CULTURAL CODE

Video Games and Latin America

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game controversy to date within the region, resulting in a wide-reaching 2011 Venezuelan censorship law that banned scores of video games from circulation in the country.

The specific controversies examined in this chapter have arisen in part because of the well-evidenced tendency on the part of designers of video games (and military-themed games in particular) to use storylines set in contemporary and historical geopolitical hotspots—including Revolution-era Cuba, contemporary socialist Venezuela, and drug war-afflicted Mexico. Matthew Thomas Payne has observed that games frequently feature "combat that unfolds in authentic theaters of war, both historic and those 'ripped from today's headlines,'" which is one way game designers create a compelling context for confrontation.[7] When these headlines center on sensitive political issues, they naturally touch on raw nerves among certain segments of the Latin American public and political spheres. But in each of the cases examined here, it can be seen that games are used rhetorically by public figures pursuing their own political agendas—that is, as the technological scapegoats of moralistic and ideological discourse—in a manner unrelated to the meaning these games generate through gameplay. The specific types of erasures and distortions necessary to make games politically expedient are revelatory of the underlying ideologies of those that employ them as political commodities.

Video Games and Political Controversy in Latin America

Political controversies have arisen around games in a number of different circumstances throughout Latin America, with telling similarities and differences in legislators' responses to games in each case. For Mexico, ludic representation is certainly nothing new, since early titles like the 1982 computer games *Aztec* (Datamost) and *The Mask of the Sun*, or the 1984 Atari games *Montezuma's Revenge* (Parker Brothers) and *Quest for Quintana Roo* incorporated the iconography of the Maya and Aztec cultures into their digital environments, formulating what would be one of the most enduring tropes of Latin American culture in the realm of electronic games. It probably wasn't until the Super Nintendo/Sega Genesis title *Urban Strike* (EA 1994) that Mexico was rendered in a video game not as a setting steeped in ancient culture, but as a modern society, albeit strictly as the backdrop to a military airstrike by helicopter (figure 2.1). *Urban Strike*, the third game in EA's helicopter shoot-'em-up *Strike* series following *Desert Strike: Return to the Gulf* (1992) and *Jungle Strike* (1993), was set in a then-futuristic 2001. The game's Mexico mission, set among the military barracks of an army fortress and a nearby town, is replete with architecture that signifies Mexican culture through colonial adobe structures with red tile roofs, and at the same time stands out as an advance in game mechanics, since the player can use the helicopter's weapons to destroy the architectural structures in the game. The responsiveness of its environment set *Urban Strike* apart from the earlier titles in the series, and at the

Figure 2.1
Urban Strike (EA 1994)

same time paved the way for a new Mexican cultural trope in video games, that of the unstable neighbor to the south of the United States in a dystopian futuristic military scenario.

Video game representations of Mexico as a setting for military intervention have surged in recent years, occasionally igniting controversy within Mexican politics. The day after the release of *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter 2* (Ubisoft 2007), mayor Héctor Murguía of Ciudad Juárez asked legislators to block its sale, calling the game despicable, xenophobic, and harmful to children.[8] Similar controversy arose surrounding the release of Ubisoft's *Call of Juarez: The Cartel* in 2011, when the state legislature of Chihuahua unanimously approved an official request for the game to be banned nationwide.[9] On one hand, it is understandable that local legislators would object to games in which their people are characterized as criminals and cannon fodder more often than not. On the other hand, this is video game exceptionalism in political practice. Other forms of media, like film, television, and literature have long depicted the hardships of human existence, including gritty realism torn from the news stories of their times. Likewise, there are established traditions in the representation of the drug war in Mexican cultural production, from the *narcoliteratura* of writers like Élmer Mendoza, to the *narcocorridos* of bands like Los Tigres del Norte or Los Buitres de Sinaloa, to recent films like *El infierno* (Luis Estrada 2010), *Miss Bala* (Gerardo Naranjo 2011), and *Saving Private Pérez* (Beto

Gómez 2011). What is it, then, that makes games like this so particularly notable, and objectionable, to politicians?

