

theexplorer

THE AGE OF THE ENTREPRENEUR

How a new generation of pioneer is breaking the chains of business orthodoxy to create its own opportunities

NATURAL WONDERS

Preserving some of the most delicate corners of the Arab world is creating exciting new opportunities



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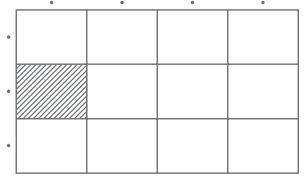
The Explorer meets an entrepreneur who is helping to draw a new Middle East.



DRAWING STRENGTH

Launched in 2006 by Suleiman Bakhit, Aranim is fast becoming a Middle Eastern media powerhouse, with comic books, online games and websites serving a new generation of Arab consumer

Words: Eddie Taylor



“An idea is nothing unless you put it into action – especially in the Arab world!”
Suleiman Bakhit

//// A growing empire of comic books, animated films, online games and, latterly, an Arab-language web portal for all things animé might not be the obvious business for someone who was told by his art teacher he should really pursue other interests. And by taking a Masters in HR Development at the University of Minnesota, it was clear Suleiman al-Bakhit seemed to agree. But then came 9/11, and the subsequent negative portrayal of Arabs and Muslims in the media motivated the young Jordanian to offer America a different perspective. A tour of schools in his state brought him face to face with thousands of children – and an almost ubiquitous obsession with superheroes.

“It all began as a response to a question from a 6-year-old,” says Suleiman, from behind a desk strewn with illustrations, sketches and notepads at Aranim’s offices in Amman. “I was president of the International Students Association and was really trying to convey to school kids the best aspects of Arab culture, countering the image of al-Qaeda and terrorism. Then one kid asked ‘What superheroes do you have in the Middle East?’ And it got me thinking – what positive figures do we have in our culture? That was when I started to sketch out some characters.”

Of course, before Aranim was born, Suleiman had to learn how to draw, which he managed via online tutorials. He then unleashed his first character, Naar, who leads a group of youngsters in a post-apocalyptic, adult-free Middle East. “The storylines revolve around the opportunity for these kids to shape the world they want to live in,” Suleiman says. “It really mirrors the struggles in the region today, and the kids really identify with this character with a snarl on his face! Adults think he’s angry, but he isn’t; he’s determined and strong.”

Like all good entrepreneurs, Suleiman soon spawned other characters, those spawned new books and longer series, and with some funding and a network of illustrators, he was able to announce in early May that the first two issues of his comics published in 2010 boasted circulations of 320,000 copies – mostly handed out to schools. In a country of just 5.5 million, that’s impressive.

More importantly, perhaps, it’s the start of a very large community of Arab youth. Aranim will launch Aranime.com in time for Ramadan, a portal in which all the content is digitised and some actually animated, creating a powerful tool to generate revenue. He is already learning to engage this nascent community, with the name of

a new female agent being decided by the readers of his other comics. “She is the first female Arab action hero, a special forces agent whose job is to fight extremism – not just terrorism, but political, social and religious extremism,” says Suleiman. “I hope I can get women to see themselves more positively and for boys to see girls as active, strong and dynamic members of our society.”

Of course, building an online community isn’t restricted to the comics. Aranim is also behind one of the most successful Arabic online games for Facebook, Element Zero. Although still in beta, there are 25,000 registered users responsible for 2 million page impressions per month – all playing the character of a Jordanian soldier, even though they come from Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia.

Aranim is an ideal demonstration of the power of creativity and importance of community – and it is at the heart of Jordan’s drive to build a knowledge economy. It is also validation of the importance of action. “I have taken a lot of great advice from several mentors, most stressing execution,” Suleiman says. “An idea is nothing unless you put it into action – especially important in the Arab World! And I hope my ideas inspire the next generation through creative media.”