

# 11 Latin American Game Design and the Narrative Tradition

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This essay examines the relationship between video games and conventional narrative, with a particular focus on how that relationship has been approached by Latin American game designers. Relatively little academic research exists on game development in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, Uruguay, and the other countries whose games I will be referencing here, and likewise the videogame medium has been largely absent from studies of Latin American cultural production. However, the debate over using the tools of discursive or narrative analysis for the examination of video games actually has a relatively lengthy history within the growing field of game studies. Serious analysis of video games and their ways of making meaning has flourished over the past couple of decades thanks to the interest of publishers like MIT Press and Routledge, as well as peer-reviewed academic journals such as *Game Studies* and *Games and Culture*, leading to disciplinary approaches that differ considerably from conventional analyses of meaning in the fields of literature, film, and the visual arts. Collectively, the growing archive of game studies scholarship demonstrates that video games are unique cultural objects that require specific tools of analysis, a fact readily accepted by anyone pursuing serious research on games. For the purposes of the present analysis, it is useful to paraphrase new media scholar Janet H. Murray by saying that sooner or later in the debate over how to approach (Latin American) videogame design, we must come to recognize two facts: 1) Games are not narratives, and 2) Narrative is relevant to game analysis ("Last Word"). As a fundamentally interdisciplinary field of inquiry, game studies must inherently remain open to knowledge gleaned from other fields that focus on diverse forms of cultural production. Yet up to now, the discussion within the field of game studies has been largely dominated by analyses of the ways meaning is produced either through game mechanics and software coding, or through the subjective activity of gameplay. These two approaches have offered invaluable revelations and insights for the way we think about and analyze video games, but at the same time they have dominated scholarly discussions at the expense of other important considerations, such as the impact of culture on video games' meaning. Though the relationship between Latin American culture and video games is only now beginning to receive scholarly attention, the region has been both

a producer and a consumer of videogame technology since personal computers first appeared on global markets in the late 1970s and early 1980s, contributing to the development of a unique and multivalent relationship between games and Latin American culture.

## LUDOLOGY VS. NARRATOLOGY: A CRITICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION

Curiously enough, the debate over video games and the narrative tradition actually has its theoretical roots in Latin America, or at least in the work of a Latin American theorist. The primary instigator of this discussion was Gonzalo Frasca, the Uruguayan game designer and Georgia Tech-educated game analyst who coined the usage of the term “ludology” to refer to an analytical framework focusing on the mechanisms inherent to the medium of the video game in order to infer meaning. His foundational texts on the subject argue that games are unique semiotic systems in which meaning is conveyed not only by narrative or discursive means, but through the interaction between the coded mechanisms of the game software and the actions of an engaged player (“Simulation Versus Narrative”). I have stated previously that the dispute within game studies between the so-called “ludologists,” on the one hand, and the “narratologists” or “narrativists” on the other, was essentially resolved in favor of the ludological approach (Penix-Tadsen 177). This may have been an oversimplification on my part, but indeed most scholars doing research on video games readily accept that they are dealing unique semiotic systems with particular analytical demands. Likewise, there are few-to-no scholars looking at games as if they were narratives, or paintings, or movies, and any rigorous analysis of video games must take into account the aspects that make this medium unique. Though it was Frasca who started the debate between ludology and narratology, he also ultimately dismissed this supposed critical and theoretical divide, describing it as “a debate that never took place” due to the fact that ludologists themselves did not “radically reject any use of narrative theory in game studies,” and more importantly because of the lack of any spokesperson for the cause of a narratological approach to game analysis (“Ludologists Love Stories Too”). However, in hindsight, Frasca may have oversimplified this debate as well.

Indeed, there are and have been many game analysts seeking to point out games’ narrative qualities, often with the intention of “elevating” games to the level of cultural *caché* enjoyed by established art forms such as literature, painting, and film. In his 2003 book *More than a Game: The Computer Game as Fictional Form*, Barry Atkins notes that, “One day, perhaps, the computer game will even produce its *À la Recherche de Temps Perdu* or its *Ulysses*, its *Casablanca* or its *Citizen Kane*” (24), a perspective that at once celebrates the then relatively new medium’s potential for creative expression on the level of the most universally recognized achievements of literature or film, but misses the mark by failing to account for how the meaningful experience of

gaming is radically different from that of reading texts and viewing images. Janet H. Murray speaks of this difference in terms of player agency in her seminal 1998 study on narrative and new media, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*:

Agency [...] goes beyond both participation and activity. As an aesthetic pleasure, as an experience to be savored for its own sake, it is offered to a limited degree in traditional art forms but is more commonly available in the structured activities we call games. Therefore, when we move narrative to the computer, we move it to a realm already shaped by the structures of games. Can we imagine a compelling narrative literature that builds on these game structures without being diminished by them? Or are we merely talking about an expensive way to rewrite *Hamlet* for the pinball machine? (128–129)

Murray's analysis highlights critical differences such as player agency and the interactive nature of games in creating meaning. Yet, as she seeks in games "something as true to the human condition, and as beautifully expressed, as the life that Shakespeare captured on the Elizabethan stage" (274), Murray's standards of comparison uphold a hierarchical relationship between established and new media with literature at the top. Today, rather than asking if video games can reach Shakespearean heights, perhaps we should focus on what games can do that the Bard's writing cannot.

As with a photograph, a film, a painting, or a sculpture, often what is most interesting is not how it recreates familiar content from another medium, but how it expresses that content in a way unique to its own medium. A painting, for example, is most interesting insofar as it is a non-linguistic, visual means of expression, and cannot effectively be read as a written narrative: what makes it most noteworthy is its very paintingness. Likewise, following Murray's lead it became increasingly clear that an "emphasis on games as a particular form of culture" was needed, as Frans Mäyrä notes when he argues that for game studies, "it is just as important to think about meaning that is related to actions, or images, as it is to find meanings in words" (13). Alexander R. Galloway echoes this sentiment by arguing that "video games are not just images or stories or play or games but *actions*" (37), noting that "while games have linear narratives that may appear in broad arcs from beginning to end, or may appear in cinematic segues and interludes, they also have nonlinear narratives that must unfold in algorithmic form during gameplay" (92). Such a nonlinear, dynamic system is referred to as a simulation, which Frasca characterizes as "a kaleidoscopic form of representation that can provide us with multiple and alternative points of view" ("Videogames of the Oppressed" 93), one in which a process of trial-and-error with multiple possible outcomes takes precedence over a linear narrative.

