Developing Game Worlds:
Gaming, Technology, and Innovation in Peru

by

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the game development process.

The issues at stake in borderland games can be driven to various levels of resolution or stability. In order to explore them, it'll be helpful for us to pay a closer look at what these cultural commodities are actually doing — to look closely at what some examples of borderland games look like, what they simulate, and what they represent, in order to better understand both the challenges and opportunities to promoting them.

4.3 Games as Sites of Cultural Negotiation

While I was in Lima, I heard about a lot of game projects and had the opportunity to play through a handful of prototypes. Some of these prototypes were eventually released to the public, and following the narrative arcs of these games' development processes was in itself fascinating. Out of these, there were several games that would qualify under the category of culturally-themed games, and I want to pay some closer attention to a small sample of them.[4] I want to quickly do an overview of three Peruvian games developed and released within the last year: *Palomilla Hunter*, by The Boneless; *Inka Madness*, by Pariwana Studios; and *Kilka Card Gods*, by Bamtang Games. I also want to contrast the analysis of this small sample with a quick look at *Guacamelee!*, by Toronto-based Drinkbox Studios — a game which, in my opinion, is highly effective and successful at creatively appropriating cultural narratives and elements.

Palomilla Hunter

Released in 2013, *Palomilla Hunter* was one of the first projects by The Boneless, released originally for Newgrounds, an online Flash game portal, and later receiving a sponsorship from Monkey Games World and being included in their own game portal.

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[4]A note about my sampling criteria: these are not, by any means, all the culturally-themed games I ran into, and these are not necessarily the most representative ones. This sample is made up of games that I just happened to hear more about during my time in Lima. It should not be taken as comprehensive, but merely as an illustration.

Figure 4-7: Screenshot of *Palomilla Hunter.* Copyright by The Boneless.

The game is inspired by real-world news events of a group of teenagers that vandalised ancestral ruins in Peru a few years ago, recording the whole stunt on their mobile phones and later uploading the video to YouTube. News of the stunt were widely circulated and received universal censure from the public, and when brainstorming ideas about their early projects, the team at The Boneless thought this would be a fun concept to explore. The game presents the player with a series of caricature versions of historical sites and ruins — not any one in particular, but generic depictions such as sand and clay constructions with depictions of myths in the middle of the desert — that are under attack by a bunch of mischievous child demons that because of their trickery have managed to escape from the underworld. The demons run into the player's view and stop to nibble at the ruins, at which time the player can click on them to shoot them and make them disappear. If the player takes too long, the demons progressively nibble out all of the ruins and hurt the players health, and as levels progress, more and more incoming waves of various sorts of demons arrive in increasing number and speed.

At the top of the screen, the sun god, Inti, watches over everything going on

below. Players can use their special power by hitting the right key and summoning the sun god to eliminate all demons on the screen, but they need to wait for their special power to recharge before doing it again. The more the ruins get destroyed, the sun god's expression changes from smiling to sad.

There's no specific historical accuracy to the game — the ruins depicted are not those of any specific historical site or traditional culture, but the design style clearly conveys the fact that these are historical ruins. The game's not heavy-handed nor does it intend to conceal or convey any ulterior message on cultural responsibility — as the team at The Boneless told me, they were just thinking it would be a fun game to play and give people the opportunity to express their anger over the news of the ruins being damaged. But the game still does a very interesting thing: it spins a playful side on the whole issue, and whether intending to do so or not, puts the player in the position of having to defend cultural and historical heritage without dwelling on it or forcing a point about it. Still, the game takes a very static approach towards this playful version of preservation, indirectly making the claims, firstly, that culture is something primarily instantiated through physical structures and spaces (simply by virtue of the fact that these are the only elements defended, rather than practices, beliefs, or other cultural objects); and secondly, that the correct approach towards preservation is conservation: after all, you don't really get to play with the ruins themselves, but only stop the mischievous demons from interacting with them. Of course, one game cannot do everything, and what *Palomilla Hunter* does it does in a very interesting way, creating a playable system around an important cultural issue without feeling moralistic about it. As such, it is an interesting example to look into when we think about borderland games.

Inka Madness

Another such example, also released in 2013, is *Inka Madness*, developed by Pariwana Studios, the game development division of software and application developer Magia Digital, and their first self-developed and self-published project. The game was developed for mobile platforms and released originally for Windows Phone, with iOS and

Figure 4-8: Artwork for *Inka Madness.* Copyright by MagiaDigital.

