



*"But helpless Pieces of the Game He plays*

*Upon this Chequer-board of Nights and Days;*

*Hither and thither moves, and checks, and slays,*

*And one by one back in the Closet lays."*

—Omar Khayyam, *Rubaiyat* (trans. Fitzgerald, 1879)

## WHO IS THE PRINCE?



*An Afterword by Jordan Mechner*

Last year, while visiting UCLA's Powell Library, I saw a PlayStation 2 copy of *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* on display in a glass case alongside a 1903 edition of *The Arabian Nights*, a pack of Camel cigarettes, and a Las Vegas hotel ashtray with a picture of a harem girl. The title of the exhibition was "Seducing America: Selling the Middle Eastern Mystique."

It was an odd sensation finding my old familiar prince in such an unexpected place. I had lunch with the curator of the exhibit, an Israeli professor who collects twentieth century Orientalist pop-culture ephemera. I told him about the original *Prince of Persia* computer game, the one I'd programmed in the late 1980s. He was curious and asked where he might find a copy for his collection. You can download it for free, but what he really wanted was the box it came in.

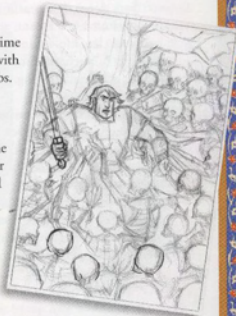
### BEGINNINGS

When I was twelve, I spent most of my free time drawing comics. I dreamed of a future with Bainbridge boards, T squares, and ink pen nibs.

Then the Apple II was invented.

A great thing about drawing comics is the intimacy of it. Hours vanish as you sit at your drawing board, absorbed in the characters and worlds you're creating. Comics were a perfect occupation for a kid inclined to daydreaming and solitude. So were computer games in the 1980s.

I found out quickly that I liked programming games and I liked animation—but what I loved was creating an imaginary universe that others could lose themselves in. The communion between game designer and player can



be as personal as that between a novelist and reader. I wanted to create games that would not only challenge players but stir their emotions.

The Bainbridge boards went into the closet. I'd found a new obsession.



It was 1985. I'd just graduated from college. I was in my old bedroom in the town where I'd grown up: eating my parents' food, playing video games, and thinking about a game I wanted to make and that I hoped Broderbund Software would publish. I knew the kind of running, jumping, puzzle-solving acrobatic game play I wanted. What I needed was a story.

It was Broderbund's Gene Portwood (a former Disney animator) who spoke the magic words: "What about Ali Baba; Sinbad?"

On that muggy, rainy August afternoon, in a single burst of creative energy, I wrote a two-page story about a boy who sets out to win a princess's love by stealing an amulet from the dungeons of an evil sultan. I didn't stop to think, much less do research. Ideas and vivid images poured out faster than I could write them down. It was as if the characters had been there all along, lying dormant, stored in a dream, and now sprang to life—animating themselves in my head, running, jumping, and even speaking.

I must have met them somewhere before, but where? Maybe in some illustrated storybook I'd read as a child. Or on late-night TV, in those days when movies were fascinating, elusive things you couldn't own, couldn't freeze

in time, could only glimpse as they flitted past, having no idea when or if the opportunity to see them might come again.

Where do stories come from? All I know is that when they do come, it's smart to get out of their way.



Rotoscoped animation frames for *Prince of Persia* (1989)



I moved to California and spent the next three years programming the game that would be *Prince of Persia*. The story line evolved, got tighter, streamlining and recombining elements. An evil sultan became a scheming vizier, a royal amulet was quietly dropped, a magic mirror was added.

One day I sat down at last and read *The Arabian Nights*. In those pages, I met my prince and princess, sultan and vizier, over and over in different guises. Shape-shifting, they peered out at me from behind different personas, like the broken fragments of a magic mirror.

