

# “Game over Mubarak”: the Arab Revolutions and the Gamification of Everyday Life

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On Qasr Nil bridge the lion says: Game Over Mubarak. (Ahmed Ramadan/TwitPic)

## 1

One of the most widely reported slogans of the Arab revolutions of 2010–2011 was “Game over XXX”, where XXX would be the name of the dictator you had not chosen.[1]

Photographs and videos in which such phrases featured got a lot of airtime in the Western media. While being in English doubtless helped, perhaps it was also because this was a cultural reference with which we feel particularly at home. It certainly fitted well with the image of these revolutions as an upwelling of understandable frustration from a population that was young, well-educated, largely unemployed, and broadly enthusiastic about Western democracy, culture and/or “values”, as represented in particular by our entertainment media and consumer products. The slogan was picked up by international journalists and their editors, and soon began to figure in the title of articles, op-eds,

and photo galleries, whether from Al-Jazeera English (2011), CBS News (2011), or Foreign Policy (Springborg 2011).

On one level, the power of this slogan is its immediacy. It seems to require no explanation, even if you have never (consciously) heard it before. On another level, it invokes a (popular) cultural context which provides the basis for an implicit irony (as we all “know”, life is not a (video) game), as well as a source of richer, more complex, but ultimately optional connotations, for those with some experience in the relevant fields of play.[2]

Some Western commentators were puzzled as to how Arab youths could be so familiar with not only the English language, but also the culture of English-language video games.[3] Yet video gaming is no less widespread in the Middle East and North Africa than it is in Europe or North America or South East Asia – or for that matter, any other part of the world where there are cities and cheap PCs available for rent.[4] Any visit to an Internet café in the region is likely to reveal more people playing Call of Duty or FIFA Football, than chatting on Facebook or consulting dating sites. The proliferation of pirated copies of games, low hourly rates, and a lack of alternative recreational spaces where so much time can be spent at so little cost and with so little interference from the world of adults and/or authority, means that video gaming is a major activity for Arab youth, as it is for young people in most parts of the urban world, North and South. It is thus arguable that, just as elsewhere, video games have now become the single most important influence on the visual culture of young people in the region. To cite just one telling statistic, of the 1.6 billion Internet users worldwide who play games online, 36% are in the Middle East (Thome 2011).

In an illuminating article on the circulation and reception of pro-Arab video games in Palestine, Helga Tawil-Souri cites a twelve-year-old girl she interviewed in Jenin, who told her that “none of the games with Arabs in them that she had ever played before these three [Under Siege and Under Ash, made by Dar el-Fikr (Syria), and the Hezbollah-produced game, Special Force] had allowed her not to shoot at Arabs; in her words, ‘I always had to shoot at my own people.’” (Tawil-Souri 2007: 545). What is remarkable here, for those unfamiliar with such societies (or parts of their own society), is that a 12-year-old girl in Jenin has already at that age accumulated enough experience of playing American and/or European-produced first-person shooters, to be able to discuss their differences with the pro-Arab games Souri was studying. This single remark is enough to challenge, and correct, many unconscious Orientalising assumptions about Arab youth in general, and Arab girls in particular.

Her comment inevitably raises another question : not just what was it like, but how was it “possible” for a young Palestinian girl to take pleasure in “shooting Arabs”, albeit in a video game ? Yet one of the main characteristics of video games is that roles are always interchangeable, even reversible. In Counter-Strike (1999), for example, one of the most successful online games of all time, and a stalwart of the Palestinian Internet cafés I visited in 2003–2004, players have to periodically exchange roles : one moment they are part of a counter-terrorist commando, the next they are one of the terrorists. As Mathieu Triclot has pointed out in his recent study of the philosophy of video games, however aggressive these games may be, they do not divide the worlds they produce up according to some essential qualities, such as good and evil, which might imply, or even command, a persisting identification. The experience they produce is one of fear, hyper-alertness, but also constant confusion. To enter into the game, the player does not need to accept an ideology, or strike a position on national or international politics. All they have to do is engage with the basic binary structure of Team A against Team B. This essential reversibility is well illustrated by the ease with which the game Quest for Saddam (2003) was repurposed by the Global Islamic Media Front as Quest for Bush (2006), with only minimal adjustments : “The two games are strictly identical in their mechanisms, the maps and the environments are left unchanged, all that is changed are the way the sets are dressed, and the “skins“ of the enemies – that is, the flat areas of colour applied to the polygons” (Triclot 2011: 199).