To be sure, authors and artists in many fields of cultural production have long sought to promote an "active" reading and interpretation of their works, and in this sense the idea of an "active" reader, spectator, or viewer is nothing

new. And video games, like literature, film, and the visual arts, also require an “active” agent to decipher their meaning and look beyond the surface of their representations. In literary studies and in Latin American literary analysis in particular, a lengthy history of scholarship attests to the centrality of ludic play in the process of writing and reading. A short list of scholarship on this topic would encompass research on play in literature in general (Ehrmann, Hutchinson, Spariosu), as well as specifically on play in Spanish-language literature from *Lazarillo de Tormes* (Yovanovich) to Cervantes (Scham) to contemporary drama by Spanish-American women playwrights (Larson). When thinking of ludic writing, readers of Latin American literature will probably also be thinking of that paradigm of literary play, Julio Cortázar’s 1963 novel *Hopscotch*, which features a game-like “Table of Instructions” that guides the reader into a playful cat-and-mouse chase with the content of the novel, divided between 56 main chapters and another 99 “expendable” chapters. Indeed, postmodern literature has been convincingly analyzed from the perspective of ludic criticism (Burke), and the ludic critique finds ample material with which to work in *Hopscotch* (Sacido Romero; Simpkins). Works like *Hopscotch* are reminders that the search for an active reader and the use of play are, in a sense, nothing new in the realm of cultural production.

However, as Frasca argues, the key difference for video games lies in the fact that embodied action on the part of the player is a necessity not only for the interpretation of meaning, but for unlocking the very content of the work itself (“Videogames of the Oppressed” 86). Above and beyond interpretive considerations, the *content* of a written text, motion picture or work of visual art is fixed, while the content of a video game is variable and dependent upon interaction between the player and the game software. Such differences demonstrate the need for a unique approach when games are the objects of analysis, and further the grounds for ludology as a way of approaching games as discrete and self-contained systems of signification.

However, while Frasca and his fellow ludologists demonstrated the importance of examining games as unique cultural products, recent scholarship has begun to chip away at the ludological establishment, demonstrating a tendency toward the reincorporation of the tools of narrative analysis—albeit partially—into the fold of game criticism. For example, Steven E. Jones’s 2008 study *The Meaning of Video Games: Gaming and Textual Strategies* constitutes a major contribution to research on this topic. As Jones notes, the primary danger with any hardline ludology is its potential for essentialism, brought on by ludologists who seemed “ironically [...] prepared to recapitulate the history of twentieth-century *literary* formalism, with ‘the game itself’ replacing the New Critics’ ‘text in itself’ as the hermetically sealed object of attention” (5). Against strict formalism or a misplaced methodology driven strictly by narrative analysis, Jones proposes “a very different kind of ‘textual’ approach [...] one that has very little to do with story per se and is, I think, in sympathy with the aim of ludology to do justice to the uniqueness of games as a form—but one that also refuses to cut games off from the larger culture” (6).

This approach, which takes into account both the lessons of ludology and the broader history of cultural criticism, is akin to what I have referred to previously as “cultural ludology,” a way of examining videogame meaning that is sensitive to the effects of the coded mechanisms of signification particular to the videogame medium, but which also pays careful attention to the ways culture is portrayed within video games, along with the broader impact on games’ meaning produced by the social, political, and geographical settings in which they are designed, manufactured, purchased, pirated, and otherwise put to political, ideological, or social use (Penix-Tadsen 180). Above and beyond the ways that programmed code and player actions contribute to games’ signifying process, the cultural environment in which games are produced and consumed brings about important modifications to their meaning. To put some flesh on this skeletal structure of theory regarding videogame design and the narrative tradition, I will turn now to particular examples from the broad range of videogame responses to the narrative tradition that have been deployed by Latin American game designers, helping to illustrate how cultural ludology can be put to work at the level of gameplay.

## LATIN AMERICAN GAME DESIGN: A PRELIMINARY TAXONOMY

You would be excused if you did not know that there was such a thing as “Latin American game design,” as a quick web search of this precise phrase will demonstrate that nothing has been written previously on the topic *per se*, in academic publishing or anywhere else. However there is indeed a significant and traceable genealogy of games by Latin American designers, so this shortcoming is probably due less to a lack of interest and material than to my placement of the critical frame of “Latin American” game design over top of a field of cultural production that is at once global and often extremely local in scope. There is, for example, some very compelling research on certain games from Uruguay, Mexico, or Argentina, but no work that looks at game development on the broader, regional level as a whole. Like the cultural environments in which they were produced, video games from Latin American designers are diverse and wide-ranging. In order to formulate a categorical approach to this broad field, I propose a concentration on three distinct types of games. The first category will perhaps be the most familiar to a general audience, encompassing independent and commercial games for play on home computers and game consoles. Next there are the growing wave of “casual” games played online and on mobile devices, which are making gaming—and game design—ever more ubiquitous in Latin America and across the globe. Third and lastly, I will examine a number of conceptually driven “serious games” and “art games” that demonstrate how Latin American game designers have taken advantage of the critical potential of the videogame medium in unexpected ways. Together,

these examples demonstrate the importance of a perspective conscious to the ways coded software, subjective gameplay, *and* the cultural milieu of production and reception interact in the production of videogame meaning.

## INDEPENDENT GAME DESIGNERS AND COMMERCIAL PIONEERS

“Independent games,” defined as “[l]ow budget games produced outside the system of big publishers” (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 19), have a largely undocumented history in Latin America, but deserve greater critical attention. Early examples of independent game design in Latin America include everything from the 1982 game *Truco*, an electronic version of the popular card game from Argentine programmers Ariel and Enrique Arbiser, to *Druids, the Epic*, designed by the Costa Rican studio Teleport Media in 2002, to Peruvian Luis Grimaldo’s 2007 *Inkawar*. These games were their programmers’ passion projects, cobbled together at home or in very small studios, generally by one or two individuals. Though each of these games was produced as software to be played on home computers, they differ in their graphical interfaces and gameplay as well as their intended audiences: *Truco* was sold and copied widely throughout Argentina, *Inkawar* was available free for download by local and regional gamers, and *Druids, the Epic* was published and distributed internationally. In their own ways, each of these games gave Latin American games an increased market presence, whether those games were focused on Latin American culture (as in the case of *Truco* or *Inkawar*, a role-playing battle simulation that recreates the territorial conquests undertaken by the Incan empire), or on more universally familiar material drawn from cultures outside the region (as in the case of *Druids, the Epic*).