Call of Juarez: The Cartel was developed by the Polish firm Techland and published by Ubisoft, the Montreal-based software giant. It is the third game in the series, after the original *Call of Juarez* (Ubisoft 2006) and its prequel, *Call of Juarez: Bound in Blood* (Ubisoft 2009). Unlike the previous titles in the series and the latest entry, *Call of Juarez: Gunslinger* (Ubisoft 2013), all of which are first-person shooter (FPS) games set in the Old West, *The Cartel* took on the setting of the contemporary US-Mexico border in the midst of an expanding drug war. There is no shortage of evidence in the game to support claims that it is xenophobic—despite its ostensible focus on "The Cartel," characters of Mexican origin play only tangential and one-dimensional roles in the game. As the playable team of US authorities fights largely on their own country's territory against the encroaching violence of a politically connected cartel, the team members gun down countless Mexican affiliates, all of whom respond with redundant and basic expletive phrases in Spanish: "¡Puta madre!," "¡Puta!," "¡Hijo de puta!," "¡Chinga tu madre!" In the game's subtitles, nameless characters are merely referred to as "Mexican," as in this exchange: "Mexican: I hate it down here, it smells all funky and shit." "[Another] Mexican: Are you sure that's not you?" And while the playable protagonist Eddie Guerra is one of relatively few Latino protagonists in the history of video games, his cultural depth does not go far beyond his biographical background in East LA or the inflection of his dialogue with the occasional "*ese*" or Spanglish phrase: "The enemy of my enemy is my *carnal*."

There are, however, elements of contemporary reality in the game that contribute to a unique portrayal of border geography and culture in the present day, particularly the ways *Call of Juarez: The Cartel* simulates border militarization. Throughout the game, US government officials push for a frontal military invasion of Mexico, citing increasing threats to national security. Through Fox News-like cable news reports that play during the cutscenes between missions, we hear the perspective of the politicians that inhabit this particular gamespace. Early on, we learn that Attorney General Joseph B. Reynolds is weighing military action in Mexico: "We will seize their drugs, freeze their assets, and hang 'em high like the outlaws they are! This is war! We have declared war on the Mendoza cartel!" His perspective is amplified by archconservative senatorial candidate Ron Lindsay, who in a Glenn Beck-like bluster calls for the United States to go beyond prosecuting criminals in its territory and to actually enact a full-scale military invasion of its southern neighbor. This fictitious militarization has real-world roots: at least as far back as 1999, Claire F. Fox was already referring to the government's "stepped-up presentation of the US-Mexico border region as a 'staging area' for 'war games.'"[10] In the present day, the US government is using "the philosophy of 'low-intensity wars'"[11] by patrolling the border with drone aircraft and generating an increased presence along what Fernando Romero/Lar has called the "Hyperborder." Romero/Lar notes that in 2008 there were

more American Border Patrol agents than there were American soldiers in Afghanistan,[12] leaving little doubt as to the reality of border militarization today.

Games like *Call of Juarez: The Cartel* create speculative fiction by incorporating details of actual geopolitical conflicts, using topical poignancy to generate interest in their games. From its title to its pre-release announcements calling the drug cartels "the new outlaws" and running the slogan, "Welcome to the new wild west," it would appear that the marketers of *Call of Juarez: The Cartel* sought to raise public ire, generating some sales in the process.[13] If so, they ultimately succeeded in the former, but failed at the latter. The shift from the Old West to Mexico's contemporary drug war put the game in countless headlines prior to its release. A general shock permeated reports that noted that in the year prior to the games release, some six thousand people had been killed in drug-related violence in Ciudad Juárez.[14] Others celebrated the advent of such controversy, saying, "[b]ring on the virtual violence. Maybe then we'll pay attention to the real thing."[15] As noted earlier, Mexican congressional representatives called upon the country's Department of the Interior to ban the game altogether from circulation in Mexico. But in spite of its pre-release attention, it quickly flailed once it was on the market, racking up an aggregate rating of 45/100 from gaming site Metacritic. It ultimately sold around half a million copies in an expanding market in which successful video game titles measure their sales in tens of millions.[16] In this sense, *Call of Juarez: The Cartel* is most of all an example of how the political significance of some games can be disproportionate to their actual social or economic impact.