But as Triclot is at pains to point out throughout his text, a video game is not just a structure (dispositif). It is also, indeed above all, a means for inducing certain experiences in the player, for producing “ludic states”. Hence his proposal that we replace, or supplement, the Anglo-Saxon school of game studies, which focuses on the rules, gameplays, and narratives of video games, with a school of “play studies”, which would focus on what the player makes of the game, how she experiences it, and also on what the game makes of the player – how it influences and shapes her subjectivity.[5]

From the point of view of play studies, the true politics of gaming cannot, therefore, be reduced to a matter of who is designated as the enemy (Arabs, Israelis, or Americans ?), or even of what rules and criteria are deployed in order to distinguish between enemy and friend. The real politics of the medium which gave us Call of Duty and World of Warcraft lies in the way in which it initiates us into a world in which even as we pursue the illusion of mastering and shaping our environment, we are shaped by it to see the world in terms of actionable information, and our selves as bundles of quantitative indicators. The defining output of so much play is not just more happiness for the players, or more profits for the companies that design and market the games : it is more people who have

trained themselves to fit into an environment that is defined by "this sought-after adjustment: subjectivities defined in terms of parameters, the desire to optimize those parameters, and a state of infinite activity that carries on from task to task" (224).

When we play video games, we think we are just playing. But in fact, Triclot argues, we are learning to work – to become subjects that are entirely at home in the world of digital transnational capitalism. This is a world in which the computer is the centre and the measure of all things – in which all decisions should be answerable to models which, however seductively analogue, can all ultimately be reduced to binary code.

And yet, within and behind and around these signals of subjection, there is a lot of noise. A video game, like any kind of game, may at moments function as a part of such a system. But as an experience, it is not a system, merely an "assembly of disjointed subjectivities" (217). A space in which there are not just rules and narratives, but play and metaphor, too. A space in which there is space not only for critique, but also for invention. For forms and meanings that break with the past. For the emergence of something new.

## 2

Through this simple gesture of inscribing the words "Game over Mubarak" into the urban environment of Cairo, the language of the video game leaves the confines of the screen and begins to invade offline reality. The tag applied to the base of the lion at the west end of Qasr el-Nil bridge in the photograph reproduced above, the contrast between the texture of spray paint and stone, has the knack of making that process of occupation seem almost tangible.[6] But what if it was the sign of a shift that is more than just linguistic? What if it was an indication that, for the revolutionaries who deployed this symbol, reality itself was becoming "playable"? That for them, the world was no longer a closed system, with a single correct outcome, but a place where meanings were plastic, and roles reversible, and where their actions might indeed be able to influence the outcome of events?

Recent debate about the shift from video games as an activity which takes place in a separate space from everyday reality, to gaming as an integral part of everyday reality, has revolved around the notion of gamification. This is the idea that since people find video games completely absorbing, but have difficulty experiencing the same level of commitment and attention in other areas of life (e.g. work), the answer might be, not to ask why workers are alienated under the regime of globalized capitalism, but to import some of the more obvious features of video games into everyday life, in order to stimulate people to get more "involved".