This divide between local color and global appeal is an enduring one in Latin American game design, and will not come as a surprise to anyone who has read Jorge Luis Borges’s text on the Argentine author and the literary tradition, in which he asserts at once the hegemony of the global desire for local authenticity, and an opposing personal compulsion toward universality. Like literature, film, and the pictorial arts, some video games concentrate on local color while others prioritize universal accessibility. Some early commercial game designers were wary of the dangers of reducing their audience to those familiar with a given cultural context, and aimed for games focused primarily on fantasy worlds without direct ties to the real-world cultural context in which they were created. These games include the aforementioned *Druids, the Epic*, as well as Salvadoran designer Sergio Aristides Rosa’s game *Enola* (2014), a horror game that was produced with the support of a development grant from the Salvadoran government. Other commercial games from Latin American designers to eschew locality for universality include games like 2012’s *Poltergeist* from the Bogotá, Colombia-based design firm Glitchy Pixel (both *Enola* and *Poltergeist* are marketed to PC and/or Mac gamers through the popular online game distributor Steam for around US \$10–15). Since all of these games concentrate

more on replicating than challenging traditional game conventions, they likewise sustain a fairly balanced relationship between the use of procedural and narrative processes of signification, meaning that narrative is a significant component in these (at least partially) story-driven titles.

Though some Latin American designers avoided local specificity since early on, others saw the potential in exploiting the local market as well as exporting Latin American culture to a global gaming audience. On the one hand, there is an increasing number of commercial games being developed by Latin American game design firms with the aim of marketing to a specifically Latin American audience. Some of these are the result of open-source modifications of existing games crafted by Latin American *modders*, such as *Grand Theft Sinaloa* or *MVP Caribe*, the latter of which is a “full-conversion modification” of EA Sports’ popular baseball simulator *MVP Baseball 2005* that was converted by a community of primarily Venezuelan and Mexican modders into a game centered Caribbean leagues, trophy races, players, stadiums, and logos. These *mods*, which circulate among the considerable but relatively marginal community of hardcore PC gamers that download and contribute to them, rewrite the script of existing products of global popular culture. Many other commercially-developed games from the region’s designers incorporate specific content from Latin American popular culture, and more of them are being published not just for personal computers but for the console market, meaning more Latin American designers are breaking into the lucrative and enormous potential in production for Microsoft’s Xbox, Sony’s PlayStation, and Nintendo’s Wii consoles. We could start with *Lucha Libre AAA: Héroes del Ring* (2010), billed the first multi-console game to be designed entirely in Latin America, as a collaboration between Colombian and Argentine designers and the Mexican game publisher Slang. Another example is *Atrévete a soñar* (2011), a singing competition game based on the popular Mexican teen *telenovela*, or *Capoeira Legends* (2009), a fighting game focusing on the internationally popular Afro-Brazilian martial art. I am sure that a final such example, *El Chavo Kart* (2014), a sort of *Mario Kart*-meets-*El Chavo del Ocho*, has won fans from many generations of Latin American popular culture enthusiasts for incorporating familiar characters of television and comics into an interactive format. These tie-ins to other media are one direction in commercial game design in Latin America, running alongside another trajectory of visionary commercial projects such as those of Santiago, Chile-based ACE Team, designers of multi-platform titles like *Zeno Clash* (2009), *Rock of Ages* (2011) and *Abyss Odyssey* (2014), which offered significant innovations in the first-person shooter, tower defense, and action-adventure genres, respectively. These and other examples demonstrate the increasing commercial viability of Latin American game design for the mainstream global gaming market.

At the same time, Latin American game designers and politicians have each responded in their own ways to the dominance of US and European representations of their own cultures. Politicians around the globe have long singled out video games, arguing that their portrayals of history and culture are negative

or unfair—a recent example is former Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega’s 2014 lawsuit against the makers of *Call of Duty: Black Ops II* (2012), a game in which Noriega was portrayed as a non-playable character (Vara). Game designers have also responded to foreign-made portrayals of their own cultures in the blockbusters of the global games industry—such as Fidel Castro’s Cuba in Activision’s *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (2010) or the Mexican Revolution in Rockstar Games’ frontier odyssey *Red Dead Redemption* (2010)—but in ways that seek to embrace rather than condemn the medium’s potential for conveying national history. Some recent examples have reimagined historical narrative in the form of a first-person shooter, such as the Cuban-developed game *Gesta Final: Camino a la Victoria* (2013), in which the player participates in the major campaigns of the Cuban Revolution as part of Castro’s 26 de Julio movement, or Mexico’s *Al Grito de Guerra* (2010), a game in which players can battle each other in the settings of famous battles from the Mexican Revolution, choosing their faction from between *Villistas*, *Zapatistas*, *Felicitas*, and the *Ejército Federal*. These games of course lack the enormous reach of games on the global market, being that they were developed by collaborative groups of university and secondary school students and distributed freely to a largely local (or national) audience. But they are important in demonstrating how the region’s game designers are attempting to “take control of the message” regarding Latin American culture in video games, creating portrayals of Latin American culture from within the region itself. In so doing they effectively narrate an alternative history, one that is again developed not only through words but through interactive play.

Finally, there are those commercial games made by independent developers working in the global gaming market. One standout example is the 2012 game *Papo & Yo*, designed by Colombian Vander Caballero in his Montreal-based startup Minority Media as an allegory for growing up in South America with a substance-addicted father. This game, set in a Brazilian *favela*, follows the young Afro-Brazilian protagonist, Quico, as he manipulates the ramshackle buildings of the favela in order to solve spatial puzzles, exercising power over a world in which he can often feel as if he has none.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 11.1 *Papo & Yo*.

Developed through a grant from Sony's "Pub Fund" for independent developers, the game has proven to be a great critical success since being released first through PlayStation Network and later for Windows and online play through Steam. The game uses relatively little text and dialog in its creation of an environment that is more defined by space and the process of discovery as Quico puts together the clues to a successive series of puzzles in the hopes of curing his friend Monster of his crippling addiction ... to eating frogs. Heavily symbolic and full of legible audiovisual metaphors, *Papo & Yo* achieves something very rare for any expressive product, and especially for video games: it engages the player in a moving multisensorial affective experience that offers more room for ponderous contemplation than it does facile solutions to complicated problems.

