

Video game maker linked to US prisoner in Iran

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Amir Mirzaei Hekmati, the American sentenced to death by the Iranian government, is linked to a small New York company specializing in video games that recreate real-life conflicts in the Middle East and beyond.

The company, Kuma Games, makes a series of "Kuma(backslash)War" games that come in short, 10- to 15-minute episodes. The scenarios are usually nabbed from the news, and like documentary films, they seek to be as accurate as possible in chronicling real-life situations. Players can simulate events such as the killing of Osama Bin Laden, Afghan air strikes or the death of Moammar Gadhafi. There's also "Assault on Iran," about the country's nuclear ambitions.

"They are best known across academia, war hounds, people interested in war. Maybe soldiers or ex-soldiers," said Lindsay Grace, a professor who studies video games at Miami University in Ohio.

They are not "living-room games" like "Call of Duty", the popular shooter series by Activision Blizzard Inc., he said.

It's not the first time that video games have stirred up international barbs. Cuba denounced the 2010 version of "Call of Duty," in which U.S. special operations soldiers try to kill a young Fidel Castro. The country's state-run media said the game will turn American children into sociopaths. THQ Inc.'s "Homefront," meanwhile, had its cinematic opening scene changed in Japan, with references to North Korea's Kim Jong-Il and the country itself removed and replaced with "Northern Leader" and "A country to the North," respectively.

Iranian authorities accuse Hekmati of spying, but the U.S. -and Hekmati's family- said the charges are false. This week, he became the first American sentenced to death in Iran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, according to the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran.

The 28-year-old Hekmati was linked to the gaming company in December, when the former U.S. Marine interpreter was shown giving a purported confession in a video that was broadcast nationally in Iran.

In the video, Hekmati said he worked for New York-based Kuma Games, "a computer games company which received money from CIA to design and make special films and computer games to change the public opinion's mindset in the Middle East and distribute them among Middle East residents free of charge. The goal of Kuma Games was to convince the people of the world and Iraq that what the U.S. does in Iraq and other countries is good and acceptable," according to an account of his statements in the English-language Tehran Times.

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Published on Electronic Component News (<http://www.ecnmag.com>)

Kuma did not respond to repeated email messages for comment on Monday and Tuesday, and a listed phone number for the New York-based company did not connect to anyone.

The website of the U.S. Small Business Innovation Research program lists an "Amir Hekmati" as the principal investigator for Kuma LLC with a Kuma email address, indicating that he worked for the company. The website says Kuma was awarded \$95,920 for developing a second-language training program. The CIA was not listed among the agencies participating in the program, and it's unclear whether it has any connections to Kuma. The CIA declined to comment.

It is not unusual for a video game company to do side projects for the military, said Stephen Totilo, editor-in-chief of video game blog Kotaku, who visited the company's office in 2006 when he worked for MTV. Totilo said Kuma's CEO told him at the time that Kuma has done some work developing training software for the U.S. Army as a side project.

The office, he added, looked much like any other small game studio, with "a bunch of young guys, some just out of college," working with the same tools as creators of other shooter games.

Though many of Kuma's games are based on recent events in the Middle East, the company also makes games such as "DinoHunters," which lets players fight dinosaurs and "I, Predator," based on the Animal Planet series.

But the war games are getting much of the attention.

Are they propaganda?

"Obviously, they are biased, like anything," said Ian Bogost, a game designer and Georgia Tech professor who wrote about Kuma in his book, "Newsgames." "But I think it would be pretty bad Western propaganda if you took Kuma's existing products and dropped them in Iran."

Propaganda, he says, would be less subtle than Kuma's games, which are "really quite modest. Let's take this thing in the news and recreate it."

That said, it's hard to say how players in the Middle East would respond to games created in the West, he added - just as it's hard to say how American players would react to games created from Iran's perspective.

Kuma's "Assault on Iran" episode seeks to offer players "the most plausible scenario to delaying or destroying Iran's nuclear arms capabilities," according to the company's website. It was released in 2005. Two years later, Kuma's CEO Keith Halper told video game blog Gamasutra that the game was downloaded "hundreds of thousands of times" in Iran.

"We put Iranian and American gamers face to face, playing and talking together in a virtual space in a way that still eludes our real-world politicians," Gamasutra quoted

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him as saying in May 2007.

On its website, Kuma describes its war games as an "interactive chronicle of the war on terror" and says the company is "very sensitive and respectful of American and coalition soldiers and the sacrifices they are making every day." It says it donates money to two veterans groups - the Intrepid Fallen Heroes Fund and the Vietnam Unit Memorial Monument fund.

"They want to sell you on the experience that you get to do the battle," Kotaku's Totilo said. "You get to be the soldier."

He added that it would be easy to say that what Kuma is doing is "pro-U.S. military," in the sense that anyone who is recreating conflicts and letting people play from the American perspective is taking America's side.

"We have a whole host of movie directors and TV producers who, like Kuma, recreate real battles from an American perspective," he said. "And I haven't seen them as quickly accused of being a front for the CIA."

Source URL (retrieved on 11/23/2014 - 8:40am):

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