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CULTURAL CODE

Video Games and Latin America

Phillip Penix-Tadsen

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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

10350_002.indd 77 10/5/2015 11:40:33 AM

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and for unpacking computational arguments others have created."[43] By setting up a series of procedures that require the player to advance along a path of predetermined steps, games can on the one hand create a logical correspondence that offers the player an experience of believability and verisimilitude, in which the game is perceived as consistent with or further endorsing the player's own life patterns. On the other hand, the manipulation of these same techniques to increase "cognitive friction" in the player can serve to create a meaningful dissonance between the player's real-world ethics and functional understanding of the game's mechanics. This means that persuasive games function in the way that they do because they place the player in an ethical conflict between their own desires as a real-world moral being, and their operational understanding of what actions will lead to a successful outcome within the game. So how, exactly, do Latin American game designer go about creating ethical crises for their players?

Uruguayan critic and game designer Gonzalo Frasca is not only an early proponent of game studies as an academic discipline, he is also a prominent figure in the history of serious game design. Frasca has designed several "newsgames" centered on current events in geopolitics, and coined the term "video games of the oppressed" to describe the potential of using the medium as a tool for liberation, building upon Brazilian educational philosopher Paulo Freire's *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) and playwright and drama theorist Augusto Boal's concept of "The Theater of the Oppressed."[44] Frasca's most notable attempts at this sort of game design were produced in his *Newsgaming* series, which aimed to "use games and simulations to analyze, debate, comment and editorialize major international news" with simple playable scenarios designed for use with Adobe Flash Player.[45] The first, *September 12th: A Toy World*, was produced in 2003 as a response to the US-led global "war on terror," while the second, "Madrid," was put together within a day as a timely but enduring response to the March 11, 2004 Al Qaeda bombing of a number of passenger trains in Spain. Each of these games offers a paradigmatic model of ludic persuasion.

September 12th begins with a concise explanatory introduction: "This is not a game. You can't win and you can't lose. This is a simulation. It has no ending. It has already begun. The rules are deadly simple. You can shoot. Or not. This is a simple model you can use to explore some aspects of the war on terror." Alongside these explanations are two preparatory sketches for the characters who populate the simulation: one is labeled "Civilians," and features a family of three individuals in head-to-toe Islamic *hijab* and tunics. The other character is labeled "Terrorist," and in addition to a tunic and keffiyeh, holds a submachine gun. In the sketch as in the game itself, the differences between civilians and terrorists are subtle. Once the player clicks Start, the visuals of the simulation, which has been at work in the background, are revealed: the player observes a *Where's Waldo*-like world of tiny animated figures circulating busily and swiftly in an unnamed Middle Eastern city lined with buildings of varying sizes, bazaars,

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Figure 2.5
September 12th (Newsgaming.com 2003)

fountains, vendors' stands, and palm-shaded plazas (figure 2.5). An aiming reticule replaces the player's mouse arrow, so that the only manner of interacting with the simulation is through the manipulation of the targeting system: pushing the reticule to the right or left extreme extends the player's view in that direction up to a finite point, meaning the reticule is a navigational tool as well as a ballistic mechanism.

Eventually, of course, nearly all players of *September 12th* will be tempted to click. When they do, after a brief pause that functionally allows for the targeted population to shuffle around and rearrange, a rather imprecise cruise missile rockets down from the sky, striking roughly in the area where the player aimed. The strike will usually kill several individuals, perhaps some terrorists (they are around 10 percent of the population initially circulating), and almost certainly several civilians. When they die, others begin to assemble and mourn at the bomb site, the visceral wails of the victims' relatives contributing to an impactful affective experience. Then the twist occurs: the characters that have gathered to mourn the victim begin to flash and transform, changing from their original civilian selves into an exponentially expanding population of terrorists. Each time the player aims to take out a single terrorist, he in fact ends up creating many more terrorists. The more missiles the player fires, the higher the percentage of terrorists circulating among the population. The buildings will eventually be reconstructed, and with the passing of time between missile attacks the number of terrorists

10350_002.indd 79 10/5/2015 11:40:33 AM

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in the population begins to thin out, but they will never disappear altogether. As Sicart notes, "*September 12th* 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.'"[46] This is a simulated world in which there is no way to win, one can only *lose less*. And from the start, the best thing a player can do is simply to do nothing at all, meaning the procedural rhetoric of *September 12th* functions in a manner antithetical to the heroic triumphalism one generally expects of the medium.