An even more commercially successful example of a game that brilliantly incorporates Latin American cultural iconography is the "Metroidvania"-style scrolling platform brawler *Guacamelee!* (2013), the brainchild of Mexican game animator Augusto "Cuxo" Quijano, developed by the Toronto-based firm Drinkbox Studios. Largely due to its quirky and innovative design, the game has become a smash hit across virtually every major gaming platform from personal computers to home console systems to mobile consoles like the PlayStation Vita. *Guacamelee!* gives the player the ability to switch at will between the world of the living and a world of the dead inhabited by the iconography of the Day of the Dead, including candlelit altars with sugar skulls, playful laughing skeletons, and above-ground mausoleums.



Figure 11.2 *Guacamelee!*

It also incorporates a wild barrage of imagery from Mexican and global pop culture, ranging from *lucha libre* to stone Olmec heads from the twelfth-century BCE to the online meme known as "grumpy cat." A wildly imaginative game, *Guacamelee!* features a linear narrative that is an homage to the narrative of the original *Super Mario Bros.*, with our hero Juan attempting to save the princess. But beyond this narrative level, it creates a meaningful experience through its combination of a deeply developed cultural environment

and a surprising level of dimensionality that makes this 2D platformer into an experience that transitions between small and large scale, human and animal characters, and the living and dead worlds. This dimensional factor probably has more impact for the meaningful experience of *Guacamelee!* than its underlying narrative, though it does offer a truly entertaining rewriting of Mario's classic patriarchal plot, meaning that attempts to understand the game strictly in terms of its narrative significance will invariably miss the mark. Like other independent games from Latin American designers, *Guacamelee!* highlights the benefits of cultural ludology for understanding not only the impact cultural symbolism in games, but the immeasurable importance of the cultural geography in which video games are produced and consumed.

## CASUAL REVOLUTIONARIES

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Today, a major segment of Latin American game design is dedicated to so-called "casual games"—those games that are played on social media and mobile devices—which can be seen paving the way for a twenty-first-century Latin American Boom in game design. In his 2010 study *A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games and Their Players*, Jesper Juul describes the way casual games turned the traditional battle for advancement in game design on its head, eschewing graphic realism and big budgets for a new paradigm: "This is the moment in which the simplicity of early video games is being rediscovered, while new flexible designs are letting video games fit into the lives of players. Video games are being reinvented, and so is our image of those who play the games. This is the moment when we realize that everyone can be a video game player" (2). Casual games represent a radical shift in the dynamics of game production and consumption, moving from the conventional model in which hundreds of people would work for two to five years to produce a AAA title that would sell for \$60, to a model in which a handful of people (or a single individual) would work for a year or two to produce a casual title that will sell for perhaps \$1, or that will be available "free-to-play" with in-game purchases and upgrades accounting for the game designer's profits. And in spite of their low purchase cost, there are many cases in which successful casual games have proven more profitable (especially considering initial investment) than their console market counterparts. This means that it has rapidly become easier and more profitable to be a game developer at the same time that it is rapidly becoming easier and more common to be a gamer in Latin America. The advent of casual games is paralleled by the boom in mobile cellular technology over the last decade and especially the last year, which has, for example, led technology watchdogs to estimate that 80% of the population of Brazil will have internet access by 2016 (ComScore). This signifies a population boom in gamers that coincides with a shift in the definition of what constitutes a gamer, from the "hardcore" traditional gamer to the "casual" contemporary gamer. This also means that casual games represent a promising

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avenue for future development by smaller firms in Latin America, the kind of game design and market experience that will allow those artists and designers to move on to more ambitious projects in the future, paving the way for an explosion in Latin American game design that can already be perceived.

Today there are more than 300 small game design firms throughout Latin America, and like their artistic and traditional commercial counterparts, their production spans a wide range of subjects, settings and game mechanics. To be sure, casual games also represent a shift in the priorities of game developers, a return to a focus on novel mechanics and simplistic elegance rather than the photorealist drive toward increased graphical verisimilitude. As Juul asserts, “The rise 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? Casual games are an alternative answer to the old question of how to make games that players feel are worth their time and money” (147–148). Today, casual game designers in Latin America are producing an array of titles including international smash hits like *Kingdom Rush* (2011), a tower defense game for iOS and Android, from Uruguay’s Ironside Studios, to Mexican firm Phyne Games’ Day of the Dead-themed Windows Phone game *Mictlan* (2012), to *Brasil Quest* (2014), an app game sponsored by the Brazilian government that was designed to introduce a global audience to the 12 host cities of the 2014 World Cup.



Figure 11.3 *Kingdom Rush*.

These are just a few of the literally hundreds of casual games that have been produced in Latin America in the past several years, and they portend a period of growth and expansion upon the existing genealogy of game design in the region. The role of Latin American culture here is important because of more than just these game designers' decisions to portray Latin American culture, or not to do so, in their games. Their geographical and cultural locus of production has deep effects related to regional and local economic, social, and aesthetic considerations that go beyond the level of representation to impact their potential for conveying cultural meaning.

## SERIOUS PLAY: NEWSGAMES AND EDUGAMES FROM LATIN AMERICA

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One of the most interesting areas of Latin American game design, and certainly the one that has garnered the most significant scholarly attention to date, are games that fall under the category I would generally title "serious games." In 2005, Michael Zyda defined a serious game as "a mental contest, played with a computer in accordance with specific rules, that uses entertainment to further government or corporate training, education, health, public policy and strategic communication objectives," adding that "they involve pedagogy: activities that educate or instruct, thereby imparting knowledge or skill. This addition makes games serious" (26). This does not mean that all serious games are didactic or straightforward, however. The author of *The Ethics of Computer Games* (2009), Miguel Sicart, argues that "ethical gameplay should *increase* cognitive friction," meaning that designers seeking to challenge a player mentally, ideologically or ethically must create scenarios in which there is a "divide between the procedural and semantic layers" creating the grounds for reflexive participation on the part of the player ("Values Between Systems" 8).<sup>9</sup> Another difference between serious games and commercial games is the audience: while today's major game releases reach millions of gamers worldwide, players of serious games comprise the relatively marginal segment of the gaming population that is compelled to seek out unusual approaches to game design online. But in spite of their reduced audience, serious games have produced some of the most thought-provoking models for theorizing the potential impact of games beyond the realm of mainstream entertainment. In Latin America and globally, serious games represent a major source of innovation in game design.