Android versions following soon thereafter. It is a platformer style game, inspired by classics in the genre such as *Super Mario Bros.* and *Donkey Kong Country*, as explained to me by the lead developer on the project.

The player plays the role of Atuq, second son to the ruling Inka, Tupac Qhatari — all of whom are fictional characters. An aging Tupac Qhatari has decided to abdicate power in favour of his first son, Sarey, but on the day of the coronation ceremony, an evil warlock, Phawack, appears in the middle of it all and casts a spell on Sarey. Phawack then demands from Tupac Qhatari control over the empire in exchange for Sarey's life. As imperial guards rush to capture Phawack, he vanishes, and Tupac Qhatari asks his other son, Atuq, to find Phawack and release his brother from the spell.

As Atuq, the player needs to travel over the Inka roads and destroy Phawak's totems to weaken his power in order to break the spell. The various levels in the game are played against the backdrop of natural and historical environments of Peru, including famous locales such as Machu Picchu or distinctive elements such as stone-built houses. The mechanics of the game are fairly standard for the platformer genre, with players walking across the level and jumping onto and off platforms to navigate obstacles, all while fighting enemies and collecting objects to increase score. In that regard, one could be tempted to include *Inka Madness* under the *tomb raider* category

of Latin American representations in games (Penix-Tadsen, 2013), described above — that is, games that merely take the Latin American cultural, geographical, and historical backdrop as the exotic setting for an otherwise unrelated story. But there's a crucial difference here that we need to take into account: rather than Peruvian locales being simply the setting for gameplay, the player is actually playing the role of a character originally belonging to these locales. It is not the story of a Lara Croft-like character traversing an anonymous ruin in search of artifacts and secrets, but a character that is fighting to restore order and balance to their own realm. This is why *Inka Madness* is interesting and different to most other games occurring within similar scenarios: in this narrative, a character belonging to this reality is empowered with agency to transform the game world.

In *Inka Madness*'s case, the setting and cultural elements are by no means a coincidence. Working within the realm of cultural heritage and capitalising on the cultural and commercial opportunities that can be associated with borderland games are things Pariwana Studios is intentionally aiming for, as explained to me by one of the studio's managers:

> It was then that we decided, let's make a game using Peruvian cultural heritage, and we set ourselves the goal that our video game division — which we're calling precisely "games division from Peru to the world" — because we were going to be developing world-class games for mobiles, for casual gamers, using Peruvian cultural heritage as our main asset. And that's how Pariwana Studios was born, and it is still our goal.

This explicit attitude and commitment shows that the strategies to approach and deal with borderland games are diverse, with some studios and developers exhibiting a stronger, more conscious commitment to how culture is treated within their games, and other leaning more towards drawing inspiration from their everyday environments and happenings.

However, this narrative contribution does not necessarily translate to the game design. Game mechanics are fairly standard to the platformer genre — walk, jump,
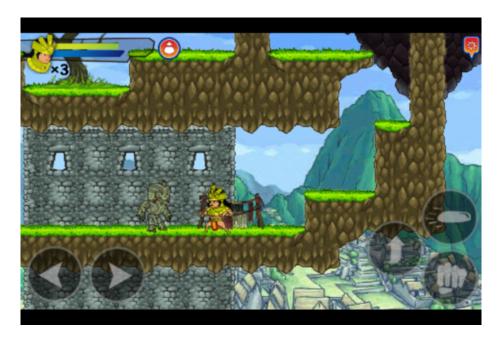
Figure 4-9: Screenshot of *Inka Madness.* Copyright by MagiaDigital.

attack, and so on — as is the level design. Players do not get the chance to explore more from the narrative during the levels nor do they learn anything about the game world from actual gameplay, but only from the narrative interludes occurring in between stages. The game's limitation as a borderland game, therefore, lies in the fact that it ends up being a skinned or themed version of a platformer, onto which an interesting narrative structure has been layered, but which doesn't fully articulate it with the gameplay. In that sense, *Inka Madness* also illustrates the challenges of designing and building this sort of games, especially the challenge of thinking beyond the strictly narrative elements — plot, characters, settings — and to articulate the subject matter all the way through the design process. Borderland games can (and are probably better when they do) go beyond treating culture and history simply as assets to be deployed in the game world.

Kilka Card Gods

Kilka Card Gods is another Peruvian-developed game, released in 2013 by Bamtang Games, the largest game developer in the local industry. The game is available for multiple mobile platforms such as iOS, Android, and Blackberry, plus a future version