Mercenaries 2: World in Flames is comparable in this sense—while it was a moderately successful release for its publisher EA, selling just over two million console and PC copies worldwide, its impact within the political arena came to outweigh its significance as a playable game, particularly with regard to Latin America. This is due to opposition to the game from one of the most polarizing political figures of the early twenty-first century, Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez, who held office from 1998 until he succumbed to cancer in 2013. Chávez took issue with the representation of Venezuela, and in particular of its socialist leadership, in a game designed by California-based Pandemic Studios, who had also developed the previous game *Mercenaries: Playground of Destruction* (LucasArts 2005). *Mercenaries 2* situates the player as a Swedish soldier of fortune named Mattias Nilsson (voiced by actor Peter Stormare) at war in a fictionalized Venezuela whose government has recently been toppled by a military coup that installs fictional politician Ramón Solano as the civilian leader of the new government (figure 2.2). Solano pontificates on the need to nationalize the nation's petroleum reserves while in reality pursuing his own economic gains, sparking violent conflicts between different sectors within the game, including a CIA-funded mercenary force, the private security agency of Universal Petroleum (the foreign-owned company looking to maintain its stake in the country's oil in spite of the coup), and the guerrilla organization known as the People's Liberation Army

Figure 2.2
Mercenaries 2: World in Flames (EA 2008)

of Venezuela. These factions do battle in what is doubtlessly the most thorough rendering of Venezuela's geography in video game form to date, including the cities of Caracas, Maracaibo, Mérida, Cumaná, and Guanare, the areas of Amazonas and Isla Margarita, and several unspecified locales in the Venezuelan countryside. Overall, the game's tone is reminiscent of a satirical and ironic comic book in which nothing is taken too seriously and political metaphors are mixed without any consistent narrative thread that would indicate a sustained commentary on real-world affairs. However, little time passed before this game—despite a relative lack of success in terms of sales and critical reception—produced major effects in the real world.

Sensing critical overtones in the game's depiction of national politics, members of Chávez's Patria Para Todos (PPT) party began to denounce the game publicly as a threat to national security, characterizing its designers as "doing the work of Washington in order to drum up support from Americans for an eventual operation to overthrow Chávez."[17] Before long, president Chávez himself took up the subject, offering his evaluation of the game on his weekly "Aló Presidente" television program: "What about those games they call PlayStation. ... Poison! There are even games about killing, that teach you to kill, kill, kill. Once they even made one with my own face. Yes, that's right, you had to kill Chávez, seek out Chávez to kill him, bombarding cities, dropping bombs. A PlayStation. What's that? Ah, it's capitalism! Planting the seeds of violence in order to sell more weapons."[18]

Chávez's characterization of the game's plot was widely accepted and used as evidence by politicians and journalists alike, though in actuality, Chávez is never mentioned in *Mercenaries 2*.[19] This did not stop legislators from condemning video games at large as teaching children to be violent, and before long they found success in their political maneuvering, approving in December 2009 new legislation titled the "Law for the Prohibition of Bellicose Video Games and Bellicose Toys," which makes it a legal requirement for each and every video game sold in Venezuela to "promote respect for life, creativity, healthy entertainment, camaraderie, loyalty, teamwork, respect for the law, comprehension, tolerance, understanding between people and the spirit of peace and brotherhood," in addition to assigning fines of more than US$100,000[20] and mandating a three-to-five year prison sentence to any individual importing, manufacturing, selling, or renting games that fail to meet these requirements.[21] Moreover, "Article 8: Destruction" stipulates that the Venezuelan government is responsible for destroying the offending materials, a task that was then carried out as a public spectacle by operatives who literally steamrolled controversial toys and video games (figure 2.3). Within a short time, the Venezuelan model was duplicated elsewhere: Panamanian politicians proposed their own "Law prohibiting bellicose or violent games and toys" in 2011[22] and Chile drafted legislation placing legal restrictions on the circulation of violent video games in 2014.[23] Venezuelan game designers complain the law has crippled the national industry at a time when many other Latin American administrations are looking to enhance their countries' game production.[24] By politically distorting the dimensions of a game that one Venezuelan writer has ironically

Figure 2.3
Venezuelan officials steamroll "bellicose games and toys," June 2010

labeled "the most controversial video game that no one ever played,"[25] all while characterizing the game's intended audience as juvenile and its political implications as transparent, Chávez and his supporters succeeded in legislating far-reaching censorship that eliminates creative freedoms in the country under the guise of confronting capitalist imperialism.