In "Videogames of the Oppressed," aforementioned Uruguayan game designer and theorist Gonzalo Frasca uses Brazilian playwright Augusto Boal's "Theater of the Oppressed" and theorist Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as the basis for a proposal that takes serious games a step further by suggesting the potential for "consciousness-raising videogames" (85). Frasca would later go on to coin the term "newsgames" to describe games used "to analyze, debate, comment and editorialize major international news," and two

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such games of Frasca's own design—the online Flash-animation simulations *September 12<sup>th</sup>* and *Madrid*—provide the basis for much of game theorist Ian Bogost's elaboration on the concept of “procedural rhetoric” as the primary system of signification in games. Bogost argues that “games can be noteworthy rhetorical devices” but that “[t]his power of the medium has gone untapped because the market has focused primarily on entertaining players, rather than engaging them in important topics” (*Unit Operations* 119–120). The antidote to commercial game design is the use of procedural rhetoric, which, as Bogost explains in the introduction to his 2007 study *Persuasive Games*, “is the practice of persuading through processes in general and computational processes in particular. [...] Procedural rhetoric is a technique for making arguments with computational systems and for unpacking computational arguments others have created” (3). Bogost is describing the system through which meaning is created in games like Frasca's *September 12<sup>th</sup>*. Bogost uses Alain Badiou's concept of the “evental site,” or “the place where current practice breaks down,” in order to suggest that these “persuasive” games “expose the logic of situations in an attempt to draw players' attention to an evental site and encourage them to problematize the situation” (*Persuasive Games* 332). And indeed, while only the relatively marginal segment of the gaming community that seeks out serious games online will be familiar with these unusual, self-published newsgames, Frasca's innovative approach to game design has provided serious food for thought about procedurality.

*September 12<sup>th</sup>* is a reflection on the futility of the United States-led global “War on Terror,” one that requires the player to enter into ethical friction through gameplay.





Figure 11.4 *September 12<sup>th</sup>* and *Madrid*.

Miguel Sicart's description of the game's dynamics from his 2009 book *The Ethics of Computer Games* is worth citing at length:

In this game, the player controls what seems to be a sniper crosshair that can scroll through a simulated Middle Eastern village where civilians and terrorists move freely. The player will try to shoot, most likely a terrorist. Then there is a conscious break of the game rhetoric: it is not a sniper rifle but a missile launcher that the player is using. When the missiles hit the village, terrorists and civilians die. For each civilian dead, a group of other civilians will gather, mourn, and then transform into terrorists. The game has no end. By removing the winning condition and manipulating the ergodics of the simulation (the action that could lead to a conclusion of the game is actually punished by the multiplying enemies), *September 12<sup>th</sup>* makes a powerful ethical statement: the only way of surviving this game is not playing it ... but not playing it means letting those simulated terrorists "live." (43)

Bogost echoes the significance of the omission of the "win condition" from game design, arguing that in *September 12<sup>th</sup>*, the represented procedural system fails to perform the services it alleges to provide. One cannot play and hope to succeed (*Persuasive Games* 8). Like its sister "newsgame" *Madrid*, in which the player must light the candles of a group of attendees of a candlelight vigil in honor of the victims of the March 11, 2004 train bombings in Madrid, and which was designed and published within 48 hours of that event, *September 12<sup>th</sup>* uses simple dynamics, free distribution, and a

novel approach to gameplay in order to urge the player to critically reflect on broader geopolitical issues. In this way, these games demonstrate how innovative, outside-the-box work from Latin American game designers can operate above and beyond their local and national audiences and concerns in order to make a globally impactful contribution.

It should not be too surprising that *Madrid* and *September 12<sup>th</sup>* have virtually no connection to written narrative in its conventional form. They were, after all, designed by the lead ludologist himself, Frasca, and echo his sentiments regarding the need to recognize the unique ways in which games express meaning that the written word cannot. They are simple games that are driven, more than anything, by the novelty of their mechanics and the visual, sonic, and conceptual allusions they make to lived experiences in contemporary society, with very little need for written discourse per se. Just as Frasca's ludological critique can be seen as representing the formalist or even essentialist end of game analysis, his games eschew the techniques of conventional narrative in the name of hard-coded, procedural meaning. However, his approach is not the only, or necessarily the definitive, approach to narrative in game design from Latin American designers.

Indeed, there are some designers whose games are so overtly pedagogical, discursively-driven, and didactic, that they resemble interactive fiction more than conventional video games. Such is the case with *Tropical America*, a 2002 online Flash animation game that was developed as a collaboration between the now defunct Los Angeles, California-based nonprofit OnRamp Arts, and the participants in "an after-school violence prevention workshop for students at Belmont High School, a ninety percent Latino public school in downtown Los Angeles" (Jenkins 219). Henry Jenkins describes the development process in detail in his 2006 book *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*, where he describes its content:

In *Tropical America*, the player assumes the role of the sole survivor of a 1981 massacre in El Salvador, attempting to investigate what happened to this village and why. In the process, you explore some five hundred years of the history of the colonization of Latin America, examining issues of racial genocide, cultural dominance, and the erasure of history. Winners of the game become "Heroes of the Americas," and in the process they uncover the name of another victim of the actual slaughter. [...] They enhanced the game play with an encyclopedia that allowed players to learn more about the historical references and provided a space where meta-gaming could occur. Rather than romanticizing violence, the kids dealt with the political violence and human suffering that led their parents to flee from Central America. (220)

