

## Coming Soon to Your iPad: An Interactive Graphic Novel on the CIA and Iran

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- Cognito Comics is launching an immersive digital graphic novel called *Operation Ajax*, specifically for the iPad. Inspired by journalist Stephen Kinzer and his bestselling account of the 1953 CIA-sponsored coup in Iran, *Ajax* will combine elements of video games and graphic novels.

- Dan Burwen, founder and CEO of Cognito, sees digital graphic novels as the future of digital storytelling, blending the technology of video games with the high-end storytelling of animation and graphic novels.



By Edward Nawotka

SAN FRANCISCO: Daniel Burwen was a commercial artist teaching video game design when he discovered Stephen Kinzer and his work *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror*.

Burwen's previous work had been limited to producing scenes for the likes of *Tony Hawk 8* and *James Bond's From Russia With Love*, but he felt that the iPad opened up new possibilities for integrating story and image. The resulting work, *Operation Ajax*, is a fictionalized retelling of Kinzer's historical account of the 1953 CIA-sponsored coup that toppled Iran's democratically elected government in favor of the Shah. *Operation Ajax* features an unnamed narrator — "an amalgamation of government agents whose names were redacted from declassified CIA records" says Burwen — who guides the reader through one of the key events in America's involvement in the Middle East through to the present day in the form of an interactive graphic novel.

Burwen discovered Stephen Kinzer's work in late 2007, and met him in early 2008 to pitch the idea of an interactive graphic novel to him. Kinzer, a former *New York Times* correspondent who served as bureau chief in Istanbul, Berlin, and Nicaragua, among other places, "thought it was a cool idea," as Burwen puts it. Kinzer was impressed with Burwen and his partner, who flew out to Chicago to meet with him. "We spent a couple of long days working out early drafts of the script," says Kinzer, who now teaches journalism at Boston University. "What I've found interesting about this project is the desire to use this awe-inspiring technology to communicate valuable information. This is taking technology to a different level."

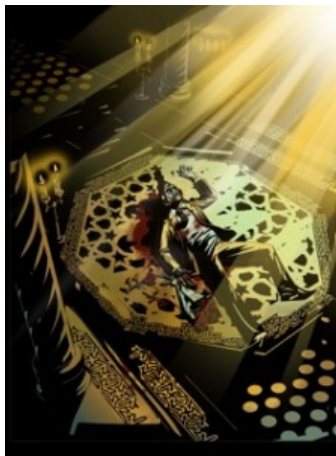


"The idea was to develop a new immersive reading experience," said Burwen, age 30. "I'm a games person, so I thought this was an opportunity to 'reinvent the page.' At the same time comics, which was a new medium to me, has its rules and I realized you have to respect them."

Burwen opted to "deconstruct the page," so that you experience it piece by piece. Speech bubbles and characters appear in sequence as you're reading, which in turn allows Burwen to "measure out the experience." In addition, the panels are also touch sensitive and corners "peel back" to reveal articles, photographs, and artifacts culled from the real world. But the reader is always in control and has the ability to swipe through panels as they are reading, which ultimately allows them to control the pace.

"I think what we've created offers a kind of cinematic experience, but the challenge for me as a designer was where to draw the line between watching a movie and reading a book," he says.

To develop the app, Burwen launched a new publishing company, Cognito Comics. Together with app developer Tall Chair — a company which has produced apps for the movie *Sherlock Holmes* — they are building a platform to implement his ideas. *Operation Ajax* is the first graphic novel to be produced using Tall Chair's proprietary Active Reader app, which is designed specifically for publishing graphic novels on the iPad.



At the time of this writing Burwen is in the midst of finishing up the prologue to the story, which will be released in Q3, to be followed by eight more "episodes" or chapters each coming out at five week intervals, until the story reaches its finale at page 180. Having seen a preview of the app, I can attest that it is impressive, not the least because it manages to render a nonfiction story that might not appeal to everyone fresh and compelling.

Burwen notes that because the iPad is so new, there was "no obvious development pipeline" to create art for his app. "In video games, there were a whole bunch of tools you could use, but with this, I mark everything up in Flash and use Photoshop and Illustrator, but there is a big opportunity out there for someone to develop tools that will help us in this process."

For his part, Burwen says he was motivated to start this project by a desire to “produce stories with lasting social value”:

“With video games you spend millions of dollars to develop it, it comes out, goes on sale for five months, gets discounted, and then goes into the bargain bin and eventually turns into nothing more than a piece of plastic. With this, I feel differently. It’s an ironic coincidence that the founding of the Anglo-Iranian oil company is the start of BP, and that’s part of our story... When you pick the right topic it intersects with current events in interesting ways.” And bitter memories of the 1953 coup were a central part of the Iranian revolution and the ongoing hostility between Iran and the United States.



Burwen believes *Operation Ajax* is part of a growing interaction between genres, as developers start to bridge the writing culture of animation and film with the technology of video games. Kinzer agrees that a hybrid product like this can have enormous potential: “This is where it gets interesting: you’ve got young designers on the cutting edge of technology, but looking to merge that high-tech with the need to educate Americans about our history and our role in the world.”

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