As first set out by Byron Reeves and J. Leighton Read (2009), and followed up by Gave Zicherman and Joselin Linder (2010), among others, this proposal is eminently disappointing. The idea that people could be motivated by getting points which could be exchanged for benefits every time they brush their teeth, give up their seat on the bus for an old age pensioner, or exceed their hourly data input targets, seems too naive to be taken seriously. As Margaret Robertson has pointed out, what Reeves and Read are really calling for is not the gamification of reality, but its "pointsification" (Robertson 2010) – the introduction of a system of rewards and penalties more reminiscent of some kind of Social-Darwinian primary school than of playing Grand Theft Auto.[7] As Triclot puts it, "Gamification is often accompanied by the lauding of the power of games and their players, but in fact it rests upon an attitude of total contempt for the medium, which it reduces to a Pavlovian mechanism. In order for a game to be interesting, the decisions we take in the course of it must influence the outcome. (...) But instead gamification aims to dispossess us of our power to make decisions, of our ability to act upon the world and the frameworks through which we perceive it." (Triclot 2011: 234)

Yet while Triclot is critical of this reductive approach to infusing the experience of video gaming into everyday reality, he argues that the convergence of gaming and everyday life is nevertheless inevitable, thanks to the proliferation of small mobile screens, and the increasing role they play in structuring our lives and forming our experience of the world. The question then is not so much whether we want gamification, as what we might want gamification to mean. "Could we not imagine", he asks, "that the same mechanisms might be used to produce games that are really games, that is, which would increase our power to act collectively on the world, rather than destroying it?" (234).

Or to put it another way : what would the gamification of everyday life look like if it were not a top-down process, designed by Ivy League professors, IT entrepreneurs and military commanders, but a bottom-up process, produced and implemented by the people themselves?

I would like to propose that the Arab revolutions, with their omnipresent camera-phones, and their sophisticated use of a range of technologies - including geo-localization (for knowing who has been arrested, and where they are

being held)[8], and even the creation of a state of “dual Internet” in order to get round state-imposed black-outs[9] - produced a generalized fusion of new and ancient media[10] that goes well beyond the popular icons of elite activists well-versed in social media and equipped with latest-model laptops, and in doing so provides us with a pretty good picture of what such a “people’s gamification” might look like.[11]

As we should expect, this gamification of reality is not simply the replication of existing forms of game experience in a new place, but their disruptive transformation and reinvention, in response to unforeseen opportunities offered by the new environment. So when the Arab revolutionaries left their PC screens and internet cafés to move out into the world, they took with them their experience of symbolic universes that could be acted upon. But they also transformed those universes, in order to inscribe them into the world around them. One of the most remarkable of those transformations is clearly displayed in the slogan, “Game Over Mubarak”, itself. Because in choosing to make that slogan theirs, the revolutionaries were not identifying themselves as the players of a game. Instead, they were identifying their enemy, Mubarak, as the solitary player, still trapped in the 1980s arcade where the shoot’em-up at the Stadium had brought him to power.[12] And they were speaking to him with the voice that, in our time, is the voice of destiny: the voice of the machine. When the people brought the video game out into the street, they did not identify with the special ops commando, or the terrorist he pursued. They identified with the computer.

Of course, this sounds paradoxical: that the mass of young people who overthrew Mubarak and Ben Ali should identify with something as lifeless and artificial as a Windows box, just at that moment when they might seem themselves to be finally coming alive. (And it is hard to interpret the proliferation not only of videos, but also of photographs, paintings, poems, songs, and other forms of self-expression released by these revolutions in their happier moments as anything other than an overflowing of a long-repressed vitality). But then, we have to understand that the identification of the most vital and most powerful of the forces inside them and around them with this complex, not immediately empathetic, calculating machine, is not just an assertion of the power of the gaming experience. It is also a critique of that experience. Or rather, it is a message from somewhere deep in the unconscious of the computer. For as Triclot writes, in a slightly different context, “Online (multiplayer) games represent a form of classless society, not because there are no poor, no proletarians in the world they depict, but because the position of the poor and the proletariat is played by the machine.” (225, my emphasis).[13]

So in making the slogan “Game Over Mubarak” their own, the revolutionaries were not necessarily embracing or rejecting the video game culture. They were making its unconscious speak. They were not simply dictating to their soon-to-be former dictator that his time was up, they were also showing the world what the video games we have been playing have repressed for all these years: the point of view of the machine, which is also the point of view of the people. By identifying with the object that is this machine, they made themselves visible as what they had always been all along: the only possible subject of their own history.

