CULTURAL CODE

Video Games and Latin America

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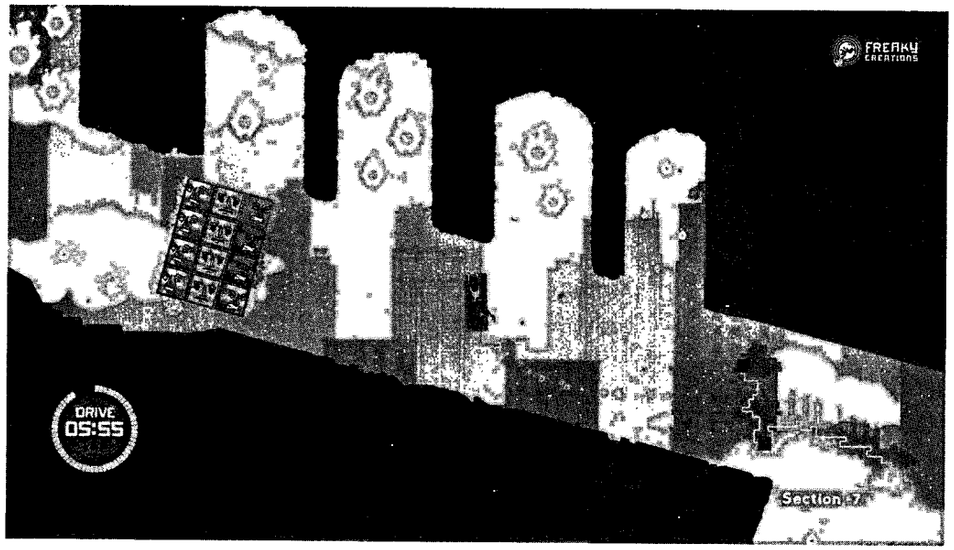

Figure 3.15
To Leave (Sony 2013)

A blend of initiatives from the public and private sectors is nurturing Latin America's potential for game development across the region today. Governmental entities are enabling national industries by offering financial incentives to game designers and publishers and, more important, by developing the educational infrastructure for a sustainable workforce. Likewise, governmental agencies are providing support in less direct ways, such as when the Bogotá Chamber of Commerce sponsored the public gallery exhibition "Video Games Made by Colombians" in summer 2014.[91] Along with these state initiatives, private corporations have begun to pay more attention to the region, contributing to the professionalization of the video game industry in Latin America through programs designed to nurture the region's abundant talent. As a result, video game development is alive and well in Latin America today, growing and diversifying in a number of directions.

Trajectories in Latin American Game Design

A broad spectrum of game design practices are taking place across Latin America today, with developers working with a variety of platforms, technologies, and game genres, each with different objectives and audiences in mind. Therefore it is important to avoid monolithically

reducing the design traditions of countries throughout the region to a single moniker such as "Latin American game design" without accounting for the diverse range of creative visions and design methodologies that fall under this umbrella. The focus of this section is to help distinguish and enumerate some of the many types of game development work taking place in Latin America today, emphasizing the expanding potential for regional game production. Together, examples from a variety of genres and frameworks including newsgames and political parodies, educational games, advergames, outsourced games, independent games, casual games, and games from Latin American designers working abroad evidence the diversity of game development practices in the region today.

To begin with, the use of games for social critique has a longstanding tradition in Latin American game design. As discussed in chapter 2, it was Frasca that coined the term "newsgames" to describe games that respond to real-world events through gameplay in a way that is meant to provoke critical reflection. A number of other Latin American designers have also used games to respond critically to real-world situations and events, creating simulations that help process the complicated effects of real-world trauma. One example is Salvadoran designer Sergio Arístides Rosa, who was inspired by the violence around him to create *Enola* (Domaginarium 2014), a horror-themed game that uses violence to discomfort rather than gratify the player (figure 3.16). In a similar vein, Venezuelan designer Ciro Durán designed the game

Figure 3.16
Enola (Domaginarium 2014)

Nación Motorizada (*Motorized Nation*, 2012) after he was robbed on a Caracas highway, as a type of "intellectual vengeance" that transformed his victimization into something more meaningful than just "one more" random and unpunished crime[92] (figure 3.17). In *Nación Motorizada*, the player must drive a car down the highway and "survive the constant harassment of the motorbikes that are chasing" her vehicle by knocking the attackers off their bikes, offering a vindictive social critique of the crime problem in Caracas in the form of a simple Flash animation

