of individuals. This definition of culture recognizes its commodified and negotiated nature, while also accounting for the contrasting meanings that culture can take on depending on the semiotic systems and interpretive contexts in which its signification is generated. Mäyrä offers a final point of reflection on the importance of context for games' meaning, noting that "all games have their uses, and only when situated within such contexts of play do they derive their meaning."[38] It is in the spirit of identifying these "uses" that link games to culture that I turn now to a review of historical purposes for play in Latin America.

Games and Latin American Culture: A Brief History of Uses

This book is predicated on the idea that video games and culture have specific uses for one another, and that their relationship is most clearly understood in terms of these uses. Games have served multiple purposes for human culture in general, and in Latin America specifically, since long before the advent of video games. A cursory glance at some of the major events of Latin American history reveals a longstanding tradition of using games for a variety of socio-cultural purposes. The *Popol Vuh*, a compendium of orally transmitted Mayan beliefs first transcribed and published in 1701, describes a culture that used games primarily for the purposes of leisure or play, albeit one whose players' motivations differ fundamentally from those of today's gamers. The *Popol Vuh* presents gaming as a form of ceremonial negotiation, a system of communication between earth and the heavens. The central story of the hero twins Hunahpú and Xbalanqué highlights the values of strategy, dexterity, and cunning, both in game and out of game, focusing largely on their skills in the ceremonial *juego de pelota* or ball game. When the arrogant lords of Xibalbá scheme to kill the twins because of their noisy game playing in the ball court, the twins use their playing skills to trick the ruling lords into demanding their own sacrifice. Once the twins succeed in vanquishing Xibalbá, they ascend to the heavens, where one becomes the sun and the other the moon.[39]

Centuries later, video game designers the world over show a sustained fascination with this mythical environment: several early games focus specifically on the iconography and environments of the Mayan world, including *The Mask of the Sun* (Broderbund 1982), designed by the Slovakian firm Ultrasoft and *Quest for Quintana Roo* (Telegames 1983), designed by Texas-based Sunrise Software; Lara Croft spends a significant portion of her time exploring the mythical temple of Xibalbá in *Tomb Raider: Underworld* (Eidos 2008); and recently two separate groups of Guatemalan game designers have created interactive electronic versions of the Mayan ball game. One of them, *Mayan Pitz* (Calidá 2013), adapts episodes from the Popol Vuh into the simplified format of a "casual" game, defined as "games that are easy to learn to play, fit well with a large number of players and work in many different situations," including games for

Figure 0.1
Mayan Pitz (Calidá 2013)

play on social media and portable devices[40] (see figure 0.1). *Mayan Pitz* is an iPad, iPhone, and iPod app aimed at a young audience, which was translated into the major Mayan dialects of Guatemala thanks to support from the country's Ministry of Culture.[41] The second of these reimagined versions of the Mayan ball game is the highly ambitious *Pok ta Pok* (Lion Works 2012), which incorporates a high degree of historical detail into its environments (including the mythical Xibalbá as well as real-world ball court sites like Chichén Itzá, Palenque, Teotihuacán, and Tenochtitlán), characters (a veritable pantheon of Mesoamerican gods including Tláloc, Cuauhtémoc, and Xóchitl) and indigenous cultures (not only the Maya but other ball-playing civilizations like the Aztecs, Olmecs, Zapotecs, and Teotihuacanos)[42] (figure 0.2). Both of these Guatemalan-designed video games demonstrate that culture, when meaningfully incorporated into game design, can significantly impact the player experience. One way these games' designers get culture "right" is by making it more than just part of the narrative or visual embellishment of the setting: as was the case for the Maya, the ball game holds cosmic significance in these video games, as they reflect the alternately destructive and productive Mayan view of play by putting the player through a continual process of failure and success, cataclysmic end and glorious rebirth.

