The Blood on Our Controllers: how the game industry relates to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Interview with Hippolyte Caubet

As we all know, this conflict began on October 7, 2023, when Hamas-led armed groups launched a surprise attack on Israel, killing over a thousand people and taking many hostages. In response, Israel initiated one of the most destructive campaigns in modern history. [1–4] This campaign escalated into genocide, resulting in the deaths of over 46,000 Palestinians, including civilians of all ages, and the destruction of more than 65% of Gaza's infrastructure. [5–9] The conflict has further intensified over the past year, with Israeli invasions extending into Lebanon and Syria.

While Western governments, media, and even the video game industry were quick to condemn Putin and Russia for the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, their responses to the genocide in Gaza have been notably underwhelming. [10–12]

The silence of the gaming industry, in particular, has drawn criticism, especially from members of the *Future Class* program, an initiative by The Game Awards designed to "represent the bright, bold, and inclusive future of video games." [10–14] In an open letter, Future Class members stated, "silence is a message. Silence is tacit support. Silence is the dehumanization of Palestinian lives." [11] They urged The Game Awards to show support for Palestinian human rights during their December 7, 2024, cere-

mony and called on the gaming industry to address the systemic dehumanization and vilification of Muslims, Arabs, and people from Southwest Asia and North Africa in video games. [11] Despite these appeals, The Game Awards remained silent. [13]

Amid that silence, a remarkable and courageous documentary titled *The Blood on Our Controllers* was released. [12] Recognizing the meaningful intersection of geek culture, politics, and human rights, we felt compelled to highlight this documentary, so we interviewed its director, Hippolyte Caubet. Below, you will find our questions (expressing our concerns and also our stance) and Hippolyte's heartfelt answers. Through this dialogue, we hope to amplify his message and bring it to wider audiences and communities.

When we think about the war in Gaza and how the world is responding (or not) to it, the video game industry is not the first thing that comes to mind. What inspired you to create this documentary? Was there a particular event that sparked the idea for this project?

Games have been a passion for me since I can remember. Board games, role playing games and later, video games. They are incredibly powerful tools to convey feelings, emotions, and ideals. But they are not perfect, far from it. The way they have been portraying Arab communities in the past decades is alarming.

After the events of October 7th, I realised along with many people the oddly loud silence of the Western community toward the Palestinian struggle. That realisation, besides the fact that the industry **has** a role in the dehumanisation of Arab **and** stood up for other causes in the past, made it clear for me that people needed to realise that responsibility.

The documentary tries to light a spark, to make people realise the wrongs of the industry so that we may not repeat our errors and so that we try to help those who need it.

By watching *The Blood on Our Controllers*, it's clear that speaking out against the Palestinian genocide is considered risky in the game industry, with people fearing repercussions like ostracism, job loss, or loss of funding. This makes your initiative even more important and awe-inspiring. How difficult was it for you personally to start this project? Did you face any pushback or challenges during the production of the documentary?

I'm lucky to be working in a very progressive studio, so I didn't really have to fear anything for my current job. My bosses knew I was working on this project and never tried to slow down my work. Regarding future collaborations, if this project is not to the liking of some others, then they're probably people I wouldn't have wanted to collaborate with in the first place. My values are and will always be more important than my salary.

One of your interviewees mentioned expecting the game industry to respond to the war in Gaza similarly to how it responded to Black Lives Matter and the invasion of Ukraine – but it didn't. There are various reasons (e.g., racial, financial, political) that outsiders can speculate about. What are your thoughts, as an insider, on why the industry failed so miserably to stand against the genocide?

I think we failed as humans, not necessarily as the video game industry. The lack of support from the Western world after the events of October 7th could be seen everywhere.

The main reason is the normalisation of those conflicts. "War happens", "war has to happen", and "it has to happen there". We are so used to seeing those regions of the world under conflict, under the bombs, it doesn't mean anything for us anymore. All my life what I've heard of Gaza was the war, but never things about the food they eat there, the beach, the culture, or anything!

Ukraine felt like an anomaly for a lot of people. A disastrous event that we could help stop. Gaza felt like a natural disaster. But this is obviously not true, our silence and lack of empathy is only going to let this fire grow even stronger.

I focused on the video game industry because it is the people and the industry that I know; that I'm a part of. I know the part we are responsible for in the culture industry, and I also believe we can do better.

Following up on that, how hard was it to find people to interview for *The Blood on Our Controllers*? How did you select the individuals featured in the documentary?

A lot of the interviewees were contacted by Younès Rabii, who helped me a lot to produce this documentary. They were all very happy to help! I'm glad that they did.

Representation and respect for other cultures are central themes in *The Blood on Our Controllers*. You and your interviewees discussed games such as *Liyla and the Shadows of War*, *Bury Me, My Love*, and *Assassin's Creed Mirage*, though such examples are still few and far between. Are there other games you think capture this spirit? How do you see the game industry moving forward to improve representation and treat non-Western cultures with respect?