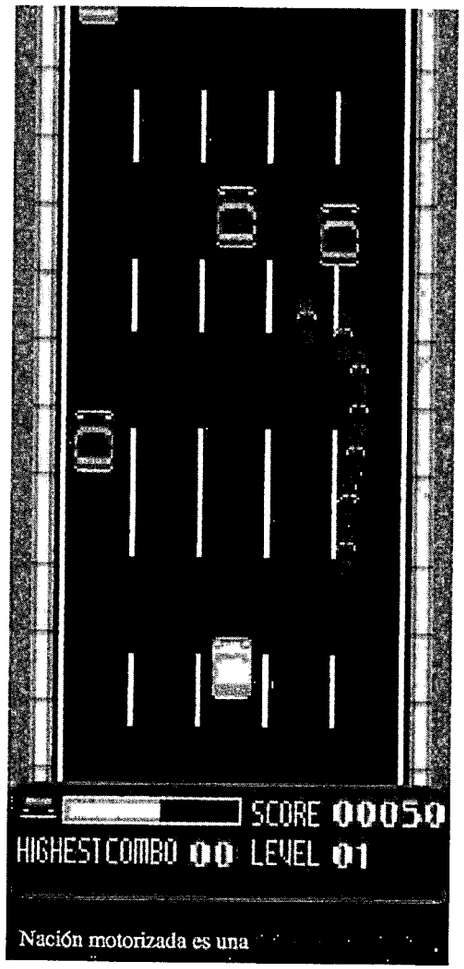

Figure 3.17
Nación Motorizada (Ciro Durán 2012)

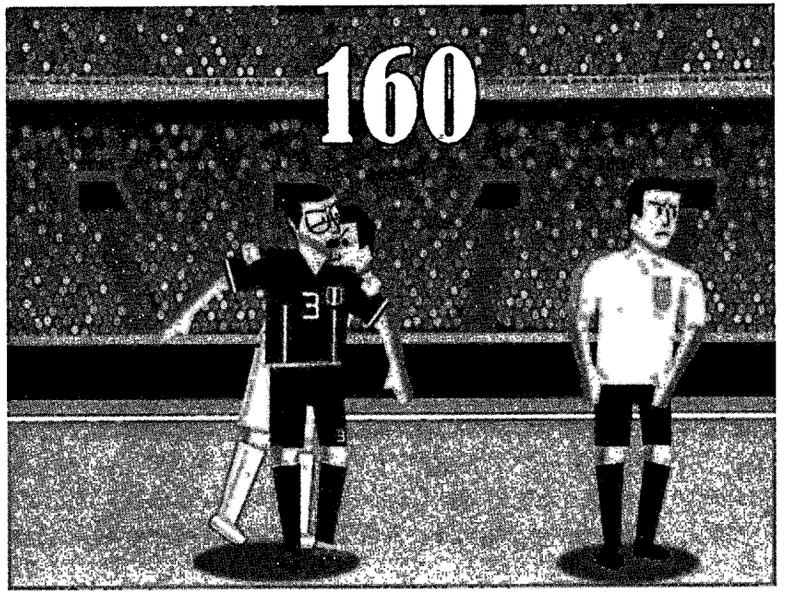

Figure 3.18
La Mordida (LEAP 2014)

web game.[93] Others have used the newsgame format to lampoon the headlines of the moment using simple mechanics and satirical caricatures of newsmakers. Take, for example, *La Mordida* (*The Bite*), a game that was developed by Peruvian studio LEAP Games within days of one of the biggest stories of the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, when Uruguayan forward Luis Suárez famously bit the shoulder of his competitor, Italian defender Giorgio Chiellini (figure 3.18). The bite went unseen by the game's referees but was caught from several angles in high definition by the television cameras, making it a global subject of water cooler discussion in the days that followed. LEAP game developers took advantage of this moment of public visibility to launch their game, in which the player controls a biting Suárez as he attempts evade the referee's gaze, chomping away for as long as possible on the shoulder of Chiellini.[94] Games like these are also a chance for small developers to get the word out about their more ambitious projects, such as LEAP's 2015 release for the PlayStation Portable, *Squares* (figure 3.19). Like the Internet memes circulated through social media and the tweeted jokes about this event and others, games like *La Mordida* represent an attempt to be humorously provocative as well as a novel way of communicating *around* a world event through electronic media.

Political parodies are an even more common form of satirical newsgame. Games that poke fun at candidates for public office are being produced far and wide, even in countries without