Unlike many small-scale web games, *September 12th* has indeed garnered a significant amount of critical attention. The game is one of Bogost's primary examples in *Persuasive Games*, and he has spoken of it elsewhere as an example of the fact "that games can be noteworthy rhetorical devices."[47] Bogost sees the procedural rhetoric of the game as providing a set of apparent rules, affordances, and possibilities that in fact do not deliver on their promises: "In *September 12[th]*, the rules depict the impossibility of achieving a goal given the tools provided [and] the represented procedural system fails to perform the services it alleges to provide."[48] Patrick Crogan sees this built-in failure as a way of addressing the complicity of the video game medium in the military-entertainment complex, "a reflective meditation on this backstory of military history and on its adoption in war game simulation practices that are now widely disseminated in commercial and amateur war game models."[49] Doubtlessly, *September 12th* is meant to problematize the role of technology in contemporary drone-dominated conflicts like those in Afghanistan and Iraq. Toward that end, it puts the player in control of the death and destruction in order to produce the kind of cognitive friction discussed earlier: the actions required by the game's rules are at odds with the outcome and do not produce the desired result, leading the player to a questioning of the underlying logic of using military intervention to eliminate opposition.

Frasca's next game, *Madrid*, went in an even less conventional direction, using peaceful protest against violence as the context for gameplay. This Flash animation game features a group of some twenty visible demonstrators gathered at a candlelight vigil, each one wearing a t-shirt featuring the name of a city that has been victim to terrorist violence (New York, Baghdad, Oklahoma City, Tokyo, Beirut, Paris, and Buenos Aires) and holding a candle with a flickering yellow flame (figure 2.6). The initial instructions, written in both Spanish and English, tell the player to "Click on the candles and make them shine as bright as you can," and as she does so a light meter at the bottom of the screen traces her progress toward the goal. As soon as the player has clicked on a candle's flame, it momentarily burns big and bright, then almost immediately begins to diminish until it becomes a barely lit flicker. As the player attempts to keep all twenty candles lit, the difficulty of keeping the flame alive becomes ever more apparent. If the procedural rhetoric of *Madrid* had not made it clear enough that the game is about the importance of remembering the lives of the victims and keeping alive the hope for a future

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Figure 2.6
Madrid (Newsgaming.com 2004)

free of fear of violence, the message that the player reads each time she loses is a strong reinforcement: "Debes seguir intentándolo. You have to keep trying." *Madrid* is about the importance of the living keeping their commitment to nonviolence alive, a notion that is harmonious with the content of the game, a candlelight vigil to remember the victims of terrorist violence in Spain. In these two simple but thoughtfully designed games, Frasca establishes important patterns for successful ideological game design that others have tried to reproduce, including straightforward rules, a simple player interface, and coordination of content and mechanics in order to create alternating experiences of friction and coherence.

Other politically and ideologically challenging games have resulted from collaborative efforts combining game design, pedagogy, and community building. These include games that seek to subvert generic norms for the use of violence in video games like *This War of Mine* (11 bit 2014), a survival-strategy PC game in which the player acts as a civilian attempting to survive within a war zone rather than the conventional video game soldier, or *NarcoGuerra* (2013), a turn-based strategy IOS and Android app game developed by the UK firm Game the News, which goes against conventional military shooter games about the drug war by focusing on the difficulty of balancing the interests and demands of the multiple forces at work in the war for control over Mexico's territory among cartels, government agencies, and citizens (figure 2.7). Games such as these challenge our expectations of violence in video games in order to raise important sociopolitical concerns in a complex yet playable manner.

The 2002 online Flash animation game *Tropical America* shares these other examples' unique focus on examining and enhancing the player's understanding of history: it was

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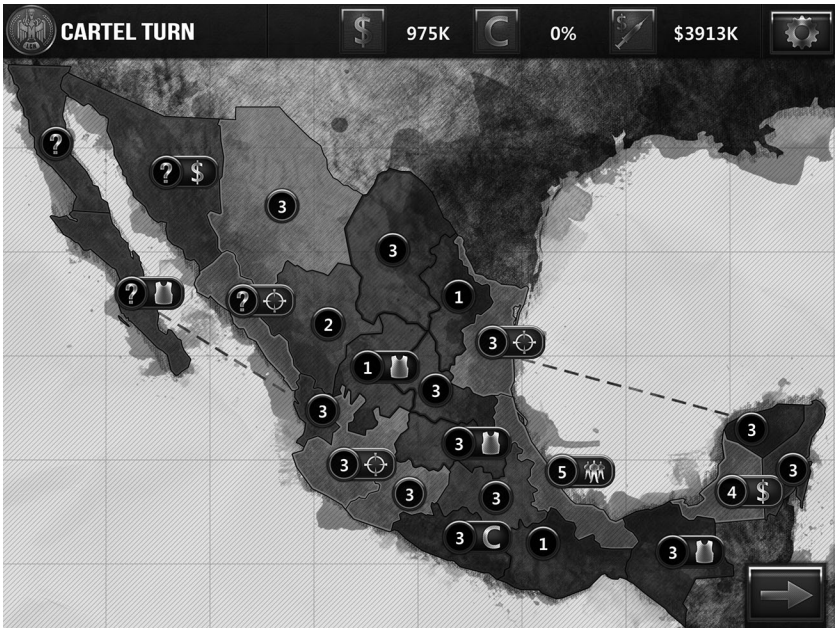

