



# Game for anything

When even pirated video games are being modified to better serve a Saudi audience, you know it's time to take the media seriously by Sidra Tariq

Long ago games used to be only a form of entertainment. Children would huddle around board games like Monopoly and Ludo and spend hours competing with each other. There was no concept of a banner ad popping out of the game or an interactive video trying to attract your attention. But games these days have managed to become a major platform for advertising.

Like the rest of the world, the Middle East is making great efforts to put the gaming industry in the fast lane as the number of active users escalates. Advertisers are also at the forefront, ready to bank on the marketing opportunities gaming platforms have to offer – from banners and pre-rolls to dynamic in-game advertising (ads embedded in a game).

Saudi Arabia has some of the most active gamers in the Middle East, making it a major market. Fadi Al Ramahi, chief operating officer of Dubai-based regional gaming company Tahadi Games, which features massively multiplayer online and browser-based games for Arab customers, says, "In Saudi, the gaming market in general has been growing nonstop over the past two years."

He adds that the kingdom is a very promising market for Tahadi, which currently offers four free-to-play localized online games: *Runes of Might*, *Heroes of Gaia* (*Abtal Gaia*), *Ragnarok*, and *Crazy Kart*. "We see around 1 million gamers in Saudi Arabia. It started off, of course, with console gaming, because the market started off as a console gaming market, and then people started going more towards the online gaming market. So if we look at Tahadi, for example, we have around 180,000 to 200,000 registered users from Saudi Arabia."

Around 30 percent of Tahadi's user base is from Saudi Arabia and the level of feedback and engagement from Saudi gamers is very high, says Al Ramahi. "They provide feedback, they communicate, they help our other players... and it has been just fabulous working for the Saudi market."

**MEASURING THE MARKET** While the gaming sector in Saudi Arabia is very active, it is difficult to track how much the market is worth, especially when it comes to console gaming, says Chadi Saab, media supervisor at Starcom



CHADI SAAB.

Media supervisor at Starcom MediaVest Group

MediaVest Group in Saudi Arabia. "The Saudi gaming industry is a little bit vague because there are not a lot of numbers," he says. Officially imported consoles are tracked with serial numbers, but since there can be several months between their release in the US or Japan and their official roll-out here, some distributors buy them abroad on their own by paying a premium. This makes it difficult for the manufacturers to track the number of devices that have been exported to the region.

Piracy is another problem haunting the country, and also blurs gaming statistics. Yet marketers realize that the market is a growing one and it provides them with a lot of opportunities to connect with customers.

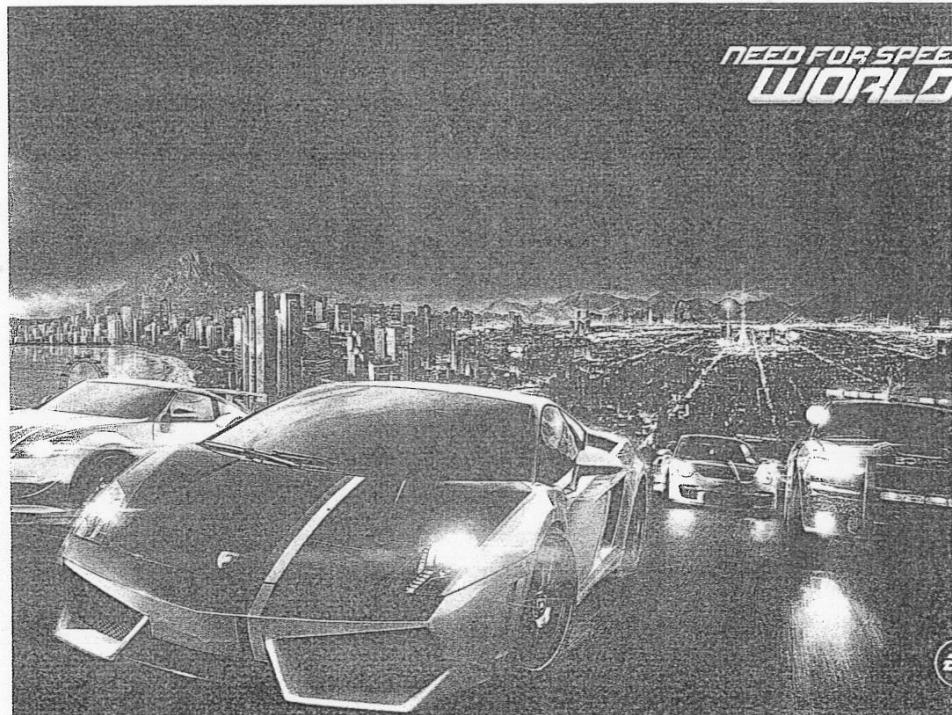
Marketers usually divide gaming into four categories, says Saab: casual games, console games, MMOGs (massively multiplayer online games, sometimes called MMORPGs or massively multi-player online role-playing games), and advergames. "Casual games are games like solitaire, chess, and card games.

Console games are mostly expensive and are usually played by males, especially if they are action and soccer games; they go to PS3, Xbox and computer games. MMOG and MMORPG are [role-playing games] like *Mafia Wars* on Facebook, *Farmville* on Facebook, *World of Warcraft*, and *Second Life*. These are huge world games; you have millions and millions of players working and interacting online and playing online. Advergames are games launched online or on CDs by a brand. Pringles has done that and M&M's has done that."

Tahadi's Al Ramahi says, "Generally speaking, there is no specific dipstick for the gaming market in MENA, and this is really one of the challenges for any company that needs to go into the gaming market. We expect around 60 to 70 percent to be console gamers. But as people see more and learn more about MMORPGs, we see the percentage versus the console gamers is increasing."