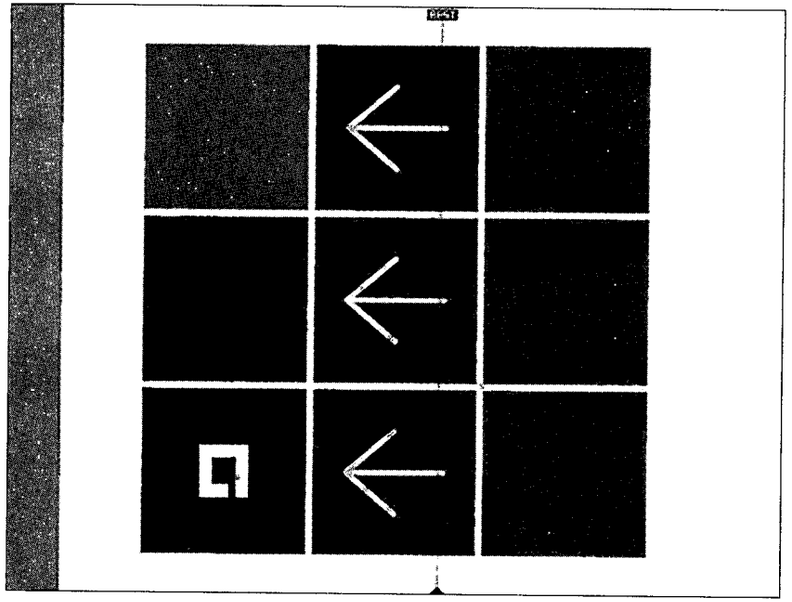

Figure 3.19
Squares (LEAP 2015)

a major national industry or significant game design infrastructure. After Paraguayan congressional representative Carlos Portillo was questioned in an interview about a number of allegedly false college degrees on his résumé as well as his professed fluency in English, he responded by saying, "My name is Charlie," then struggled to count to ten in English, forgetting the number five. Again, the Internet meme machine was quick to pick up on this event, taking advantage of the deep divide between the politician's public self-representation and the reality revealed in the interview in order to produce playful parodies. Within a short time, a video game parody had appeared as well: in *Portillo el Tontillo* (*Portillo the Little Fool*, Groupweird 2014), the player guides an avatar featuring a cut-and-paste image of the candidate's face as he tries to duck under and leap over the books flying his way—each time the politician comes into contact with a book, he loses a point, marked by a countdown in broken English, "te, nai, ..."[95] (figure 3.20). The low-fi aesthetics and simplistic gameplay mechanics of *Portillo el Tontillo* are characteristic of political parodies and other newsgames, which are often quickly compiled in response to recent or ongoing events, the comic timing of the parody's release ultimately taking precedence over complexity or replay value.

Similar examples of political parodies can be found throughout Latin America. In the Panamanian game *Carrera Presidencial 2014* (*Presidential Campaign 2014*, Cerdipuerca Studios 2013),

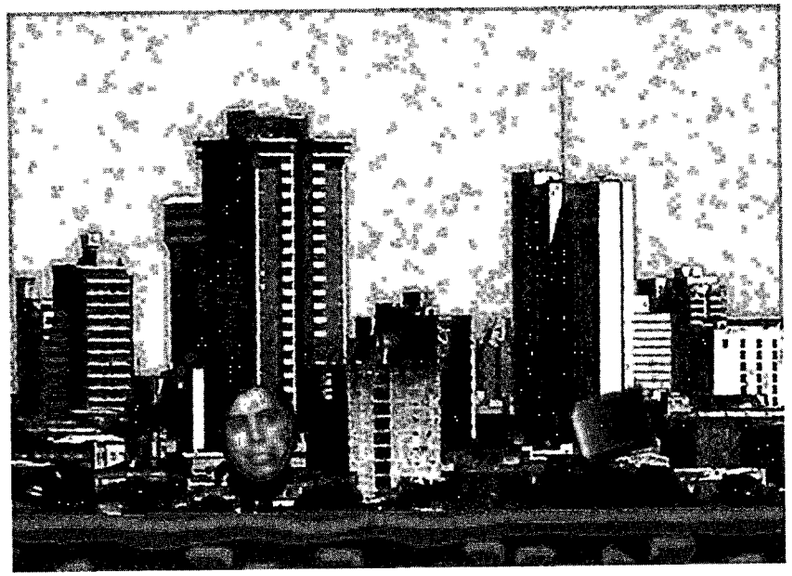

Figure 3.20
Portillo el Tontillo (Groupweird 2014)

the player chooses from caricatures of real-life candidates in the country's presidential elections, then attempts to win votes by giving away tanks of gas, handing out political pamphlets, and evading electoral officials.[96] And *Carrera Presidencial 2014* was not the only game designed around Panama's 2014 elections. Eduardo Soto and Amado Cerrud, two young Panamanian designers residing in Taiwan and collectively referred to as Amazian Team, designed *Guerra Política* (*Political War*, 2014) as a way of satirizing outgoing president Ricardo Martinelli, whose administration had been racked by a number of political scandals.[97] In the game, a character named "Mentirelli" (a play on words between the president's last name and the Spanish verb *mentir*, "to lie") leaps around among the various electoral candidates seeking to replace him as well as former dictator Manuel Noriega and Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro, in a race for money and points—the goal is to gather 5,000 Panamanian Balboas in order to earn diplomatic immunity. But what is perhaps most noteworthy about *Guerra Política* is the way it became more than just a satire to be circulated among the general public, entering into the country's political discourse after several opposition candidates played and discussed the game in interviews. Among them was Panama's then-Vice President Juan Carlos Varela, who would eventually win the election to become president of Panama in 2014. Varela commended the designers of *Guerra Política* for including specific elements related to his proposed policies, calling the game "very

detail-oriented and creative."[98] The case of *Guerra Política* demonstrates the potential for game designers to develop newsgames, social critiques, and political parodies that not only comment *about* but also actually become a part of the political discourse of their particular time and place.