Figure 2.7
NarcoGuerra (GameTheNews 2013)

produced as a component of an after-school violence prevention program in a 90-percent-Latino public high school in Los Angeles, California, where the student population consisted primarily of first- and second-generation immigrants from El Salvador and elsewhere in Central America. The project that led to the development of *Tropical America* was spearheaded by OnRamp Arts, an organization that produced new media projects in collaboration with local high schools, youth, and artists, which received support from a US Department of Education media literacy grant to address youth violence.[50] *Tropical America* was intended in part to provoke reflection on the role of violence in society, but in this case it went beyond that initial goal by seeking to enhance students' knowledge of the cultural heritage that many of them shared as individuals recently displaced from their homelands. In the words of the project's description, "wanting to find a new and compelling way to connect young people to their history, OnRamp artists decided early on to create a database of historical texts, imagery and resources that would exist as a parallel web site to the online game."[51] This information was compiled under the guidance of *Tropical America*'s coeditor, Los Angeles-based Colombian media artist Juan Devis, who culled material from a play he had previously written to create a series of lectures on key episodes from Latin American history. Students used these lectures

10350_002.indd 82 10/5/2015 11:40:33 AM

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as the basis for creating an index of symbolic iconography to parallel the historical processes and relationships they sought to describe in the game, then collaborated with Mexican visual artist Artemio Rodríguez to produce the game's visual aesthetic.[52] As a result, *Tropical America* has the look of a black-and-white woodcut print, an expressive genre with a long history of use toward politically activist ends in Latin America. The game's aesthetic is especially evocative of the work of early twentieth-century Mexican print artist José Guadalupe Posada, which provided the basis for the Mexican Taller de Gráfica Popular (TGP), or People's Graphic Workshop, whose members circulated sociopolitical critique through the woodcut prints they produced in Mexico from the 1930s through the 1960s. *Tropical America*'s aesthetic nod to this tradition suggests an affinity for the use of a simple and accessible interface in order to convey messages with the clarity of a highly simplified form, illustrating historical inequalities in black and white.

Though it requires the player to make decisions that affect the outcome of gameplay, *Tropical America* has such a strong concentration on narrative that it could be described as much as an interactive fiction (to use Montfort's term)[53] or a form of "ergodic literature" (to use Aarseth's)[54] as it could be a video game. The game begins when the player chooses between playable protagonists Juan and María, after which the player is positioned as the lone survivor of the 1981 massacre of El Mozote, a small village in El Salvador, looking for clues as to why this event came to pass. Against the backdrop of automatic gunfire and screams, the opening passages of *Tropical America*'s narrative offer an elliptical explanation that parallels the insecurity and confusion of the situation portrayed:

> They stormed into town early in the morning.
> There were 30 or 40 of them. They had machetes and guns.
> They were asking questions.
> I didn't know who they were, or why they came.
> We were all forced to line-up in the main plaza.
> My mom and I were taken into the church.
> They closed the door and everything was dark.
> When I opened my eyes, I was the only one left.
> I was scared, so I ran. I ran as fast as I could.
> There was a strange smell in the air, the smell of gunpowder, burning wood, rotting flesh.
> I'm afraid to go back but I need to know what happened.
> Who did this to my family and me?
> Who destroyed my town?
> What am I supposed to do now?[55]

From this point, *Tropical America* unfolds as a quest narrative in which the player searches for an explanation for the atrocities introduced at the beginning. In this sense, the quest ultimately ends when the player is introduced to Rufina Amaya, the real-life sole survivor of the

10350_002.indd 83 10/5/2015 11:40:33 AM

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December 1981 El Mozote massacre. However, the game also aims to take on topics such as cultural identity through diaspora, historical inequalities, and the contemporary structures of hegemony. As Henry Jenkins elaborates in his analysis of *Tropical America*, the player explores "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."[56] This is achieved through the completion of four different quests that will lead to the attainment of natural elements that symbolize the stages of the learning process through which the player progresses: corn, sugar, melon, and grapes.

The four quests in *Tropical America* follow different trajectories that bridge vast expanses of history and geography. The "corn" quest begins in the Mayan temple of Bonampak, then takes a somewhat less foreseeable turn, leading to an encounter in 1990s Chiapas, Mexico, in which the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) conjures the memory of their namesake, revolutionary hero Emiliano Zapata (figure 2.8). In the "melon" quest, the player attempts to deliver a melon along with a letter to Charles V, King of Spain and Holy Roman Emperor, but is derailed by parallel journeys to meet with either La Malinche or Tupac Amaru. In the "grapes" quest, the player must feed Christopher Columbus with native vegetables and fruits (he loves avocados), then encounters Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in her colonial Mexican convent followed by a series of encounters with victims of torture and disappearance at the hands of the Latin

Figure 2.8
Tropical America (OnRamp Arts 2002)

10350_002.indd 84 10/5/2015 11:40:33 AM

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American military regimes of the 1970s and 1980s. The "sugar" quest begins in the indigenous Taíno island territory that would soon receive its colonial name of Hispaniola. The player walks down a beach as three indigenous men pass by in their canoes, against the backdrop of the *Niña*, *Pinta*, and *Santa María* anchored in the bay. The player must produce an indigenous word like "canoe" from his inventory (it recognizes only words mentioned within the game, such as maize, avocado, and chocolate, but not other words derived from native languages such as chile or tomato), after which he is rewarded with a gold nugget.