But how did *Mercenaries 2* really depict Venezuela? To begin with, this was not the first (nor is it likely to be the last) representation of Venezuela to appear in video game form: over the course of the early 2000s a kind of fictionalized representation of Chávez's Venezuela was practically a trope among military games. The plot of *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six 3: Raven Shield* (Ubisoft 2003) revolves around a covert operation by the US government to assassinate the fictitious Venezuelan president Juan Crespo after he attempts to create an international oil crisis and benefit from it by jacking up prices to the United States. The futuristic tactical role-playing game *Front Mission 4* (Square Enix 2004), set in 2096, involves an allied international invasion of Venezuela after its rogue leader breaks away from the international diplomatic organization known as the United States of the New Continent (USN). Just six months before the release of the controversial *Mercenaries 2* came *Conflict: Denied Ops* (Eidos 2008), which revolves around a CIA operation to take out the fictional regime of General Ramirez, a petroleum-nationalizing maverick seeking to take control of the country after internal divisions have left it polarized and embattled. To greater or lesser extremes, all of these games create a fictional rendering of certain tendencies of the Chávez administration as well as the interventionist pretensions of the United States. So why did *Mercenaries 2* garner special attention from the regime?

Like the other military-themed games discussed in this chapter, *Mercenaries 2* attempts to create a sense of realism by including references to real-world political circumstances, albeit through the lenses of fictionalization and parody. Pandemic Studios, the creators of the game, have stated that they "always want to have a rip from the headlines" and that they focus specifically on geopolitical situations where "a conflict doesn't necessarily have to be happening, [but] it's realistic enough to believe it could eventually happen."[26] Matthew Colville, the lead writer for *Mercenaries 2*, explains in an interview with Venezuelan journalist Gregory David Escobar that when the design team heard of the denunciations of the game as propaganda, "we never thought anyone in Venezuela could take that seriously," asserting that the decision to set the game in Venezuela was made for creative and artistic reasons.[27] On the one hand, there are elements of this fictitious environment that seem to match up with real-life Venezuela under Chávez: for example, Solano is a vociferous leader who seeks to use Venezuela's oil reserves as the basis for making the country into a "South American super power," while pro-Solano pedestrians shout out, "¡Viva Solano! ¡He is Bolívar reborn!," referencing not only the enduring legacy of Venezuelan national hero Simón Bolívar but also Chávez's self-fashioning as the leader of a new movement that took the Liberator's name, his Bolivarian revolution. On the

other hand, the game is clearly a parody, with a tone closer to a Hollywood action movie than a realist documentary. Indeed, for those who have played *Mercenaries 2*, it is difficult to imagine it being seriously characterized as a "justification of imperialist aggression,"[28] much less part of a "campaign of psychological terror,"[29] in the words of two different Venezuelan congressional representatives. It would be much easier, in fact, to substantiate the opposite reading: the game is not an endorsement but a critique of US interventionism.

For one thing, the player of *Mercenaries 2* is not in fact playing a game of US intervention: on the contrary, as the title indicates, the protagonist belongs to a force of mercenaries for hire. Indeed, not one of them is American: Nilsson is Swedish, his main radio dispatcher is Australian, his helicopter pilot Ewan is Irish, the mechanic Eva Navarro is Venezuelan, and the jet pilot is an inebriated Russian. The player fights for all (fictitious) sides in this struggle as well—the first missions support Universal Petroleum, but quickly give way to jobs for the People's Liberation Army of Venezuela and other factions. There are also numerous indications of the game's critical stance toward the neo-imperialist efforts of the international governments and corporations portrayed in the game. First, there is the actual written information provided to the player—for example, Universal Petroleum, the game's version of a Texas-based multinational oil giant, is described as having "made a deal with the Venezuelan Government 50 years ago. In the decades since, U.P. made billons of dollars from the arrangement." If this wasn't plain enough, late in the story the CEO of Universal Petroleum directly tells the player, as the mercenary Nilsson, that the corporation has "been screwing the Venezuelans out of their oil." US imperialism, corporate greed, and disrespect for Venezuela are not the hidden truths of this game, but rather the superficially evident elements of its parodic framework.