Educational games, sometimes referred to as "edugames," are also gaining increased attention from Latin American game designers and funding sources alike. Like the Uruguayan developers of the previously discussed RPG *1811*, design teams in several other countries have created games about their respective independence movements. For example, a Dominican team produced *La Trinitaria* (*The Trinity*, Instituto Tecnológico de las Américas 2008), proudly proclaiming it to be a game "by Dominicans and for Dominicans,"[99] while in Mexico, a team of student designers led by Guillermo Medina and Felipe Mandujano developed *Al grito de guerra* (*At the Cry of War*, Máquina Voladora 2013), an FPS based on the Mexican War of Independence. Other design teams throughout the region echoed the call to commemorate major events of national history through games, including Cuba's Youth Computer and Electronics Club (JCCE), the makers of *Gesta Final*, the Cuban Revolution shooter discussed in chapter 2, as well as several educational games that they released simultaneously. Working under the JCCE, a government-supported initiative founded in 1987 with the objective of disseminating information technology among the nation's youth, the Estudio de Videojuegos y Materiales Audiovisuales (Evima, Video Game and Audiovisual Material Studio) developed a series of five games tailor-made to the national population's preferred game genres in 2014.[100] These were publicized as the first games ever fully designed in Cuba, and included the first online game ever published in the country, *Comando Pintura*, a paintball shooting game aimed at fostering nonviolence (figure 3.21). The other games also relate to the official vision of Cuban popular culture and national values: *Beisbolito* (figure 3.22), a learning game for elementary school students, teaches math through the Cuban national sport of baseball; *Boombox* is a 3D puzzle/maze game, one of the country's most popular genres; and *A Jugar* is a collection of mini-games for children that incorporates popular animated characters created by the Cuban Institute for Art and the Cinematic Industry (ICAIC).[101]

These games represent a first for the Cuban game design community, but their efforts mirror those of projects seeking to educate students on issues pertinent to national culture in other countries. For example, the Administration of the Panama Canal published the game *Reto Canal* (*Canal Challenge*, 2013) with the objective of maintaining the waterway's relevance in the minds of Panamanian youth.[102] Likewise, *Súbete al SITP* (*Get on the SITP*, Transmilenio 2014), a bus-driving game sponsored by the Colombian government and aimed at teaching citizens of Bogotá how to safely use public transportation, earned its designers a prize from the organization Games for Change.[103] Like the JCCE's games and those focusing on major historical episodes from Uruguay, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico, games such as *Reto Canal* and *Súbete al SITP*

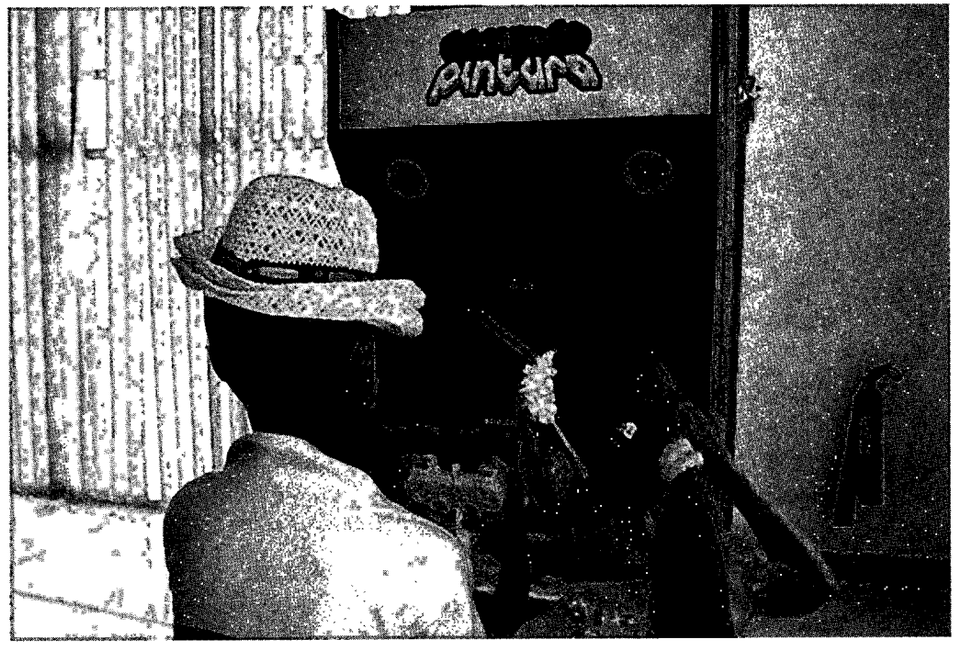

Figure 3.21
Comando Pintura (JCCE 2014)

fill cultural gaps in the global game industry by providing content produced by designers with a local audience in mind.

