brinson and ValaNejad’s game, which makes it one of the top alternative video games right now. *The Cat and the Coup* fully debuted last summer, and has generated some online buzz and won a number of prizes, including Best Documentary Game at Indiecade in 2010, Gamezone’s Top 10 Indie Games of 2011, and a runner-up at the Games for Change Festival in 2011. The developers say they’re still tweaking, but it’s already playable—check it out at www.coup.peterbrinson.com—or watch one of the myriad YouTube videos by individuals all over the world playing the game and commenting. News of this cat and its coup has gone viral. ☺