However, nobody in the Chávez administration seemed especially interested in examining how *Mercenaries 2* worked on a ludic level—it was more politically efficacious to use the game in other ways. But when Chávez denounced the game for devaluing Venezuelan lives, he failed to note that the game in fact does place a value on those lives: they are worth $5,000 apiece. At first blush, this reduction of a human life to a monetary value may seem absurd and dehumanizing. But understood within a ludic system of logic, this $5,000-per-life price tag actually has a profound functional impact on the meaning of human life in the game. To comprehend this, we must take into account that *Mercenaries 2* is essentially a "skinned" version of the open-world genre defined by the *Grand Theft Auto* (*GTA*) series.[30] This means that *Mercenaries 2* and *GTA* not only share their genre and basic scenario (both are open world third-person shooters in which the player can hijack vehicles and take on missions to make money) but also their fundamental game mechanics, including the manner in which missions are presented to the player as multiple tangentially interrelated options within an expansive and responsive world, as well as elements such as the health meter, damage to vehicles, and transportation physics.

Given its provenance in the genre defined by *Grand Theft Auto*, there is an important departure from generic convention in *Mercenaries 2* that Chávez failed to take into account. In the *GTA* games, players receive no monetary penalty for running down or shooting pedestrians unless they are caught by the police doing so—on the contrary, most of their victims will leave behind some money to award their aggression, meaning that NPC murder is a profitable enterprise in the *GTA* universe. In *Mercenaries 2*, on the other hand, protection of the population is incentivized early on when rebel leader Marcela Acosta offers "a big bonus not to injure any civilians," after which the player is fined for each civilian casualty incurred. By imposing a significant monetary penalty on players who show wanton disregard for the lives of the game's NPCs, *Mercenaries 2* actually forces the player to veer from the norm for this genre, and into a less sociopathic relationship to the game's NPCs by design. From a game-literate perspective, then, Venezuelan lives are actually worth much more in *Mercenaries 2* than a veteran gamer might expect. This is one of many indications that what games mean for political discourse is frequently quite the opposite of what they mean for their players.

Chávez was by no means the only national leader in Latin America to take on the video game industry in recent years. Former Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega, who remains in prison for human rights violations, attracted headlines when he sued Activision, the publisher of the 2012 game *Call of Duty: Black Ops II*, alleging that they illegally used his image and likeness in a defamatory manner.[31] Though the case was dismissed, it is evidence of the increasing relevance and immediacy of video games, for gamers and politicians alike. Noriega's case, which dealt with a Latin American head of state who was also a known political enemy of the United States suing the publishers of *Call of Duty*, had echoes of another major political controversy, this one surrounding the depiction of Cuban leader Fidel Castro in Activision's 2010 release *Call of Duty: Black Ops*.

Like so many geopolitical hot spots, Cuba has a relatively lengthy history of representation in video games. Prior to its appearance in *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, the era of the Cuban Revolution has served as the backdrop of games since the arcade action shooter *Guerrilla War* (SNK 1987), whose original Japanese title was *Guevara*, and which followed the exploits of Ernesto "Che" Guevara and the forces of the Cuban Revolution as they proceed to overthrow dictator Fulgencio Batista. For the North American release of this Japanese title, the name was changed, the dictator and island setting made generic, and the protagonist of Guevara swapped for a US soldier. The Cuban Revolution also provided the setting for games such as the real-time strategy PC game *Cuban Missile Crisis: The Aftermath* (G5 Software 2005) and the open-world action-adventure adaptation of *The Godfather II* (EA 2009). Post-revolutionary Cuba is also a favored setting for games portraying US interventions, international intrusions, and criminal activity, including flight simulator *A-10 Cuba!* (Activision 1996), hit Nintendo 64 James Bond adaptation *Goldeneye 007* (Nintendo 1997), real-time strategy titles *Command & Conquer: Red Alert 2* and *3* (EA Games

2000, 2008), action driving game *Driver 2: Back on the Streets* (Infogrames 2000), the *Island Thunder* expansion pack for the tactical shooter *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon* (Ubisoft 2002),[32] and the PC real-time strategy game *Act of War: High Treason* (Atari 2006). Along with ancient Mexico, the Spanish colonies, and the Amazon jungle, revolutionary and post-revolutionary Cuba represents one of the most frequent scenarios for the portrayal of Latin American culture in video games.