Maybe the reason the land and characters of *The Arabian Nights* are so perfect for a video game is because they are themselves dreams. Peel away the layers of Western imaginings, the Hollywood harem girls and palm trees and, yes, video games that had fascinated my Israeli professor, and you find . . . more layers. Reading Husain Haddawy's excellent 1990 translation, I learned

that what I'd believed were the original unexpurgated *Nights*, brought to the West by Galland, Lane, and Burton in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, are actually a hodgepodge of translation, invention, and outright forgery that medieval Arabic scholars are still trying to unravel. Even Haddawy's version, probably

the truest available, is based on copies of copies of tales that, by the time they were first written down in the ninth or tenth century, were already older than anyone could remember.

I hadn't created the prince. I'd had the luck to tap into a deep, centuries-old well of other people's dreams.



In 1992 a Russian writer named Victor Pelevin wrote a short story about a Soviet government functionary who plays *Prince of Persia* so much that the game starts to merge with his reality. Set in the late 1980s, at a time when the American computers needed to play games such as *Prince of Persia* were still in short supply, the story made the game famous in Russia.

#### THE PRINCE ASSUMES A THOUSAND SHAPES

Given his slippery nature, it was inevitable that the prince would escape from my control. By 1992 *Prince of Persia* had become a worldwide best seller. Versions of the game were being sold on every computer and console platform I'd heard of and some I hadn't. Each new publisher and development team, in every country, put their own stamp on the graphics. The Super Nintendo prince didn't look quite like the Sega Genesis prince or the Sharp X68000 prince, the prince on the front of the box didn't look like the prince in the screen shots on the back, and some of them made me cringe.

I had no one to blame but myself. I'd chosen to present my story stripped down to its bare essentials, with characters that conveyed their personalities through gesture and action, not words. This left plenty of space for others to fill the void with their own imaginings.

Who is the prince? Does he have a name? How old is he? Is he a prince to start with, or does he become one by

"The little figure runs along the corridor. It is drawn with great affection, perhaps a little too sentimentally. If you press the <Up> key, it arches its back, and hangs in the air for a second, trying to catch hold of something above its head. If you press <Down> it squats and tries to pick something up from the ground under its feet. If you press <Right> it runs to the right, if you press <Left> it runs to the left. In fact you can use various keys to control it, but these four are the most important.

(...)

The final purpose is to reach the highest level, where the princess is waiting, but to do that you have to devote a lot of time to the game itself. In fact, to be successful, you have to forget that you're pressing keys and actually become the little figure—only then will it acquire the degree of agility required to fence, jump through the snapping body-scissors in the narrow stone corridors, leap over the stone shafts and run over the collapsing flagstones, each of which can only support the weight of a body for seconds—although the figure has no body left alone any weight, and neither, if you think about it, do the tumbling slabs of stone, no matter how convincing the sound might be when they fall."

—Victor Pelevin, "Prince of Central Planning" (1992)

marrying the princess? What land is he from, who are his parents, what is the sultan a sultan of, and what century is it anyway?

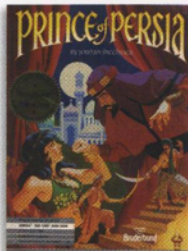
"Long ago in a certain city there lived a king . . ." *The Arabian Nights* tales rarely got more specific than that about time and place, and neither did 1980s video games. Baghdad or Samarkand, the ninth century or the twelfth—what did it matter so long as there was a scheming vizier, a beautiful princess, and a palace on a moonlit night? On the 280 x 192 screen of the Apple II, where the characters' faces were four pixels square, such details hardly seemed to matter.

But as the 1980s became the 1990s, as video-game technology improved, and teams of artists and engineers I would never meet began translating *Prince of Persia* to platforms with more memory and higher-resolution graphics, those questions I'd left unanswered started to chafe.

In 1993 Broderbund published the prince's second adventure, *The Shadow and the Flame*. Hoping to preempt the proliferation of princes and inconsistent backstories that my first game had spawned, I'd written up what I intended to be a definitive "bible" establishing the prince's past once and for all—as George Lucas had done for *Star Wars*, planting the seeds that would flower in future episodes.