Other educational games are supported by a mix of public and private funding, or by nongovernmental philanthropic organizations. The Nicaraguan Zamora Terán Foundation is one such source of financing for game development, having sponsored a "One Laptop Per Child" initiative beginning in 2010 aimed at putting a computer into the hands of every school-age child in Nicaragua. Along with the hardware, the foundation has supported the design of multiple applications to help students and teachers get the most out of the technology at hand, including several video games.[104] All of the applications are freely available, and their source code was released as freeware in order to allow programmers and educators throughout Central and South America to create their own localized versions.[105] One of these games, *Sin Dientes* (*Toothless*, 2011) is a variation on the classic hangman word game, with the difference that incorrect guesses lead to the loss of one of the character's teeth (figure 3.23). Another, *Conozco Nicaragua* (*I Know Nicaragua*, 2011) is an interactive geography game in which players help an explorer find the pieces of a missing ship, discovering the country's different official departments,

Figure 3.22
Beisbolito (JCCE 2014)

rivers, and volcanoes in the process (figure 3.24). In Costa Rica, Nicaragua's neighbor to the south, independent firm Green Lava Studios was contracted by the Pan-American Health Organization to develop the health education game *Pueblo Pitanga: Enemigos Silenciosos* (*Pitanga Town: Silent Enemies*, 2013), a platformer along the lines of *Super Mario Bros.* featuring a protagonist named Fabio who is seeking clues to his sister Luisa's mysterious illness (figure 3.25). As these examples demonstrate, educational games represent a major trajectory in Latin American game design, due in large part to a mixture of support from local, national, and international agencies, entities in the private sector, and forward-thinking governmental administrations and ministries throughout the region.

Game development has also been fueled by the efforts of the private sector, with a corporate tie-ins creating unique opportunities for Latin American game designers in the fields of advergaming, work-for-hire, and outsourced game development. The advergaming and work-for-hire production models involve contractual design for a commercial client, which appeals to game developers seeking to take fewer risks by working on set contracts with predictable rates of return.[106] In addition to being approached by corporate clients, game developers can go looking for business themselves, as in the case of Honduran publisher OK Producciones,

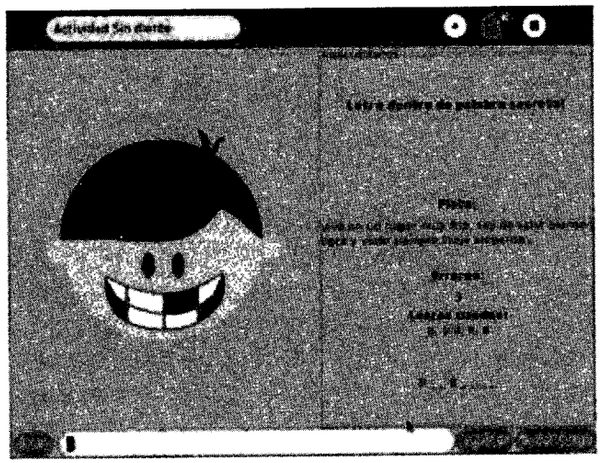

Figure 3.23
Sin Dientes (Fundación Zamora Terán 2011)

Figure 3.24
Conozco Nicaragua (Fundación Zamora Terán 2011)

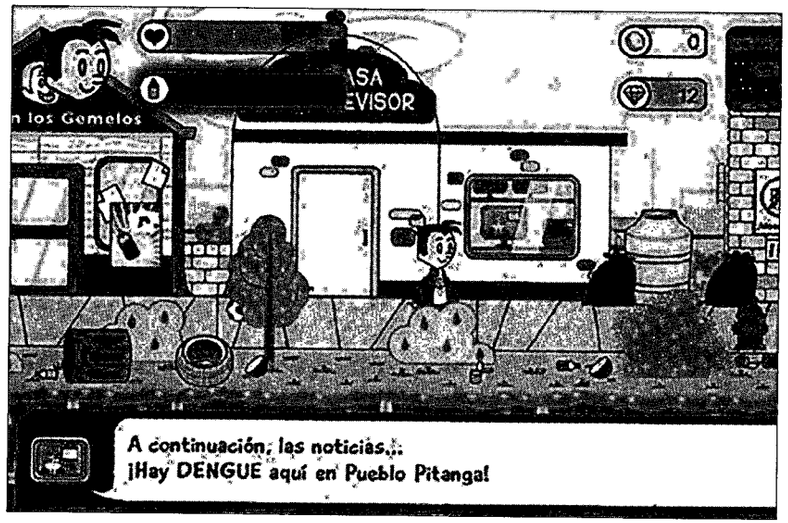

Figure 3.25
Pueblo Pitanga: Enemigos Silenciosos (Pan-American Health Organization 2013)

who contacted singer-songwriter sensation Polache with a proposal to make a game using him as the protagonist. The result was *Polache Land* (2014), an iOS app in which the singer travels through ten different Honduran settings, singing his hit songs and uttering custom-recorded dialogue in moments of success and failure.[107] Rather than a strict advergaming venture, *Polache Land* is probably better defined as work-for-hire.