Console gaming is huge in Saudi Arabia, says Saab. This includes regular console gaming and online console gaming, which allows gamers to compete with players from around the world. Saab says he knows youngsters who will rent a house for a weekend and play console games there. "They can spend the whole weekend there, just having small naps, waking up and interacting, playing the games, sleeping and waking up again."

"Console games are a huge success, especially as Saudi doesn't really have a lot of entertainment outlets for youngsters and teenagers," he says. "You don't have a party scene, you don't have so many artists' places and cinemas, not even proper parks and even the weather doesn't really help. So what you will find them usually doing is going indoors and playing online console games." He adds that the average age of console gamers in Saudi is 30 years, but kids start playing at 12 years old.



**FAST AND FURIOUS.** Girls and boys alike enjoy racing games

While the male population is more inclined toward console gaming, women in Saudi Arabia tend to be casual gamers, says Saab. "Females are known to be the number one players of casual games, as those demand a lot of time commitment while you play them," he says. "They usually play [games like] sudoku, and you can play it on websites." Many women also play soccer on consoles, as well as games like *Guitar Hero* and first-person-shooters, he adds.

Online gaming is one of the fastest-growing sectors in global interactive entertainment, representing 15 percent of the worldwide video game industry, according to US research firm NPD. With broadband speeds improving around the Middle East, online gaming is also becoming popular in this region. According to research company TNS, 86 percent of the Saudi online population plays online games, while 37 percent plays daily (the global benchmark for daily use is 27 percent).

**LOCALIZATION.** Localization of game content is a movement that has been taking place in the Middle East for a while now. Game developers are trying to make the games more regionally relevant by publishing popular games in Arabic and by tailoring content to fit the cultural sensitivities of the region.

As far as console gaming is concerned, international games such as *Travian* – a multiplayer online strategy game developed by German

#### PRESSING THE RIGHT BUTTONS

The most popular games in Saudi Arabia, as shared by SMG's Chadi Saab.

FIFA 2012  
Call of Duty Black Ops  
Need for speed Hot Pursuit  
Grand Theft Auto  
Gears of War 3  
Halo 2  
Pro Evolution Soccer  
Infamous 2  
Assassins Creed Brotherhood





**ENTERING ANOTHER WORLD.** *Multiplayer online strategy games such as Travian are popular in Saudi*

software company Travian Games – are more popular and played more often than localized games in Saudi Arabia, says Saab. But the story is a little different for casual games. “Casual games have a presence on Yahoo Sports and many of these websites, and usually these are regionally developed.”

A different type of localization has also hit the market. And it comes in the form of piracy. People hack games for PlayStation, Xbox and other consoles and computers, and sell them at lower prices. But what’s new about that, you ask? Piracy takes place in every market. However, this is a bit more tailored to local demand. “These guys [pirates] take the number one games, which are usually soccer games and maybe shooting games and they are able to hack into the games or adjust [them] according to the needs of Saudi. For instance [in soccer games], depending on the local teams here, they will actually classify the local teams here and change their professional level – they will make them faster or stronger than other teams.” Games worth 250 riyals or 300 riyals could be sold for as little as 10 riyals or 15 riyals, he says.

Some pirates even go to the extent of looking for advertising for the hacked games, and Saab says that he has been approached with an offer. “They will actually tell you, ‘How about you get your local client to advertise in this game which we hacked [and will] sell for 10 riyals, and you [are] going to have to [your client’s] banners all over the game, and we are actually going to duplicate around 10,000 of these CDs and sell them.’”

“I was really shocked,” he says, adding that he declined the offer.

**ADVERTISING.** Games provide a great avenue for advertising. The sheer number of gamers in the world and an opportunity to interact with an engaged audience is always appealing to marketers.

Al Ramahi says that at the moment brands mostly advertise on gaming websites. MMORPGs are also emerging as an attractive platform, especially with the option of in-game advertising, he says.

In-game advertising is now turning out to be a popular marketing tool, particularly in online console games. “We find it very important and it is a very good opportunity for us to be present with game banners on the console service itself as [gamers] connect to the Internet,” says Saab from SMG. “We usually always advertise dynamic in-game advertising in console games and they have a huge success here, especially for our client Saudi Telecom Company (STC). Basically you will be playing the *Need for Speed* racing game and throughout the race you will find banners [from] STC that offer a new broadband connection.”

Al Ramahi adds that Tahadi is also seeing an increased interest in in-game advertising. “We have advertised for a couple of clients before, and the feedback was really good. Generally, gamers don’t like to see many advertisements in the game. So we’d rather sacrifice a little bit on the revenues generated from in-game advertising, though if we do it smartly we can still satisfy everyone: the audience and the advertisers.”

Generally speaking, you wouldn’t go into an online game and find it flooded with advertising. That just makes the gaming experience a little bit weaker.”

**CLIENTS.** In-game advertising has been attractive to marketers from different industries, but Al Ramahi largely sees telcos and FMCGs opting for online in-game advertising.

Meanwhile, Saab says that at the moment, there aren’t many advertisers in Saudi competing for banners in games. “For the time being, mostly telecommunication companies are really big on that as they have the bigger budget. Basically their budget is not experimental per se, but they have room for awareness campaigns.”

“For instance, my STC client is utilizing this media properly and we use it [to communicate things like Internet] speed upgrades from high-speed to super-high – messages that are relevant to people who are savvy when it comes to Internet and require more from their Internet speed and so on,” he adds.

Saudi Arabia continues to be a growing gaming market and a useful platform for marketers. “From an advertising point of view, with more game developers in the market, high penetration of smart phones and the new tablet market, I expect to see more brands creating advergames, and having brand presence in games,” says Saab. “As the market is opening more and more on digital advertising and due to increase in high-speed Internet penetration, I expect to see more local and regional brands present in dynamic video in-game advertising.”