Concept art for *Sands of Time* (2003). Copyright © Ubisoft Entertainment. All rights reserved.



Arriga *Prince of Persia* box (1990)

*Prince of Persia* in Japan: Super FamiCom *Prince of Persia* box (1992)



Even while I was writing it, I'd had a vague sense that it didn't feel quite right. In hindsight, I think my real problem was that in trying to force *Prince of Persia* into the Western, Nordic epic-trilogy-struggle-between-good-and-evil format that had worked for Lucas—and Tolkien and Wagner before him—I'd failed to take into account the prince's origins as an *Arabian Nights* character. Those were tales of wisps and dreams, whose nature was to spin and embroider themselves out of nothing, only to vanish again in the shimmering mist. In Wagner, everything is destiny. In the *Nights*, anything can happen.



As it turned out, I never got the chance to complete my epic trilogy. The big video-game sensation of 1993 was *Doom*, the first 3-D shooter. The public no longer wanted 2-D platformers; plans for a third *Prince of Persia* game were quietly shelved. Six years later, Broderbund tried to catch up by releasing *Prince of Persia 3D*, but the project was plagued by difficulties, and landed not with a bang but a whimper.

It seemed that the prince's adventures had run their course. And, I told myself, maybe that wasn't entirely a bad thing. He'd traveled so far from his origins, I hardly recognized him anymore.



In 2003, the prince got that rarest of things: a second chance.



When I joined Ubisoft Montreal as writer and game designer of the title we hoped would revive the all-but-dead *Prince of Persia* franchise, the team faced a daunting challenge. The best-remembered title in the series, the first one, was almost fourteen years old. In video-game years, that's an eternity.

Fittingly, the tale we chose to tell was about second chances. *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* is the story of a young warrior who is tricked by the villain into making a terrible mistake that threatens to destroy

not only his kingdom, but the fabric of reality itself. Only through heroic effort, helped by a princess he loves but is never quite sure whether to trust, can he set things right.

From the original game we took an hourglass; the basic triangle of prince, princess, and vizier; and a certain style of game play. The rest was new. The tremendous advance in graphics and sound technology meant that a team of talented artists could realize the prince's world with greater beauty and detail than ever before.

A decade and a half after he'd first run and jumped across an Apple II screen, the pixelly prince found his footing: ninth-century Persia—a time of warfare and intrigue, perfect for a tale of romance and adventure.

Doing research for *Sands of Time*, I picked up the *Shahnameh*, the Persian Book of Kings, set in verse a thousand years ago by the great poet Ferdosi. Reading the complete work for the first time, in an edition beautifully illustrated with sixteenth-century Persian miniatures, was a revelation to me.

The *Shahnameh* represents a different tradition from *The Arabian Nights*. Its epic tales of kings and heroes are to the East what Norse mythology is to northern Europe. A Persian prince like the one in *Sands of Time* would have grown up steeped in the oral tradition of the *Shahnameh*; he would have spoken about the strength of Rustam the way a 20-year-old soldier today might casually refer to Superman or the Hulk. (And, in *Sands of Time*, he does.) But as much as the prince aspires to resemble the noble warriors of the *Shahnameh*, doomed to fulfill their heroic destinies, he can't quite shed the basically happy-go-lucky nature of an *Arabian Nights* prince, stumbling from one adventure into the next. It's his inability to resolve this conflict that gives him his particular charm.



Ubisoft followed up *Sands of Time* with two sequels, *Warrior Within* and *The Two Thrones*, which gave the prince a more ruthless, violent edge. They're hard at work now in Montreal crafting his next adventure, which promises





Concept art for *The Two Thrones* (2005). Copyright © Ubisoft Entertainment. All rights reserved.

to feel closer in spirit to the romantic fantasy of *Sands of Time* and of the original game.