So what was it that made *Black Ops* unique? For one, unlike some of the controversial games discussed in this chapter, it was a widely played international success. While *Call of Juarez: The Cartel* sold around half a million copies and *Mercenaries 2: World in Flames* topped out at just over two million, *Call of Duty: Black Ops* set a new global record for the most successful release of a media product in history, and has sold more than thirty million copies worldwide to date. Noting the game's broad dissemination and appeal, the Cuban government interpreted *Black Ops* as an attack on national sovereignty, declaring on the state website Cubadebate that "[w]hat the US government was unable to achieve for more than 50 years, it is now trying to reach through virtual means," by requiring players to assassinate Fidel Castro in a game that is "without a doubt, entertainment for psychopaths."[33] While questioning the mental stability of the millions of global players of *Black Ops* might overstep the bounds of reason, in this case the government gets the facts right, at least in part: the objective of very first mission in *Black Ops* is indeed to "Find and kill Castro," an operation that the player attempts to carry out against the backdrop of the US-supported 1961 Bay of Pigs Invasion. In the mission, the player, in the role of a soldier named Woods, and his partner Mason enter the innermost rooms of the Castro compound, where a *Matrix*-like slow-motion effect kicks in, a final handful of soldiers are killed, and the protagonists proceed into the final bedroom (Woods: "Ready to make history?"), where Fidel Castro is located with a scantily clad female companion. He uses her as a human shield, but Mason fires a single bullet, which spurs an "angels singing" effect and more slow-motion, for a gruesome and graphic close up of Castro apparently getting assassinated by a bullet through the head. Woods (and thus the player) goes on to realize that it was a setup, that Castro knew of the plan and the individual assassinated was actually a stand-in, and we see the "real" Fidel handing the agent over to a military officer, saying (in English), "Do with him what you wish, general. He is my gift to you, in honor of our new relationship. Just ... make sure that he suffers." This cues cutscene footage of the real-life Fidel Castro and Nikita Khrushchev and newsreel film of a summit between Cuba and the Soviet Union, as Mason is taken to a Soviet internment camp.

This is the basic thrust of the *Black Ops* storyline relating to the Cuban government, however Cuban culture is in fact much more richly represented through gameplay than in this narrative reduction. At least as many players spend their time playing *Call of Duty* online multiplayer mode as they do playing the offline story mode,[34] and this is significant because four of the fourteen multiplayer maps in *Black Ops* are situated in Cuba (Crisis, Villa, Firing Range, and Havana) meaning that more than 25 percent of the time that many players spend in the

game is time spent in a virtual Cuba. There is also a playable Cuban military faction known as "Tropas" and a force of Cuban military contractors known as "OP-40," all of whom speak in untranslated Spanish in the game: "¡Tirando granada!," "¡Explosivo fuera!," "¡Cambiando cargador!," "¡Muerto confirmado!," "¡Enemigo a la vista!," "¡El blanco cayó!," "¡Cúbreme, que estoy recargando!," "¡Me han pegado!," "¡Tirando explosivos!," "¡Coño!," "¡Médico!," "¡Contacto!," "¡Enemigo!," and so on. Many of these phrases are divided into interchangeable groups (for example, "¡Cayó el enemigo!" and "¡Muerto confirmado!," both of which confirm an enemy fatality)—if the player watches the replay of her death immediately following her demise, the character killing her will not repeat the same phrase he said originally, but the next phrase in line for that function. The portrayal of Cuban culture in *Black Ops* pertains to the particularities of *Call of Duty* as a semiotic system, including linguistic as well as audiovisual signs that lead the player to reach several conclusions regarding Cuban culture: (1) Cuba is a revolutionary state, (2) prior to the Revolution Cuba was a decadent tourist playground, (3) Cuba was central to the Cold War confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, and (4) Cuba is defined by its tropical ecology, topography, and cultural production. Each of these messages provides potentially meaningful insights into Cuba's history and national identity, however, the Cuban government paid no attention to these procedural and semiotic representations of culture in its condemnation of *Black Ops* according to essentially narrative criteria.