So we might translate the hidden message of the slogan under the lion’s tail, then, as: “We are the machine”. A paradox, as I said. But apparent paradox is one of the more constant characteristics of the language of revolution. One has only to think of the famous slogan of the 2001 uprising in Algeria, “You cannot kill us, we are already dead” (Semprun 2001: 10). Such metaphorical statements go far beyond the attempt to characterize experience indirectly; they represent the outright rejection of the normal, given categories by which we live, or try to live. They refuse to recognize the frame that has been applied to the world on our behalf as in any way adequate to what we are actually going through, let alone what we need to go through in order to change that world.[14]

In this case, behind the joke on the ageing President who can’t even win a stupid video game, lies something much graver. By identifying with the machine, that incarnation of the fatality inherent in bureaucratic society, the people invest themselves with the aura of an impersonal, superhuman force. The individual who is carried by, and carries within herself, the masses, feels that force as something equivalent to justice, that is, as something sacred. She is the agent of destiny, and it is destiny which speaks through her. Game over, Mubarak. The force which had been crushing them for decades, centuries, was finally, briefly, diverted to crush, or at least to wash away, the tyrant in his turn.

Of course, this is not the kind of gamification of reality which the experts, entrepreneurs, and authorities would like to see. But it is the way in which the video game as experience already seems to be leaking out into the world. Even if the results of the last three years of these revolutions may in some places seem as terribly ironic as the end of a game of Metal Gear Solid 2, they have at least demonstrated one thing: that playing video games round the clock, even those games in which Arabs can only appear as threats and/or targets, has perhaps taught the generation of Arab youth that made these revolutions less about the inevitability of submission - whether to authoritarian corruption, or to capitalist self-discipline - than about the possibilities of their own rebellion.[15]