*Tropical America* is a unique and provocative sort of game, filled with heterogeneous and asynchronous representations of the history and culture

of El Salvador, Central America, and Latin America at large. This hybridity can be seen, for example, on the level of the game's two-dimensional graphics, which incorporate the look of a Mexican Revolution-era wood-cut print by José Guadalupe Posada or later works by his disciples in the Taller de Gráfica Popular into an online Flash animation game. The game offers a procedural journey that requires the player to seek out the areas on the screen that will allow them to click and progress by sweeping the cursor across the two-dimensional surface of the game's simplistic black-and-white graphics, as well as player decision-making in deciding between two alternatives in a series of questions. The player's answers will determine the course of the journey, and can be revisited later in the game as well in order to explore different possible outcomes. When a Spanish colonial authority demands that the player turn over his or her gold, for example, the player might choose not to turn over the gold in their knapsack at first, but after being tortured, they may decide to replay the scenario and give the authorities the gold forthwith. Either way, the Spanish colonial agent will demand more gold, but player resistance will result in their character's subjugation and torture, leading to a different experience for player and character alike. By leading the player on a journey that is both graphical and textual, the game's designers demand a varied skill set that relies heavily upon the player's capacity for consuming and interpreting significant amounts of information regarding the historical relationship between violence and power in Latin America, as can be seen in an array of historical and cultural references that range from Mayan legends, to the Spanish conquest, to the Mexican Revolution, to the media-savvy Zapatista rebel movement of the 1990s. An incredibly ambitious project, *Tropical America* shows how effective an extremely narrative-driven game can still be in conveying significant cultural and historical meaning, and how that meaning can be enhanced by the procedural dynamics of signification.

Though generally not as textually driven, there are several examples of other educational games, or "edugames," from Latin American designers, games crafted with the specific intention of pedagogical use with an audience of student players. These initiatives are even gaining traction among some of the more progressive policymakers, intergovernmental organizations, and NGOs in the region. Some notable examples include the Pan American Health Organization-sponsored Dengue fever prevention game *Pueblo Pitanga*, a scrolling platformer designed by Costa Rica's Green Lava Studios in which the player encounters obstacles and affordances related to Dengue fever; and the Uruguayan educational games *D.E.D.* and *1811*, designed by Montevideo's Trojan Chicken Games with the sponsorship of the country's Ministry of Education, and distributed freely online as well as being distributed to all Uruguayan primary school students as part of Plan Ceibal, the country's One Laptop Per Child initiative.



*Figure 11.5 D.E.D. and 1811.*

These latter games represent unique efforts to impart cultural and historical knowledge relevant to Uruguay in a medium that is attractive to students. *D.E.D.*, or *División Especial de Detectives*, is a mystery-solving game in which players in their first years of primary school can find and collect clues in order to solve crimes related to important objects of national cultural heritage. *1811*, like its upcoming sequel *1812*, is a free-roaming role-playing game (RPG) in which older primary school or high school students learn about the nation's

independence movement through firsthand interaction with the nonplayer characters (NPCs), whose dialog and activities round out the game's cultural contextualization of early nineteenth-century Uruguay. These games, though didactic, vary as well in their use of textual narrative, with those aimed at younger audiences (*Pueblo Pitanga* and *D.E.D.*) relying heavily upon basic game mechanics and relatively little text, and more advanced edugames like *1811* incorporating a significant quantity of narrative material into the gameplay experience, making reading and interpreting written discourse a significant element of gameplay, though other game-specific elements—such as spatial exploration and completion of in-game tasks—contribute to a dynamic system of signification that goes beyond mere narrative diegesis.

## ART GAMES AND POETIC PLAY

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The games generally referred to as “art games,” a different type of serious games unto themselves, comprise some of the most innovative approaches by Latin American game designers to the polarizing demands of interactive gameplay and the narrative tradition. Like many other serious games, art games are often aesthetically and formally experimental. They frequently favor simplicity, and use retro game mechanics, rule systems, music, and sound effects; art games frequently offer aesthetic throwbacks to earlier game design, including traditional-media games like *Monopoly* or slide puzzles, and arcade classics like *Pac Man*, *Frogger*, and *Space Invaders*. Also like other serious games, art games reach a reduced audience of enthusiasts and aficionados rather than a broad, mainstream audience, yet they make impactful statements for those that do seek them out. Art games are generally self-published online by a single artist or a small group of game designers, and made freely available for download or online play by users who might spend anywhere from ten minutes to a couple of hours playing through them, depending on the game. In this way, these games foreground the player’s interpretive experience of the games’ symbols and mechanical reactions while reducing the relative significance of narrative.

I am thinking here of a series of “games with an agenda” (Raley 212), several of which have their roots in InSite 2005, a Tijuana- and San Diego-based art fair that sought innovative multimedia approaches to the well-known dynamics of the US-Mexico border region. The “agenda” of InSite is to give visibility to the cultural and sociopolitical concerns of the area, and participants in the event raise important social and political issues regarding the effects of inequality, violence, and militarization on residents and migrants in the border region. The event brought about a flurry of creative new-media projects focusing on border politics, including *Turista Fronterizo*, a collaborative project by chicano media activist and scholar Ricardo Dominguez and Cuban-American performance artist and critic Coco Fusco, and Mexican-American designer Rafael Fajardo’s webgames *Crosser* and *La Migra*, which were played by InSite’s attendees and participants, as well as the audience of gamers who have since sought them out online, where they are freely available to play. While these

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games do bear a significant relationship to Frasca's newsgames, they differ in particular in their use of humor to respond to a particular topic. Highlighting games' capacity to contribute to "affective learning," Claire Dorman and Robert Biddle argue that "[s]erious games are often too serious, and the ability of humor to mediate learning suggests that the best games [for stimulating affective learning] will be both serious and funny" (820). To anyone who has played any of these curious little games about the Mexican border, their use of humor—both narratively and procedurally—will be readily evident, as they foreground the dangers of border-crossing for undocumented immigrants, as well as the privileges enjoyed by US citizens in the same geographical area.