This complex fabric of historico-cultural referentiality is put to an array of different uses throughout *Tropical America*, in an overall effort to interrogate the historical roots of contemporary violence and relationships of power. Indeed there is plenty of violence in *Tropical America*, but not exactly of the standard video game variety: first and foremost, violence is represented at an institutional level. The player is reminded time and again of historical and present inequalities through the game's discourse and gameplay. Spaniards are represented as violent (slapping María without provocation) and conniving (offering her "beads, mirrors and sugar" in exchange for her gold—a reference to the actions undertaken by members of Columbus' first expedition to the New World). Torture is enacted as punishment for participation in virtually any sort of subversive behavior in the game. Retribution for this institutionalized violence is the other side of this coin in the game: in one scenario, the player must cut the mustaches off the corpses of all the Spanish conquistadors to keep as trophies; in another, she must throw rocks at the heads of angry soldiers threatening her with bayonets. Though player agency has some effects in *Tropical America*, instances of violence are generally fixed elements of the game's narrative. For example, whether the player chooses to offer her gold to the Spaniard or not in the "Sugar" quest, the Spaniard will draw his sword and demand it. The player has no choice but to offer it, and is rewarded some sugar cane in return. Likewise, if the player decides to stay behind at the sugar mill and work for nothing rather than seeking justice for the indentured servants working there, she immediately dies of small pox as the screen flashes, "¡Perdiste! YOU LOSE!" At another point, the player must choose between five forms of torture at the hands of the Spanish colonial authorities: beating, asphyxiation, electric shock, burning, or stretching (figure 2.9). But it all comes out the same: the screen goes black and the words "(censored/censurado)" appear over the sonic backdrop of the avatar being tortured until finally being tossed out of the chamber by the Spanish guards. Nonetheless, there are other points in the narrative of *Tropical America* in which the player's decision will affect the trajectory by selecting between one of two possible narrative trajectories, exercising player agency. For example, when the player must decide whether to (1) take on a career as a slave trader or (2) attempt to help a traveling seaman create a new business empire, choosing the former will lead to participation in a rebellion against the slave's owners, while the latter leads to a storyline taking place in contemporary Havana.

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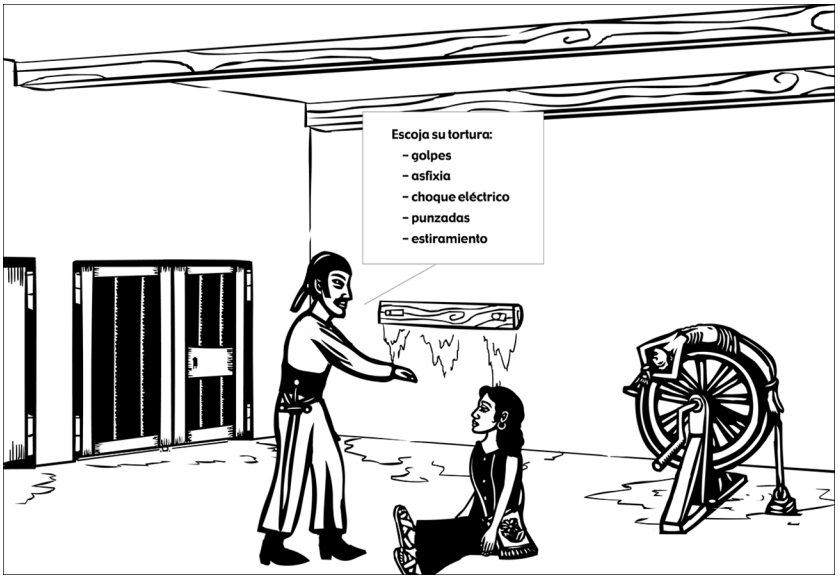

Figure 2.9
Tropical America (OnRamp Arts 2002)

Thus even when developed expressly as pedagogical tools, ideologically charged video games like *Tropical America* can be seen to employ complex systems of signification whose messages resist reduction to their narrative elements. It is the player's experience of the violence that gives it meaning as she clicks on each Spaniard's corpse in order to cut off his mustache, or chooses self-flagellation over a reading of Sor Juana's poetry. Whether gruesome or tongue-in-cheek, the game shows how even something as infinitely controversial as video game violence can be redeployed in unexpectedly revelatory ways by those willing to reexamine the potential of the medium as opposed to using it as a political commodity.