It is understandable that games portraying the attempted assassination of Cuba's real-life leadership, requiring the overthrow of a fictionalized Venezuelan socialist leader, or trivializing the very real violence sweeping across Mexico today would raise the ire of politicians in these respective nations. Ethics do not disappear altogether within the game world, though they are contextualized differently. As Sicart asserts in *The Ethics of Computer Games*, "[e]mptying games of ethical reflection in their design and using unethical content for its shock value as a marketing resource means not only devaluing the possibilities of games as a means of expression, but also making products that are unethical objects."[35] Some of the content in the games at the heart of the political controversies discussed here is indeed ethically questionable, though it is important to remember that just how exactly ethics operate in these games is very much a question, rather than a foregone and transparent conclusion. The simplifications and distortions required to condemn these games in the press and to pass legislation censoring them show how video games are commodified in the political sphere, being utilized for political saber rattling rather than understood as unique cultural products with their own systems of signification.

Perhaps this is why the 2013 game *Gesta Final* (*Final Feat*), published by Cuba's Joven Club de Computación y Electrónica (JCCE, Youth Computation and Electronics Club), a computer science initiative supported by the national Ministry of Communications, is so groundbreaking

Figure 2.4
Gesta Final (JCCE 2014)

(figure 2.4). In *Gesta Final* the player embodies one of several unnamed bearded revolutionaries and, according to the JCCE's leadership, allows them to identify with the history of the Cuban Revolution.[36] Players of the first-person shooter act as members of the eighty-two-soldier contingent that disembarked from the yacht *Granma* and whose surviving members ultimately defeated the Batista regime, passing through five major in-game battles along the way: "El Desembarco" ("The Debarkation"), "Bautismo de Fuego" ("Baptism by Fire"), "La Plata," "El Uvero," and "Pino del Agua II" (all three names of locations of actual battles in the revolution).[37] JCCE spokesperson Haylin Corujo clarifies that the game was not designed as a direct response to the controversy stirred up by *Black Ops II*'s portrayal of Cuba, explaining, "We aren't responding to any other game. What's important for us is for young people to learn while playing."[38] Regardless, *Gesta Final* represents a truly novel approach: instead of simply rejecting games as the tools of capitalism that use violence to poison the minds of the youth á la Chávez, the government supported the development of a violent video game that also happens to teach the values of the Cuban Revolution.

In other words, rather than condemn or attempt to ban video games based on their violence or alleged imperialist bias, the makers of *Gesta Final* sought to produce the type of game that they think *should* be played about the Cuban Revolution. This exemplifies the potential for

Latin American game designers to take control of the ludic message on their own cultures and national histories. Controversies surrounding video games continue to be politically productive, and therefore their reductive but persuasive use by public figures is bound to continue. But meanwhile today's game designers, critics, and players are looking beyond this trivializing realm of political posturing and poisonous PlayStations, using games not only for entertainment but also as a means of confronting ideological issues through gameplay.

Persuasive Game Design in Latin America

Discussions of "persuasion" in game studies refer more often than not to a trajectory in game design that focuses on challenging the player intellectually or ideologically through gameplay, rather than simply providing recreation. The use of game design toward persuasive ends enjoys a long history both in Latin America and globally, even if in general, as Bogost notes, the rhetorical power of games "has gone untapped because the market has focused primarily on entertaining players, rather than engaging them in important topics."[39] Looking at the industry as a whole, it is hard to argue with this point. However, there are of course other possible uses for the tools that the industry has created, a fact that independent designers have long exploited toward unconventional ends. As García Canclini observes, "[t]he exercise of citizenship has always been associated with the capacity to appropriate commodities and with ways of using them," and for years Latin American game designers have been using the video game medium in unexpected and unconventional ways.[40] Many such games are technically modest by comparison to the mass-market AAA titles discussed earlier in this chapter, their designers opting for small-scale web games, interactive narratives, and playable Flash animation projects that use simple design mechanics to create ideologically compelling experiences through gameplay.

Designing ethically challenging games means creating a friction that causes the player to question the causes and effects of the actions undertaken in the game world. Sicart argues that for ethically transformative gameplay to be possible, "there has to be a contradiction between what to do in terms of gameplay, and the meaning and impact of those actions, both within the gameworld and in a larger cultural setting."[41] Moreover, the types of ethically challenging actions included in games will not necessarily be more effective if they are "cleaned up" or rid of the gruesome details of the violent acts they contain: "If anything, ethical gameplay should *increase* cognitive friction, forcing a split between the actions of the reactive agent and their interpretation by the reflective agent."[42] Sicart draws upon Bogost's notion of *procedural rhetoric*, defined as "the practice of persuading through processes in general and computational processes in particular," or "a technique for making arguments with computational systems