The electronically rendered game board of Dominguez and Fusco's *Turista Fronterizo* mirrors that of a standard *Monopoly* board, with all of the properties switched out for locations and institutions on the border: on the US side, the San Diego Convention Center, Qualcomm Stadium, Fashion Valley Mall; and on the Mexican side, the Castillo del Mar Hotel, the Basurero de Tecate, and the Farmacia Revolución; between them, the San Ysidro Border Checkpoint, the Border Patrol, and the Policía Judicial. The player can choose to play as one of four characters, each of whom represents a unique intersection of class, ethnicity, and nationality: there are the Mexican characters La Todóloga (who wears a housekeeper's uniform and works in "lo que encuentre") and El Junior (a twenty-five-year-old professional "Huevón" who drives a Mercedes SUV), and the US characters the Gringa Activista (a 30-year-old anthropology student) or the "Binational Businessman," El Gringo Poderoso. These characteristics produce calculable results on the player's performance: the rich get richer while the poor barely scrape by in the game. The game's underlying algorithm produces a pre-defined set of results for each playable character, creating critical differences dependent upon character choice that, along with the overall comic tone of the game, ease the player into a critical assessment of the realities of border life: it offers a ludic thrill to play first as one character then as the other, discovering the way their coded characteristics produce different results within the same context. These results become evident procedurally as the player repeats the game and revisits the same locales with a different identity. At Qualcomm Stadium, for example, El Gringo Poderoso takes a Japanese executive to a Chargers game and wins a big deal for his company, while at the same stadium, the Gringa Activista spends \$100 on flyers to hand out to Mexican workers, La Todóloga picks up a \$10 shift with the cleaning crew, and El Junior spends \$200 on "porquerías" when his "cuates" in Chula Vista invite him to a see a football game. All of these fates are dealt through written captions attached to animated clips related to the locations, evidencing *Turista Fronterizo*'s use of both procedural and narrative techniques to create the conditions for affective learning and an ideological critique of borderland inequalities.

Game designer and academic Rafael Fajardo works on similar issues, and also uses simplified game mechanics and graphics along with critically incisive humor, in his games *Crosser* and *La Migra*, which situate within a borderland milieu the mechanics of the arcade classics *Frogger* and *Space Invaders* respectively.

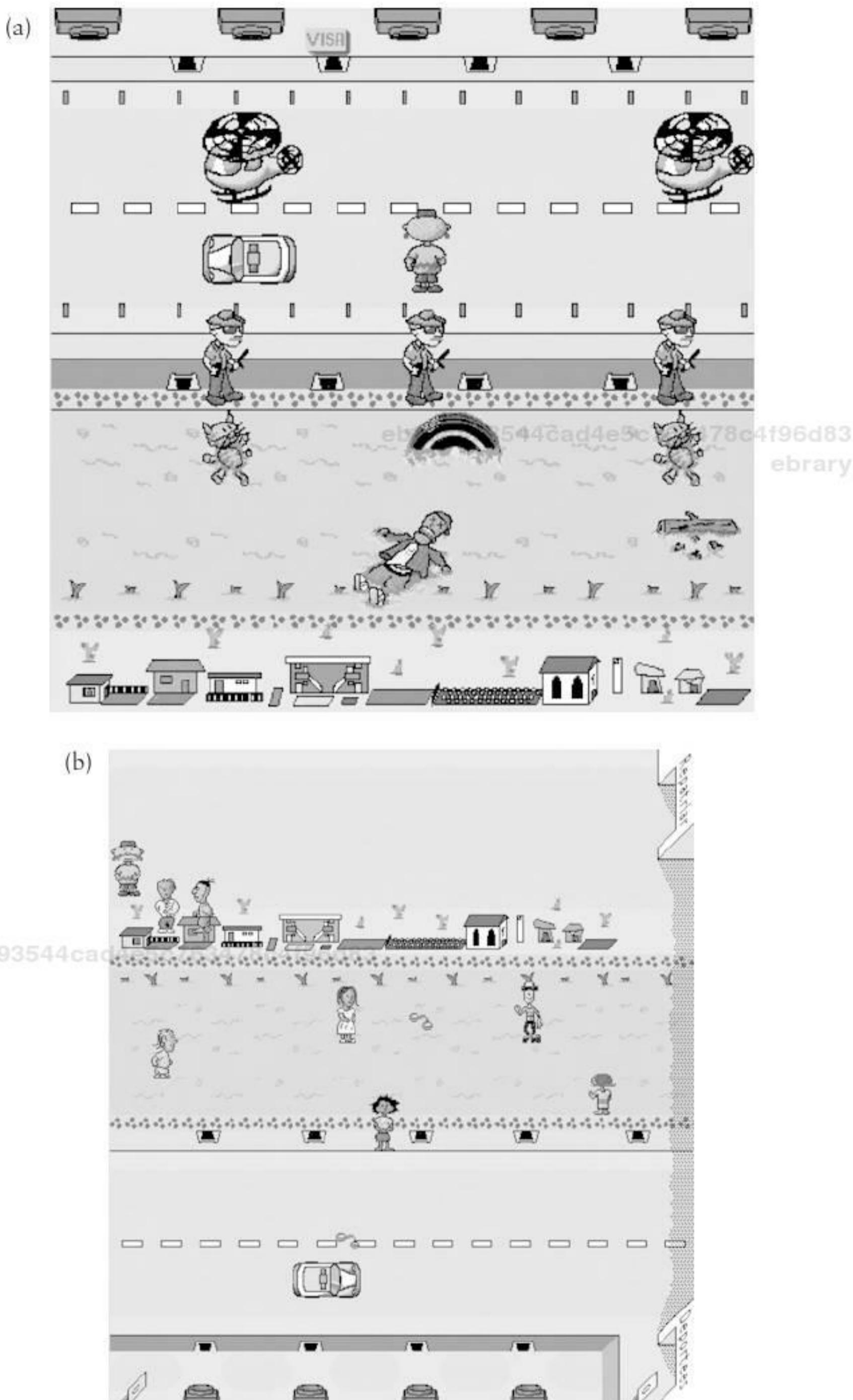


Figure 11.6 *Crosser* and *La Migra*.

The instructions for *Crosser* reflect its ironic overall tone, encouraging the player to “Get to the green card on the other side to pursue the American dream” (*Crosser*). Fajardo’s games proceed virtually without narrative or text, leaving the player with a strictly procedural frame for interpreting border culture. Each one represents a different side of the divide over undocumented immigration: the player embodies the migrant crossing from Mexico to the United States through multiple obstacles in *Crosser*, while in *La Migra* the protagonist is an INS agent who attempts to stop those crossing the border by firing handcuffs from a border patrol vehicle. Though clearly related to *Turista Fronterizo* by their shared participation in a long standing tradition of cultural production related to political and cultural issues on both sides of the border (and in that sense related to the games’ “narrative,” if one were to attempt to extract such a thing), Fajardo’s games perhaps bear a greater kinship to Gonzalo Frasca’s *September 12<sup>th</sup>* in the way that they use a strictly procedural framework to provoke critical contemplation from the player that bears little relation to conventional narrative.