## Endnotes

1. The phrase seems to have emerged towards the end of the Tunisian revolution, as for example in a much-reproduced photograph taken during the last days of the demonstrations on Avenue Bourguiba that precipitated Ben Ali's flight (Chrisafis and Black 2011). A number of Egyptian uses of the slogan are collected by Taahir (2011). From there it spread to Libya (O'Reilly n.d.); Syria (Associated Press 2012); and Bahrain (Anderson n.d.). For Yemen, I have only found examples at protests outside the country, for instance in Kuala Lumpur (Windsor Star 2011).
2. The use of the phrase "Game Over" dates back at least to the pinball machines of the 1950s. It reached its apotheosis in the arcade video games of the 1980s, but has persisted into some more recent, console-based games, even those that take a somewhat less final view of failure. For the history, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Game\\_over](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Game_over) (accessed June 9, 2014). Some sources claim that the phrase was already in common usage in billiard parlours in the US before pinball machines became popular: see the discussion at <http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=2933> (accessed June 9, 2014).
3. See, again, the discussion at <http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=2933>. Possible conduits to the Middle East, beside arcade games and their domestic videogame successors, include various Hollywood movies where the phrase figures in significant moments of dialogue, most notably Ridley Scott's *Aliens* (1986), as well as the *Saw* franchise (2004–10), and the Japanese action movie *Battle Royale* (2000). The status of the phrase as a global linguistic icon of quasi-meaningless Anglo-Americana is perhaps best enshrined in the lyrics of "Metal Milkshake" by the parodic Brazilian heavy metal band *Massacration*, which simply pile up a series of nouns which one may assume are instantly recognisable almost anywhere in the (young, urban) world: "Hot-dog / milkshake / Sunday / Mayday :: People / table / walkman / umbrella :: Round one / Fight / Final lap / Start :: Game over / Playstation / Atari".
4. This paragraph is partly based on my own first-hand experience as a regular user of internet cafés both in Egypt, while living there in 1997–2000, and during repeated visits to Palestine in 2003 and 2004. The ambience is well captured in a scene from Laurent van Lancker's film, *Trente et une nuits, mes rencontres palestiniennes* (2003), shot in the same internet café in Ramallah which I used as a base, where at least 90% of the clients at all times of day and night were school kids and young men playing first-person shooter games.
5. For a fuller discussion of Triclot's approach to the gaming experience, see my extended review (in French) of his book (Snowdon 2013). All translations in this article are my own.
6. The transliteration of Mubarak as "Mubark" suggests, unintentionally, and beyond any phonetic differences, that the imperious lion has himself already been demoted to a somewhat less impressive dog. However, while this interpretation might seem in keeping with the lions' Orientalist origins (they were sculpted in 1873 by the French animal specialist Henri Alfred Jacquemart), it belies the place they occupy in the affections of Cairo's inhabitants, who have tended to see these tutelary spirits as being on their side in their battles with the regime. See, for instance, the eyepatch which they wore later in 2011, thus identifying them with those revolutionaries whose eyes had been put out by snipers (Gillard and Wells 2011).
7. "What we're currently terming gamification is in fact the process of taking the thing that is least essential to games and representing it as the core of the experience. Points and badges have no closer a relationship to games than they do to websites and fitness apps and loyalty cards." (Robertson 2010)
8. One Egyptian activist who was arrested during the 18 days told me, during a long conversation about which mobile phone to buy (I was thinking of changing mine), that he had two main criteria for choosing a cellphone, and that one of these was that it have GPS, so that he could instantly message his exact location to his friends and the media the next time he found himself in gaol.
9. Access to the Internet from Egypt was effectively shut down from 27 January to 2 February 2011. Some of the ways in which hackers inside and outside the country sought to get around this blackout are detailed in Noirfalis (2011). Internet censorship in Syria, meanwhile, has become an almost constant feature of the last three years of revolutionary action (Franceschi-Bicchierai 2014).
10. The reemergence of traditional and popular art forms into the spaces created by these revolutions has been a constant feature of their unfolding, though one much less remarked upon in the West than their willingness to adopt and repurpose the latest IT gadgets (El-Desouky 2011, forthcoming; Bamyeh 2013).
11. The first two technologies mentioned in this paragraph mirror the two basic visual elements of many video games, namely: the combination of the immersive first-person POV (cameraphone) with the synoptic overview of the territory (GPS/Google Maps). The way these similarities (and the disruptive differences that counterbalance them) have been manifested in YouTube videos from the region will form the subject of a separate study.
12. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat was assassinated on 6 October 1981 while observing a military parade at Cairo Stadium. Mubarak, at the time his vice-president, was at his side, but escaped with only minor injuries (a serendipitous event which subsequently furnished the starting point for countless vernacular conspiracy

theories). The Speaker of the People's Assembly, Sufi Abu Taleb, became Acting head of state on Sadat's death, until Mubarak was formally inducted as the new President of Egypt on 14 October.

13. Triclot makes this point in the course of a discussion of massive multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs), where the proliferation of avatars/players seems designed to give the illusion that the whole of society is present, or at least represented. But the equation "machine = proletariat" clearly applies *mutatis mutandis* to all video games in which the machine is responsible for generating and sustaining the world in which we, the privileged, play, whether it also generates the "players" that we play against, or simply produces a functional environment in which we can play against each other.

14. On the Arab revolutions as above all Kuhnian epistemological revolutions that have called forth new acts of (anarchist) gnosis, see Bamyeh 2013.

15. I would like to thank Hani Shukrallah, Samah Selim, Hallveig Agudsdottir, Remco Roes, and Mathieu Triclot for their encouragement and comments at various stages during the process of writing this essay.

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