The 2005 Tijuana-San Diego-based art event inSite 05 included a number of other unique and ideologically challenging games that, like *Tropical America*, emerged out of the cross-pollination among spheres including video game design, social activism, pedagogy, academic analysis, and the visual arts. This transnational art fair was the fifth installment since inSite began in 1992 as a series of events focused on public art related to the specific context of the border region.[57] Contributions included public installations, performance-based works, and electronic works, among which were three very curious video games set along the US-Mexico border. Together these games exemplify Osvaldo Cleger's assessment that video games about border crossing "can be effectively *persuasive* in the way they manage to create computational representation of the experience of migrating, and its associated consequences, independently of

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Figure 2.10
Turista Fronterizo (Ricardo Dominguez and Coco Fusco 2006)

the legal or illegal status of such displacements."[58] The first of these games, *Turista Fronterizo*, "a virtual journey through the San Diego-Tijuana borderlands,"[59] is an ironic and humorous border-themed electronic variation on *Monopoly* designed by the Cuban-American performance artist and theorist Coco Fusco and Mexican-American media artist Ricardo Dominguez (figure 2.10). Claire Taylor has rightly characterized *Turista Fronterizo* as an interrogation of the socioeconomic inequalities of border life that encourages the user to compare and contrast the experiences of characters from different sides of the border and different walks of life.[60] The player of *Turista Fronterizo* must choose between four playable avatars, each with a particular national origin, occupation, and form of transportation. Two of them are from the United States: El Gringo Poderoso, a 47-year-old binational businessman who drives a Lexus sedan, and La Gringa Activista, a 30-year-old anthropology student who drives a VW bug. The other two avatars are from Mexico: El Junior, described as a 25-year-old "huevón" ("lazy ass") who drives a Mercedes G500, and La Todológa [*sic*], a 23-year-old who does whatever work she can find and rides public transportation. Depending on the choice of player the game proceeds (almost) entirely in either English (for the US characters) or Spanish (for the Mexican characters).

Turista Fronterizo's characters' identification with their material possessions and income is indicative of the game's take on the border region, which problematizes privilege based on

10350_002.indd 87 10/5/2015 11:40:34 AM

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socioeconomic class as well as nationality. For example, El Gringo Poderoso spends lavishly but profits nonetheless: at Qualcomm Stadium, he takes a Japanese executive to the Chargers Game, spending $500 but scoring a big deal for his company. He also travels freely: at the San Ysidoro Border Checkpoint, he takes the Fast Lane but must shell out $200 to insure his Lexus; at the Castillo del Mar Hotel resort, he is told to "Have a second honeymoon. Spend $1,500." Naturally, the Gringo Poderoso is politically influential as well: at the Mexican Consulate, he is told to "Meet with consul to negotiate the sale of public land in Ensenada to US companies. Spend $300 on lunch." He is an international high roller whose privileges have a cost, but one with little impact as $100 police bribes and $1,000 fees to bring the nanny's children across the border barely make a dent in his $300,000 starting balance. Meanwhile the Gringa Activista skimps and scrapes by on a $10,000 total budget, though she still uses her money in ways that indicate her cosmopolitanism and her comfortable economic origins: she spends $100 on medicine at Farmacia Revolución to save her mother some cash, or bails out a Brazilian friend who forgot her green card, costing her $200 at the Campo Base Detention Center. Her other expenses are focused on supporting her political causes, regardless of where she might find herself: at the Bambi Club, she researches an article for Mother Jones on teenage sex slavery, spending $100 on drinks to get the bartender to chat; at Qualcomm Stadium, she spends another $100 on photocopies in order to "Hand out flyers to Mexican workers." Some of her costliest acts fall under "Nightmares," which along with "Dreams" are *Turista Fronterizo*'s equivalents of *Monopoly*'s taxes and utility bills on the one hand, and "Community Chest" and "Chance" on the other. One of the Gringa Activista's "nightmare" outcomes results from her attempt to take photographs of a maquiladora, which lands her in "La Cárcel" (labeled "Mexican Jail!" on the board played by the US characters), while her participation in a meeting to plan a protest is discovered by undercover police, leading again to her incarceration and a costly $1,000 fine. Nonetheless she also enjoys the status provided by her outwardly perceptible US nationality: when she lands on the Castillo del Mar Hotel, her outcome reads, "Hide your VW, pretend you're a guest and sip free margaritas on the beach, ¡órale!"; at the Fashion Valley Mall, she pastes stickers against worker exploitation in the Nordstrom's bathroom, but spends $100 there to avoid looking suspicious. Politically, the Gringa Activista is powerless and somewhat clueless, but she nevertheless remains economically unburdened.