The work-for-hire model, in which a game design company uses another company's intellectual property or game concept with the purpose of developing a game from that intellectual property,[108] is an increasingly common approach for Latin American developers seeking to establish stability and a strong track record. A paradigmatic example is *El Chavo Kart* (Televisa 2014), a kart racing game that uses characters (and the characteristic slapstick comedy tone) from the still-popular 1970s Mexican television series *El Chavo del Ocho* (figure 3.26). Colombian Efecto Studios was selected by the game's Mexican developer Slang to design *El Chavo Kart*, which was published by Televisa Home Entertainment in cooperation with Slang.[109] Other examples of work-for-hire from Latin America include games from Frasca's now-defunct commercial design studio Powerful Robot, such as *Legends of Ooo* (Cartoon Network 2012), a video game spinoff of Cartoon Network's *Adventure Time*, and *Cambiemos* (Frente Amplio 2004), which Frasca designed for the political campaign of the leftist coalition Frente Amplio. Paraguayan group Creadores, a two-year-old game design startup with a median worker age of twenty-three, uses a project-by-project business model designing products that can be sold

Figure 3.26
El Chavo Kart (Televisa 2014)

for anywhere from US$500 to US$15,000 depending on the game's complexity.[110] One recent work-for-hire project by Creadores was *Nick Wacky Racers 3D*, a 2013 online game they designed for the television network Nickelodeon.[111] Creadores' model borders on game design outsourcing, which Marisca refers to as the "Peripheral Services Model," that is, "companies providing piecemeal services supporting various stages of game development: motion capture and tracking, digital distribution platforms, platform support and services, cloud services, marketing and advertising, user acquisition, analytics and game data tracking, localisation, and so on."[112] This segment shows a great deal of promise for those working in related industries, or whose firms specialize in specific parts of the design, publication, and distribution process. For example, the Dominican company VAP Dominicana manufactures components of video games that can be exported by request to studios in the United States or Europe, where they are "assembled" into the final product.[113] Outsourcing and peripheral service businesses like VAP are popping up around Latin America, hoping to use their proximity to the United States as a strategic advantage over similar outsourcing efforts in countries like India and China.

In a sense, Latin American game design abroad is the other side of the outsourcing coin, with visionary work coming from designers who have emigrated in search of opportunities to produce their visions. Examples include *Guacamelee!*, a platform brawler that incorporates numerous elements of Mexican culture, which was initially conceived by Mexican animator Augusto "Cuxo" Quijano, a member of the Toronto-based design team at independent Drinkbox Studios[114] (figure 3.27). In this sense, *Guacamelee!* is (at least partially) a product of Latin American game design even though it was developed in Canada by an international team.

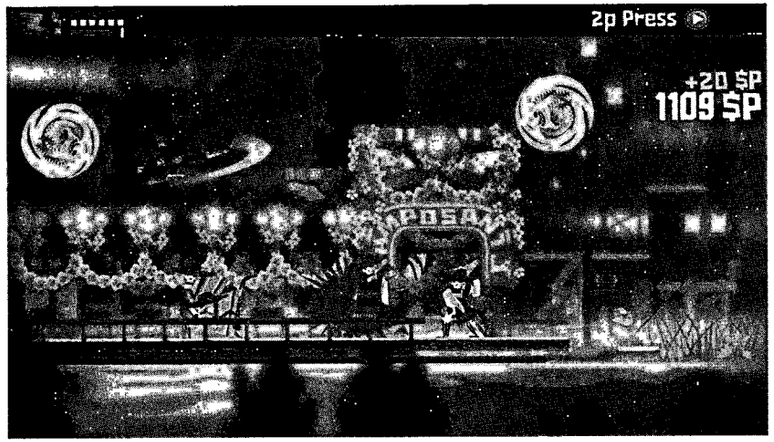

Figure 3.27
Guacamelee! (Drinkbox 2013)

Similarly, the fantasy adventure game *Papo & Yo* was developed by Colombian Vander Caballero after he founded Minority Media in Montreal. Quijano and Caballero are but two examples of the enormous number of Latin Americans working in every aspect of game design, production, and distribution today, as major creative centers draw a global talent pool to the game industry. Montreal, for example, is not only home to *Papo & Yo* developer Minority but also to studios of industry giants like Ubisoft, Electronic Arts, Eidos, and Warner Bros. Games, along with startups like Mistic Software, Quazal, and Kutoka Interactive. As David Grandadam, Patrick Cohendet, and Laurent Simon have observed, such an environment is attractive for game development on a multitude of levels: "The video game cluster in Montreal has proven to be one of the most creative clusters worldwide in this specific field," and the firms working in the cluster "have not only benefited from the presence of many organizations in their own sector, they also have nourished themselves from their exchanges with different actors and communities" among the city's more than five thousand video game industry employees.[115] Given the attraction of geographical epicenters of game development like Montreal and Silicon Valley, the trend of Latin American game design abroad is sure to grow in coming years.