Not all art games are political statements, however. In the case of Argentine game designer and artist Daniel Benmergui’s tiny, tour-de-force games, for example, a video game might represent an aesthetic or poetic manifesto. If anything, it may be Benmergui’s games that most clearly speak to the dynamics on which I am focusing here: they respond procedurally to the very real exigencies of the narrative tradition, producing fascinating and often unexpected results by reworking poetic conventions within the framework of an electronic game. Benmergui’s games are produced independently and made available to play for free online. They each take less than an hour to play through, and are popular among enthusiasts of art games and independent games, as evidenced at the San Francisco-based Independent Games Festival in 2012, where Benmergui won the Innovation Award for an early prototype of his game *Storyteller* (further discussed below). In 2010, prior to this rise to relative prominence, Benmergui created *Today I Die*, a game that requires the player to pull apart and reconstruct a poem, changing its narrative meaning piece by piece.

The game is playable in English, Spanish, Portuguese, German, Italian, Czech, and French. The game mechanics of *Today I Die* parallel the transformation in narrative tone: the poem begins as a dreadful suicide note (“dead world / full of shades / today I die”), accompanied by a woman who is slowly sinking to the bottom of the ocean, chained to a weighted ball. The environment is dark and gloomy, and two black piranha-like fishes with sharp teeth represent a ferocious threat whenever the player attempts to act. As the player completes the game’s tasks one by one, allowing for the replacement of the poem’s individual terms, the narrative tone builds toward a bright culmination (“free world / full of beauty / today I swim / until you come”), the environment brightens and the mechanisms begin to function as affordances rather than obstacles to

(a)



(b)



Figure 11.7 *Today I Die and I Wish I Were the Moon.*

player progress. The threatening “shades” are actively transformed by the player into shining beacons, creating a procedural change in meaning that echoes and enhances the narrative meaning of the simple poem at the game’s center.

This type of thoughtful play between narrative and procedurality is the trademark of Benmergui’s aesthetic, and is even more evident in his later projects. He has spent the past several years working toward the release of his first commercial game, the above-mentioned *Storyteller*, but the seed for that game’s mechanical way of dealing with narrative composition came in the 2008 game *I Wish I Were the Moon*. Though the latter requires the reader to create narrative scenarios through the movement of different on-screen elements, it is free of narrative with the exception of each of the game’s eight possible endings, which are given a simple written title (“Tragedy,” “Lost Love,” “Be Free”) and accompanied by a message stating the number of undiscovered endings remaining. These are the only textual elements of the game, but the gameplay consists of the procedural development of plotlines that resemble those of conventional, linear narratives. Upon starting the game, the player hears the sonic backdrop of gently lapping waves on the shore, while the cursor becomes a four-cornered square camera reticule, which takes a picture of any element within the frame upon the player’s click. The item is then photographed and shown in translucent overlay on top of the background, allowing the player to drag it to any location and drop it with another click. A Bird, Stars, Water, and Meteorite move at a constant and repeating pace from right to left, suggesting the movement of the Woman in the Boat in the foreground vis-à-vis the relative stillness of the Man on the Moon in the background. Eventually, the player must discover that there are a total of eight interactive animated “sprites,” the game design term for a two-dimensional image that is laid over the larger graphical interface—basically, an image that is also a functioning element of game mechanics—examples being a crocodile in *Pitfall!* or a question block in *Super Mario Bros*. In the case of *I Wish I Were the Moon*, there are eight sprites: Man, Woman, Bird, Meteorite, Moon, Water, Boat, and Heart. By cutting and pasting these sprites into different combinations with one another, the player arrives at each of the game’s eight possible endings. For example, placing both the Woman and Man in the Boat (after which his Heart disappears with the Moon as it floats upwards), leads to the ending “Lost Love,” while if the Woman or Man falls into the Water, the resulting ending is “Tragedy.” In this way, the player must use non-narrative mechanisms to procedurally create meaning in a way that, though virtually devoid of written text, creates variations on classical narrative scenarios. In this way, this deceptively simple game’s dynamics appeal to shared cultural imaginaries regarding poetic concepts of love and courtship, for example, but without resorting to the classical mechanism of conveyance of narrative meaning, the written word.

*Storyteller*, Benmergui's opus-in-progress, promises to massively expand upon the dynamics established in *I Wish I Were the Moon* by multiplying the number of scenarios, possible combinations, potential endings, and functional elements in order to create a broad range of challenging experiences that respond to the narrative tradition with an expansion on the fusion between procedural rhetoric and conventional narrative. Using the 2013 independent blockbuster *The Last of Us*—which was (deservedly) acclaimed for its moving and engaging plot development—as an example, Benmergui explains how *Storyteller* goes beyond the narrative dynamics of even the most cutting-edge commercial games in existence:

Games like *The Last of Us* use character expressions, dialogues, settings and plot twists in a static, cinematographic way that is not directly related to the gameplay of the game itself. Games usually use a story to enrich or frame what the player does most of the time: play the game. In *Storyteller*, expressions, settings and plot twists are gameplay elements to play with. In *Storyteller*, stories \*are\* gameplay. (Benmergui)

Indeed, what makes the game so unique is its combination of conventional narrative structure—in the form of classical plot tropes reduced to comic-strip simplicity—with the interactive challenge of discovering, step by step, the productive solutions encoded within the game's underlying algorithm. For this is what the player does in a process of trial and error with the game mechanics: slowly sketch out the contours of the underlying (non-narrative) code.

## CONCLUSION: LATIN AMERICAN GAME DESIGN AND THE NARRATIVE TRADITION

In conclusion, the relationship between Latin American game design and the narrative tradition shows a shift from the reception of narrative meaning to the interactive production of procedural meaning that combines with conventional narrative techniques. I would suggest that this is part of a broader shift in the episteme of contemporary society, from a paradigm of representation to one of interaction. I hope that this essay has helped to show how narrative analysis is useful but insufficient for an understanding of video games' meaning. Some of the most intriguing ludic creations out of Latin America in the last decade or two have indeed taken on the narrative tradition in direct or indirect ways, but their meaning cannot be unlocked by way of textual analysis, for example, or by viewing a gameplay video. The only way to truly access the meaning of video games is not through a narrative like this one, but through the signifying process of play.

## NOTE

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