Like the US characters, the Mexican protagonists of *Turista Fronterizo* are affected as much by their nationality as by economic and social factors in the game. El Junior, the quintessence of overprivileged upper-class Mexican "fresa," leads a life that in many ways is closer to that of the Gringo Poderoso than it is to either his compatriot La Todológa or the Gringa Activista, though he starts out with $50,000, one sixth of the budget enjoyed by the Gringo Poderoso (which is still five times that of the Gringa Activista). He tosses his money around by spending

10350_002.indd 88 10/5/2015 11:40:34 AM

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$200 on "porquería" ("garbage") when he takes out his "cuates" ("homies") in Chula Vista to see the Chargers, $100 on a few tequilas and a striptease at the Bambi Club, or $250 for a bottle of perfume to earn the forgiveness of his "jefita" ("shorty"). In terms of his freedom of movement, El Junior experiences few obstacles: at the San Ysidoro Border checkpoint he hides his weed and crosses without raising suspicion; his trunk is searched by the Border Patrol but they fail to check his pockets, so he moves on. El Junior lacks the clout of the Gringo Poderoso, and in one of his "Nightmare" outcomes he is confused with a drug trafficker and has to pay $500 to the Policía Judicial for proper documentation of his identity, but he is still politically connected, able to complain to a cousin who works for the government when the smell of the Basurero del Tecate dump begins to get in the way of his trips to the beach with lovers, or to clear the way for his plan to build the nightclub of his dreams. In some ways, he is as much a "border tourist" as the Gringa Activista or any of the others, attending a conference at the Mexican Consulate on the history of tequila, but at the same time he is set apart by his relatively high level of purchasing power. La Todológa, meanwhile, is the representative of the economic underclass in *Turista Fronterizo*, starting out with a miniscule budget of $1,000 (less than one third of 1 percent of the Gringo Poderoso's money, a fiftieth of El Junior's, and only 10 percent of the Gringa Activista's). Her actions generally focus on finding odd jobs that provide tiny contributions to her income: at the Castillo del Mar Hotel she earns $10 working in the kitchen, while at the Fashion Valley Mall she makes $100 washing dishes and at the San Diego Convention Center she earns another $100 working on the cleaning staff. La Todológa's border tourism, like most of her existence, is penny-pinching: when she visits La Huerta for Day of the Dead, she spends just $1 on the public transportation to get there, though when times are tough, she will pay some criminal elements $400 to get her across the border overnight. Her familial and social responsibilities also generate significant expenses: she has to pay $100 to cover health costs for a cousin who got lung cancer from living close to the dump, and spends $50 on medicine after her boyfriend is beaten during a strike against a Hyundai sweatshop (losing all money causes the player to lose the game). Perhaps the most notable aspect of La Todológa's life is its precariousness—her very existence hangs in a balance controlled by the whims others: accused of stealing from a hotel guest where she works, she is incarcerated without further ado; when she reports to the police after having been robbed, she ends up in jail herself; when a coyote tries to turn her into a sex slave and cross the border, she loses her life savings in an attempt to escape. Because of the way it reflects the impact of privilege and nationality by providing different outcomes to the same set of circumstances depending on the attributes of the avatar being played, *Turista Fronterizo* rewards players who wish to find out how the other half lives, so to speak, by doing a bit of border tourism themselves, offering the player critical insights through the use of humor and a highly replayable and contrasting set of game dynamics.

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Like *Turista Fronterizo*, media artist and scholar Rafael Fajardo's *Crosser* (2000) and *La Migra* (2001) use familiar gameplay mechanics—rather than the *Monopoly* board, the former is based on the arcade classic *Frogger* (Konami 1981), the latter *Space Invaders* (Taito/Midway 1978)—to problematize questions of personal and national security revolving around border crossing. Rita Raley explains that Fajardo's games "stage the scene of border crossing as one of collision detection"[61] through gameplay dynamics, though the procedural rhetoric these games employ has yet to be fully explored. In *Frogger*, the goal is to reach a row of secure lily pads; in *Crosser*, the stated objective is to "Get to the green card on the other side to pursue the American dream." *Crosser*, like its ludic archetype, consists of a series of rows of mobile obstacles whose movement restricts the player's progress from their starting point (the lowest playable area of screen space) to the destination (the highest playable area). In the original *Frogger*, there are a total of thirteen rows that the player must cross in order to get to the destination. Three of these are free of obstacles or threats: the starting row, the middle row (which offers the player a halftime respite after crossing the highway and prior to crossing the river), and the destination, the final row of lily pads. On the road, there are five more rows of different vehicles, and in the river there are five rows of logs, turtles, and alligators. *Crosser* operates on a relatively reduced scale, with seven traversable rows of space. Two are free of moving obstacles: the starting point on the Mexican side of the border, where the protagonist is surrounded by humble but colorful abodes and a series of prickly pear cacti, and the destination border checkpoint (figure 2.11). Floating down the river on the Mexican side of the border there are two threats: a gnarly log similar to those in *Frogger* as well as a rather unconventional obstacle, an X-eyed corpse in gang member garb (a plaid shirt buttoned only at the top over a white t-shirt, matching red cap, green fatigue pants, and shiny white sneakers). On the US side of the river there are two further items, floating kittens with their still-sharp and flailing claws, and abandoned rubber tires. Once the player makes it across the river in *Crosser*, she gets no respite as in *Frogger* but immediately faces the highway, replete with three more rows of threats: first, a squad of Border Patrol agents on foot, then a lane of the authorities' vehicles, and finally a stream of helicopters zooming overhead. In *Frogger*, the player goes from a precarious state to one of security, making her way home. In *Crosser* the topography is reversed, with the player starting out in the relative comfort of home, then having to cross the river and the highway in order to reach the goal, which instead of a secure lily pad is the looming monolith of a government visa office.