However, Latin Americans are not only working in independent design firms in places like Montreal but also, and increasingly, in their own home countries. Independent games have grown considerably as a segment of game development in recent years, due to a number of factors, including growth in the segment of the casual game market and the consequent decline in the required levels of financing, team size, and time from concept to market.[116] In Latin America, the standard for independent game design has been set by the likes of Chile's

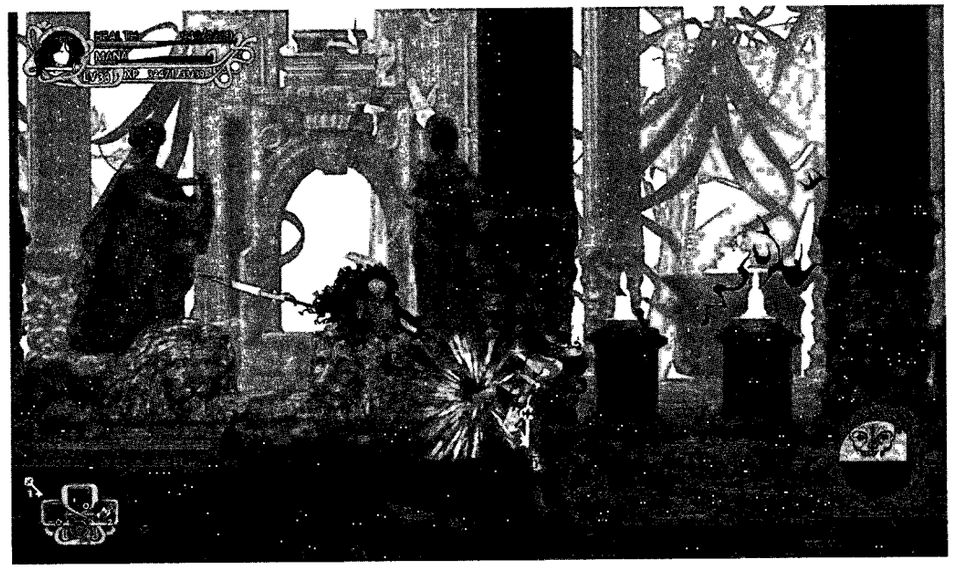

Figure 3.28
Abyss Odyssey (ACE Team 2014)

previously mentioned ACE Team, a Santiago-based firm that has produced four games to date for PS3, Xbox 360, and Windows: *Zeno Clash* (2009), a surreal first-person-melee combat game that established ACE Team's imaginative and unconventional style of game design; *Rock of Ages* (2011), which combines a Monty Python-esque medieval environment with the mechanics of *Super Monkey Ball* (Sega 2001); *Zeno Clash 2* (2013), the stylized follow-up to the previous combat hit; and *Abyss Odyssey* (2014), a sci-fi nightmare set in late nineteenth-century Santiago with a blend of mechanics including "a combination of procedurally-generated levels, 2D platforming, intricate combat systems and online, community-driven progression"[117] (figure 3.28). To varying degrees, ACE Team's games have met with considerable critical and commercial acclaim on the global games market, making them an emblem of what many Latin American game designers would like to become. Marisca refers to independent development as "the model most studios aspire to," noting that "[t]here's a fair share of romanticism attached to the idea of the indie: people who are able to get their own ideas out there, work on their own projects, and through sheer willpower and effort manage to produce a massively successful game that will be picked up and celebrated by their peers and thousands of players around the world."[118] In reality, though, working on an independent game based on original intellectual property is a highly risky venture, making it especially difficult to succeed in this segment of game development.

Mitigation of this inherent risk is yet another reason Latin American game developers are paying increased attention to the possibilities opened up by casual gaming. Juul observes that "[b]ecause of their smaller scope, casual games are generally cheaper to develop than the larger hardcore games that have driven the video game industry for so long," and the advent of casual games "shifts the perspective from technical graphical fidelity to more mundane questions such as: how does a game fit into the life of a player, and how much meaning can the game acquire from the context in which it is played?"[119] In Latin America, this means easier access for small designers to local, national, regional, and even global markets. And casual games are indeed booming, as demonstrated by *Mundo Gaturro* (*Gaturro's World*, Clawi 2010), a social game based on a popular Argentine feline comic character that is played by over ten million users.[120] Other independent designers seek to build such massive audiences through a variety of measures: Guatemalan developer OH! promoted its iOS and Android game *CocoMonkeys* (2012) by offering users a monthly chance to win an all-expense-paid trip to the Mayan ruins of Tikal in Guatemala, while using a free-to-play payment model in which users download the app for free, but must pay between US$.50 and US$2 per additional playable level in the game.