Jerry Bruckheimer and Walt Disney Pictures are making a *Prince of Persia* movie. I wrote the screenplay, but I won't be surprised if in his journey to the screen, the prince once again transforms into a somewhat different shape than I'd initially envisioned. This prince is a survivor. In the past two decades, he's shown himself more adaptable and resilient than I ever expected.

Will the actor who plays the prince in the movie become the real, definitive Prince of Persia? Will he supplant the prince in the video games? Can so many princes coexist peacefully?

Or are they all somehow the same person?

#### GAMES TO COMICS

In 2004 I got an e-mail from Mark Siegel, the editor of a new publishing imprint called First Second Books. He told me that *Prince of Persia* had had

a special place in his heart since the early 1990s, when he'd first played it on a black-and-white Macintosh Classic. Would I be interested in developing it as a graphic novel?

He didn't know he was offering to fulfill one of my childhood dreams.

As Mark and I got to know each other, we found out that we had a lot in common—including a passion for the French hardcover graphic novels called *bandes dessinées*. I'd fallen in love with the work of Hugo Pratt, Enki Bilal, and François Schuiten in my twenties, when I spent a year in France. Their books had been a huge influence on my videogame writing, especially *The Last Express* and *Sands of Time*. When Mark told me that one of his missions for First Second is to foster European-quality graphic novels in the United States, I got even more excited.

And when artists LeUyen Pham and Alex Puvilland came on board, with their rich backgrounds in children's illustration and Dreamworks feature animation, we were more certain than ever that a graphic novel about the prince's adventures could be something special.

The question was, which prince?

The plucky Aladdin-like street urchin of the first game? The orphan-with-a-mythic-destiny of *The Shadow and the Flame*? The guilt-ridden young warrior of *Sands of Time*? The battle-hardened fugitive he became in *Warrior Within* and *The Two Thrones*? Or the prince of the *Sands of Time* movie—or



rather of the screenplay, which will have been rewritten many times over by the time cameras roll!

Which one is the true Prince of Persia? All of them. And none of them.

Our search for a writer who could encompass this paradox led us to the mysterious and reclusive A. B. Sina.

When A. B. asked us what we expected him to write, we said we weren't sure, exactly, but the connection to the video games should be deep below the surface, not evident at first glance. We didn't want an adaptation of any of the games or of the movie, but a new story that would tap into the deep wellspring of Persian myth, legend, and history from whence the prince had arisen.

A. B. thought about it for a bit, then remarked that in the tales of the East—from *The Arabian Nights* to Sufi stories—the characters' conflicts and relationships tend to be with the structure of reality itself, the structure of consciousness, rather than with individual psychological issues as we tend to focus on in the West. He pointed out that the struggle against destiny is the most universal of all struggles, that it fuels the American myths and the American dream, as well as Eastern ones.

We were off and running.



Playing video games is all about timing, so it's not too surprising that in every *Prince of Persia* story so far, time itself has been a central motif.

What is interesting is that with each iteration, the time frame seems to expand. The first game was confined to the hour it took for the sands in Jaffar's hourglass to run out. *Sands of Time* took place over several days, with the menace embodied by a different kind of hourglass. The *Sands of Time* movie screenplay paints a broader canvas and takes place over weeks. And the graphic novel spans centuries—specifically, two parallel stories unfolding four centuries apart.

A. B. has woven a delightfully subversive tale offering us not just one, but many Persian princes. All in their different ways fighting wild beasts and magical creatures, falling in love with princesses, and falling afoul of scheming viziers, as my prince had done for at least a thousand years before he ran and jumped through a late-summer rainstorm onto the Apple II computer screen.

One of the possible princes in A. B. Sina's story wonders if he is prophesying the future, or if the future is remembering him.

A sentiment the original Prince of Persia, wherever he is, must surely sympathize with.

Los Angeles  
October 2007



Opposite: Concept art for the upcoming *Prince of Persia* video game.  
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