Fajardo's *La Migra* uses an interface virtually identical to that of *Crosser* but reverses the player's perspective: this time, the player's avatar is a Border Patrol vehicle that seeks to imprison, deport, or otherwise put a stop to those attempting to cross the border. Whereas the spacecraft in the original *Space Invaders* fired laser beams to destroy the descending aliens, the Border Patrol vehicle in *La Migra* launches handcuffs (figure 2.12). If the cuffs strike people

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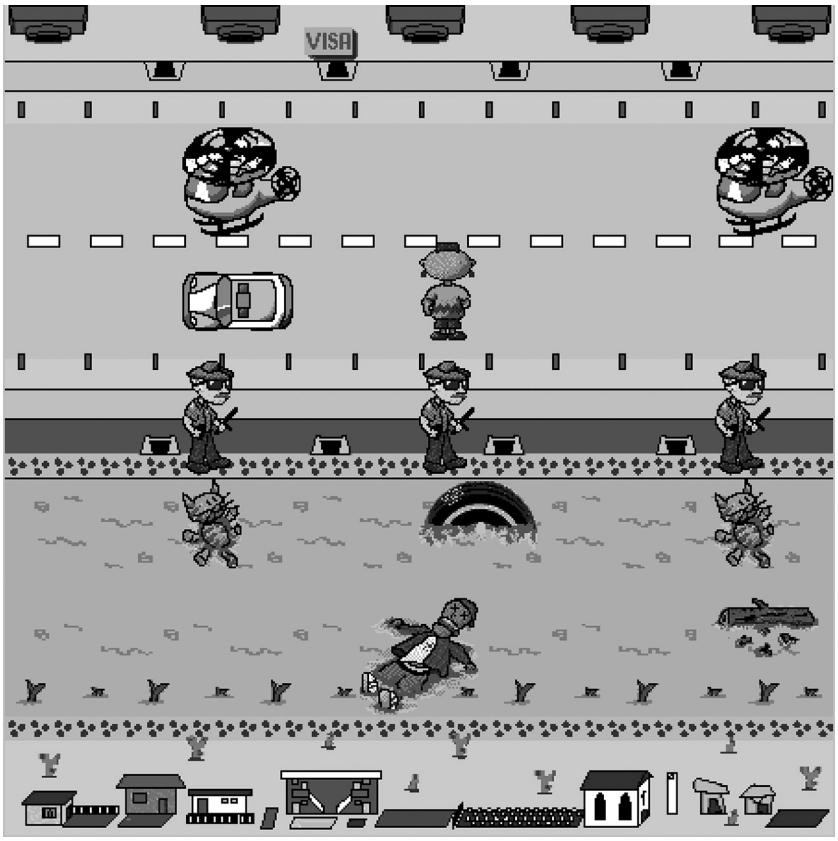

Figure 2.11
Crosser (Rafael Fajardo 2000)

crossing from the Mexican side of the border before they get to the United States, they bounce off and the character's progress continues. If they strike their target on the US side of the border, they redirect the NPC's trajectory toward an office entry labeled "Deportees" on the lower extreme of the map. The NPC then passes through the door on the US side of the border, reappears through a door marked "Repatriar" ("Repatriation") on the Mexican side, and goes right to crossing once again, creating a continual challenge for the player-as-Border Patrol agent. Should the agent become exasperated and want to do away with some of the crossers, he will have to run them down with the car, which leaves a bloody corpse in the road that is not only symbolically significant but has a ludic impact as well, as the bodies in the street restrict the movement of the Border Patrol vehicles. Like Frasca's *September 12th*, *La Migra* has no win condition: the player can only postpone losing for so long before the stream of individuals becomes