The wide variety of game development practices described in this section reflects the rapidly changing climate of the Latin American game industry today. There are Latin American designers pursuing independent development of AAA titles for global distribution both inside the region and abroad, but there are also a growing number of commercial and amateur game design trajectories that are diversifying the region's game design practices. Game developers are working with governmental entities, nongovernmental organizations, private sector investors, and multinational corporations to produce games and game elements that represent an increasingly broad range of production models. These trajectories demonstrate how a supportive environment for game development can produce substantial benefits over a relatively short timespan.

Conclusion: The Next Latin American Boom

As this chapter's introduction explains, the Latin American Boom in literature of the 1960s and 70s was the result of a convergence of a variety of individuals and factors, which included the high-quality novels of a number of talented authors as well as the contributions of literary agents, translators, publishers, academics, journals, literary prizes, and a regional spirit of solidarity brought on by the Cuban Revolution, not to mention the denunciations of the Boom's all-important detractors. Together, these forces created a sort of sociocultural and economic "perfect storm" that provided the ideal conditions for an explosion of cultural production.

Without a doubt, the conditions of Latin American cultural production in the 2010s differ considerably. Nevertheless I would argue that there is substantial evidence of a new confluence of factors promoting the Latin American game industry today, including a growing number of high-quality original games from talented Latin American designers as well as the contributions of incubation and accelerator programs, game jams and design competitions, industry events, development of higher-education programs in game-related fields, an active modding community, and explosive regional growth in casual game development. Together, these factors add up to lay the essential groundwork for a new Latin American Boom in game design and development over the course of the 2010s and 20s.

However, this boom cannot flourish without the continuation and expansion of cultural policy and other initiatives backing Latin American game development. Progressive governmental agencies and individuals are providing models for support throughout the region. The Uruguayan government funded the development of games like *1811* and *D.E.D.* through Ingenio, a state-controlled incubator for startups, while progressive immigration laws assist in attracting talent and investment from abroad, all of which has helped to make the country Latin America's leader for per-capita software exports.[121] The previously mentioned Domaginarium game *Enola* was sponsored by the Salvadoran Ministry of the Economy's Productive Development Fund (Fondepro), which awarded over a quarter-million dollars to seventeen game-related business and design startups in 2013.[122] Colombia's Ministry of Information and Communication Technologies, meanwhile, has instated the Vive Digital plan, "a cross-sector, four-year push to increase Internet adoption and promote the creation of technology-based ventures across the country," which includes "Apps.co, a roving technology development effort designed to support people in coming up with ideas and projects around new technologies, offering different resources and levels of support based on how mature the idea is and what skills the potential entrepreneur has," and the Ministry "has also set up a different partnership with ProExport Colombia (Colombia's export promotion agency) to support the promotion of Colombian game developers at international venues, such as the Game Development Conference (GDC) in San Francisco," covering 50 percent of the costs for attendance at this notoriously pricey but essential industry event, as well as offering assistance in planning and negotiation.[123] Kaxan Media Group, the Guadalajara, Mexico-based creators of the popular iOS and Android app *Taco Master* (Chillingo 2011), developed their game with the support of MexicoFIRST, a program created through a combination of government support and private initiative aimed at increasing Mexico's presence in the information technology field.[124] Honduran firm Oxen Films has received support from the government program known as Honduras Convive! for the development of a series of video game design workshops for at-risk youth, in which attendees participate in courses on narrative, acting, drawing, photography, and video production, allowing them to awaken their creativity and learn a new and valuable skill set.[125]

These and other trailblazing efforts by administrations throughout the region are paving the way for further expansion in regional game development.

Everywhere you look in Latin America today, there is evidence of explosive growth in the game industry and expanding efforts to harness its creative and commercial potential. This eruption is no mistake, but rather is the result of conscious efforts taken by governmental and nongovernmental agencies, multinational game companies, organizers of industry events and design competitions, institutions of higher education, modding communities, and game developers working at all levels of production throughout the region. What's more, these factors are combining amid the shifts in the global geography of the game industry that have accompanied the advent of casual games in recent years, opening up the game market to smaller designers with more modest projects and budgets, and yet offering the potential to make profits on a proportionately higher scale relative to conventional AAA game development. These factors are not just setting the stage—they have already begun to produce tangible results, evidenced time and again in the cases reviewed in this chapter. In light of this evidence, it is safe to say that the next Latin American Boom isn't coming soon: it's already here.

II HOW GAMES USE CULTURE