Unfortunately, there are not a lot of games like those ones. There are some, Younès tried to find one for each day of the Ramadan a few years back, but they stopped before the end as they couldn't find enough.

What we are fighting for are "testimony games" games made, designed, and published by people associated with the story. Not empathy simulators made by white people for white people. In my opinion, the best you can do to represent non-Western culture as a white Western person is to… not do it? Our culture is already so rich with themes and stories to tell! We mustn't steal

the place of those willing to tell their own stories, for only them will tell them correctly.

In the documentary, you mention a passage from a war game where American soldiers cheer when a civilian building collapses after being hit by a missile. You explained that, at first, this seemed "just normal" to you and only later did you realize how horrible and absurd it was. Undoubtedly, there are similar moments in other games that many gamers might not even notice because these things have been normalized. How did you come to realize this? Do you have any advice for gamers on paying closer attention to such things?

It is always good to look at things with a deeper eye.

In the age where a lot of media or art pieces are spoon-fed so that people can "get" the message behind them without really having to think, we really need to start to "think" again. Why was this scene made? Is it trying to tell me something? What is it trying to say? What is the context? Who made this? All those questions might be relevant and at worst, give you a deeper appreciation of the amount of work that went into that scene.

I loved playing *Citizen Sleeper*, but it is because I tried to understand what the game tried to tell me that I began to grasp the philosophical intricacies of the game and that it became one of my favourite games ever. It is also through that reflection lens that I realised that most of the games I played as a young man were feeding me war propaganda ideals.

Looking at how things evolve in this industry, games are not going to change very soon regarding those points. But the way we look at them can change quickly. We might not change in a heartbeat the omnipresence of war in games, but we can already change how they affect us.

Are there any particular moments or stories that you feel are central to understanding the documentary's message?

Rami, Rasheed, and Younès's interviews are for me the most important ones. We need to listen to them to realise the work we need to do for their communities to start being rightfully recognised.

"The most this industry will do for us is improve the physics of our ragdolls when you blow us up", said Rami. That sentence sums up so much of what I'm trying to say with this documentary.

There is another sequence that I found terrifying to edit. At some point, I do a comparison between the representation of war in *Call of Duty* and IRL footage from Gaza. The images put side to side are shockingly similar, to the extent where I switched them while editing and didn't realise for a while. That realisation, that even me while editing could mistake them for one another, was bloodcurdling.

As of this interview, it has only been a few weeks since the documentary was released. How has the audience reacted to it so far? Have there been any surprising (positive or negative) or particularly moving responses?

The reception has been overwhelming. I only got nice messages and congratulations for the documentary; a lot of people seem to relate to the stories being told in it. It feels very good! This was **by far** the hardest project I ever worked on, and I worked on *Beyond Good and Evil 2* for a couple of years.

A lot of people shared the message and it sparked discussion among many people, AAA and indies alike. I'm very proud of it.

I hope to spread the word even further, so that many discussions start everywhere. My goal is not to grow big numbers or to get famous, I couldn't care less; what I want is for this documentary to have people think and discuss with their peers, colleagues, bosses, and so on.

You end *The Blood on Our Controllers* with a call to action, suggesting that games can be entertainment but also a force for good. Let's try to end this interview on a similar high note. We already mentioned some games discussed in the documentary, but there are several others out there, like *Through the Darkest of Times*, which is a personal favourite. Do you have any other inspiring games to recommend to our readers?

I am concerned by all the social impact of games. Racism, validism, sexism, anti-semitism, orientalism etc.

In that sense, any game that at least tries to bring good ideals and to fight against the fascist or intolerant doxa is a great game! My most recent personal favourites would be *Neva* for its poetic approach to pollution and disease, *Citizen Sleeper* and *Hades 2* for their wonderfully diverse characters, *Venba* and *Mouthwashing* for the deep and dark themes they explore, and so many others!

Games have a tremendous power for positive change. They can help foster greater appreciation of cultures. I love games for that. They taught me so much about the world, they gave me so many great memories, so let's continue to create meaningful experiences that are respectful of others, visually striking, narratively captivating and... fun to play!

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ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE

Hippolyte Caubet is a game designer and game developer at Nerial, one of Devolver's Digital studios. He started his video game journey as a young child, exploring Hyrule along many other worlds, in which his passion for games grew stronger and stronger. After a long time making small games in his bedroom, he began to work on *Beyond Good and Evil 2* at Ubisoft Paris before joining Nerial and working on *The Crush House*. Alongside his day job, he is a member of Game Impact, a French non-profit organisation fighting for a brighter, more inclusive, and respectful video game industry. He is also a great Falco main in SSBU and any person trying to deny that will be brought to justice.