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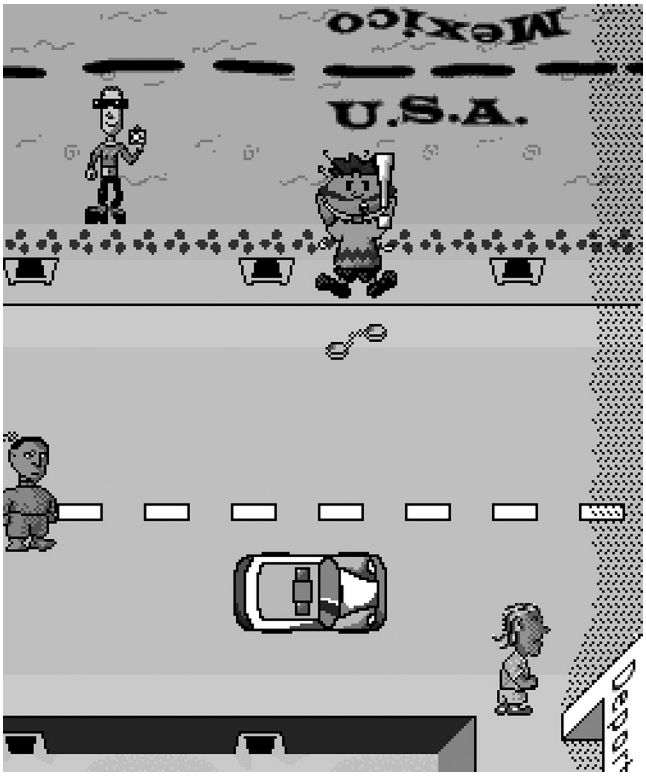

Figure 2.12
La Migra (Rafael Fajardo 2001)

too much to control given the increasing number of bodies serving as obstacles. The procedural rhetoric of *Crosser* and *La Migra* makes their message quite clear: the apparent solutions of border security and deportation do little to stymy the demand for illegal border crossing. Violent measures by the Border Patrol, meanwhile, not only make the exercise and legitimation of their own authority more difficult but also fail to address the root causes of undocumented immigration. Though the two games position players on opposite sides of the immigrant/border patrol divide, they procedurally lead toward a similar ideological critique.

Games used to persuade their players ethically and ideologically, such as the ones designed by Frasca, Dominguez and Fusco, OnRamp Arts, and Fajardo examined in this section, use retro game mechanics and basic graphics in order to make statements that are anything but simplistic. Thoughtful game design can use conventional practices for unconventional ends, persuading the player to make unexpected discoveries about the nature of violence and warfare through gameplay. These game designers also remind us that video games can capably

10350_002.indd 92 10/5/2015 11:40:34 AM

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and stirringly take on serious themes such as global terrorism and the so-called war on terror, the legacy of colonialism, civil war in El Salvador, the dangers of undocumented border crossing, and socioeconomic inequalities. Moreover, they do this in quirky and sometimes humorous ways that function harmoniously with game mechanics, evidencing how games can use an appealing and familiar interface and still provoke serious contemplation from players.

Conclusion: Beyond Persuasive Games

The importance of persuasion has been recognized in game studies for some time, but an examination of the ways games are used persuasively in contemporary culture signals a need to bring new materials, cultural contexts, and conceptual frameworks to bear on the discussion of persuasion. Bogost establishes the theoretical basis for this discussion in *Persuasive Games* by arguing: "We must recognize the persuasive and expressive power of procedurality. Processes influence us. They see changes in our attitudes, which in turn, and over time, change our culture. As players of video games and other computational artifacts, we should recognize procedural rhetoric as a new way to interrogate our world, to comment on it, to disrupt and challenge it."[62] In this chapter I have attempted to follow Bogost's lead by examining the procedural rhetoric of persuasive games like *Tropical America*, *Turista Fronterizo*, *Crosser*, and *La Migra*. These games further evidence Bogost's assertion that no game can be adequately interpreted strictly on a narrative basis, and that the procedural mechanics of gameplay hold enormous sway over the meaning created within the interactive environment of a video game.

But for better or for worse, there are other important ways that video games are used to persuade. As evidenced by the political controversies in Mexico, Venezuela, and Cuba examined in this chapter, games represent an increasingly valuable form of cultural currency even when isolated from their procedural meaning and used as political commodities. In the most drastic of cases, this has resulted in sweeping censorship measures and encroachments on intellectual freedom, such as those passed into Venezuelan law under Hugo Chávez. In the best of cases, though, it has occasioned thoughtful responses and genre-redefining takes on game design from Latin American designers seeking to take control of their country's ludic image, as with the Cuban designers of *Gesta Final*. Ever more, video games are being used to stir controversy and effect real-world changes, and it is therefore crucial to examine the ways games are used in public discourse and what effects they can produce. Analyzing games like *Call of Duty: Black Ops* and *Mercenaries 2* in terms of their depiction by public figures as well as gameplay allows us to see the ways in which reductive portrayals of games within political discourse differ fundamentally from the procedural meaning that games create for their players.

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Video games are complex procedural objects that can persuade through the activation of self-contained semiotic systems. But games are also cultural commodities, and as such they can be used as instruments of persuasion even—or especially—when their meaning is divorced entirely from that which is conveyed through gameplay. The political posturing employed when video games are discussed in the public sphere must also be interpreted in terms of its own procedural rhetoric, bringing to light the disconnections and distortions frequently employed to make video games politically useful commodities. Games are being used in more and more ways today, and the analysis of video game meaning must now turn beyond the internal procedures and rhetorical devices of game design in order to understand just how persuasive games can be for contemporary culture.

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