Figure 0.2
Pok ta Pok (Lion Works 2012)

By a measure that far exceeds even the enormous popularity and cultural significance of today's major video games, play was utterly fundamental to the Mayan way of looking at the world—indeed gaming was the very source of the sun and the moon, which were converted into trophies awarded to the best players in Mayan legend. The Maya clearly did not conceive of play as an activity separated from "real" life, or secluded to an imaginary or magic circle. This is not to say that play was anything less than magical—indeed, for the Maya the game arena itself was the portal between the human world and the world of the gods, the magical court where kings competed with immortals to steer the direction of the universe. But the Maya's magical space of play is just the opposite of Huizinga's isolating magic circle, demonstrating the fundamental interplay between the game world and the real world as well as the impossibility of separating one from another.

Games and play were also of great significance to the other major indigenous groups of the Americas, including the Aztec and Incan empires. In 1577 Fray Bernardino de Sahagún published his *General History of the Things of New Spain*, a compendium of knowledge on Aztec culture penned by indigenous scribes under Sahagún's editorial supervision. One particular chapter of this codex is dedicated to the pastimes of the royalty and nobility, and describes the dice-like betting game *patolli* as well as *tlachtli*, a variation on the Mesoamerican ball game that, the text notes, was previously played for cosmic and spiritual purposes, but had

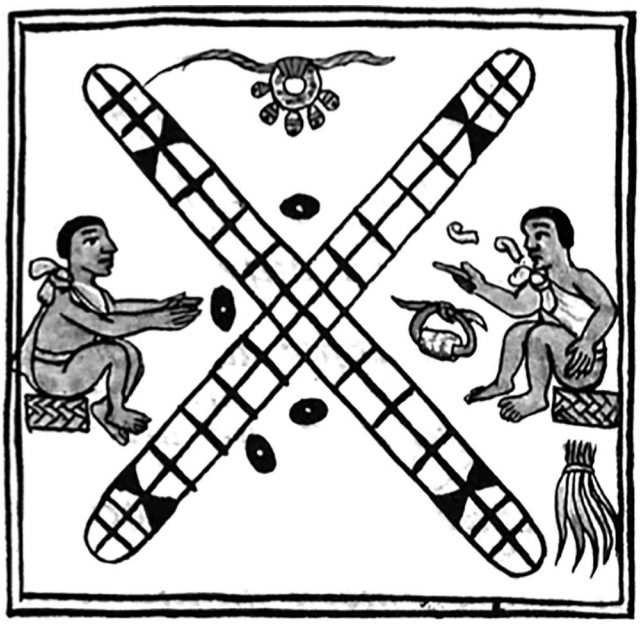

Figure 0.3
Patolli, as depicted in Bernardino de Sahagún's *General History of the Things of New Spain*, 1577

come to be regarded as sport or as a competitive supplement to warfare[43] (figure 0.3). Another period text by Francisco López de Gómora highlights the social role of play when describing how, shortly after the arrival of conquistador Hernán Cortés and his armed contingent, Aztec ruler Moctezuma II took the Spaniards out to a ball game: "Other times Moctezuma would go to the *tlachtli*, which is the ball court. [...] Moctezuma took the Spaniards to this game, and he showed great joy at seeing it played, just as much as he liked seeing them play their cards and dice."[44] Here, play is a public spectacle, an opportunity to see and be seen and a chance for Moctezuma to do some high rolling in front of his Spanish guests (and vice versa). And indeed, the stakes were high: the prizes for the winners of these games included gold beads and jewelry, precious stones, rare feathers, extravagant garments, lush textiles, loads of cacao, cornfields, homes, and slaves.[45] In contrast to the Maya, who saw games as a means of negotiating with the spiritual realm, the Aztecs viewed games as a recreational pastime for noble lords, a spectacular form of creative leisure that they went to great ends to achieve. Games were a mark of social status for the Aztecs as well as an opportunity to show power, wealth, and privilege, demonstrating how games' meanings can be contextually redefined by the ways they are put to use.