

PERFORMANCE AND PLAY: LATIN AMERICAN CULTURAL REPRESENTATION IN
GAMING

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the relationship between video games and performance studies, focusing on how Latin American cultures are portrayed within interactive media. By engaging with theories of immersion, game-based argumentation, and cultural identity, this research explores how video games create immersive, interactive worlds where players not only experience stories but also engage with social and political ideas. Through gameplay, players can engage with complex narratives and explore themes such as power, identity, and societal structures in virtual spaces. Essentially, video games do more than entertain—they also reflect and shape the real-world issues we face. Drawing from the works of video game designers/theorists, and performance studies scholars and artists the study investigates how game mechanics and digital performance influence cultural narratives and challenge dominant power structures. My research also touches on the role of augmented and virtual reality in amplifying player agency and fostering deeper connections to Latin American identity and history.

DEDICATION

This journey has been one of perseverance, passion, and unwavering support. To my mentors, friends, colleagues, and family who stood by me, encouraged me, and believed in my potential, I offer my deepest gratitude.

To Izel, my world and inspiration—this achievement is as much yours as it is mine. To Lupita, my love and rock, your support has been my anchor through every challenge. To my parents, who instilled in me the values of hard work and determination, I hope this makes you proud.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Magic Circles and Cultural Connections: The Evolution of Play from Ancient Rituals to Modern Gaming

What is *play*? Loosely, I will state that play encompasses a wide range of activities that involve spontaneity, creativity, and engagement with rules and structures. It is a fundamental aspect of human behavior, manifesting in various forms of social interaction, performance, and cultural expression. Indeed, games are an important arm of human culture, especially in Latin America, and they existed long before technology and electronic versions arrived. The relationship between ritual and games is a complex one that reveals deep connections between various forms of human expression and cultural practices. This preliminary chapter will draw on both liminality and the stages of separation, transition, and incorporation. The first component will explore how traditional rituals and games fostered communal bonds and cultural identity through transformative experiences in ancient times. The second component will shift focus to modern digital gaming, emphasizing how advancements in technology have reshaped play while retaining structured elements reminiscent of traditional rituals. This transition highlights the evolving nature of games and their capacity to facilitate significant social and cultural transitions in contemporary contexts, bridging the past and present in the study of play.

Mark Beumer emphasizes this relationship by exploring how anthropological studies of ritual provide a framework for understanding the symbolic and social functions of both

traditional rituals and modern gaming practices.¹ The works of key anthropologists, such as Victor Turner and Arnold Van Gennep, allow Beumer to highlight how rituals serve to reinforce social bonds, convey cultural values, and facilitate transitions within communities. Turner's concept of liminality, where participants experience a transformative phase, can be applied to both traditional Latin American games and modern digital games. In traditional Latin American games, participants enter a liminal state when they engage in the game, temporarily stepping outside their everyday roles. The game has ritualistic elements, such as the ceremonial preparation of the players and the symbolic significance of the ball court, which represents the cosmos. The players transform as they navigate the challenges of the game, striving to achieve victory and honor, which in turn reinforces their communal bonds and cultural identity. This concept will be tied into the early stages of the ancient forms of play when there was a connection between the cosmos and the ritual.

Arnold van Gennep's approach to rituals ties into modern ways people approach and engage with games. His stages of separation, transition, and incorporation can be connected to modern forms of games and play in Latin America by examining how contemporary gaming practices mirror the structured and symbolic elements of traditional rituals. The stage of separation is seen when players enter the gaming world, leaving behind their everyday lives. This act of immersing themselves in the game world serves as a form of separation, as they temporarily disconnect from their usual surroundings and responsibilities. During the transition phase, players engage in the game's core activities, which often involve completing quests, participating in competitions, or collaborating with other players. This phase mirrors the

¹ Beumer, Mark. "The Foundation of Anthropology to Ritual Studies." *Journal of Ritual Studies*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2020, pp. 20-30.

transitional stage in traditional rituals, where participants undergo experiences that transform their status or skills. The incorporation stage occurs when players reintegrate into their real lives, often bringing with them a sense of achievement and enhanced social connections formed through the gaming experience. The bonds formed and the skills developed during gameplay contribute to the players' identities and social networks, and is similar to how traditional rituals reintegrate individuals into their communities with renewed roles and statuses.

The study of games is often traced back to Dutch historian Johan Huizinga's 1944 work, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. Huizinga associated games with rituals, viewing them as activities occurring outside the realm of ordinary life. He defined play as "*a stepping out of real life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own.*" (Huizinga 8) Huizinga coined the term Magic Circle to describe the isolated, sacred spaces where rituals and games take place. The term refers to a conceptual boundary that separates the real world from the world of play. Within this space, the usual rules and realities of everyday life are suspended, and a new set of rules specific to the game takes over. This boundary allows players to engage in activities and behaviors that are understood and accepted within the context of the game but may not be appropriate or relevant outside of it. The magic circle creates a safe and distinct environment where the unique dynamics of play can unfold, enabling participants to explore different roles, challenges, and experiences in a manner that is clearly delineated from their ordinary lives.

In modern game studies, the magic circle is seen as a starting point for discussions about the nature of play, rather than an absolute rule. It helps in understanding the unique space that games create, but scholars also acknowledge that games interact with and influence the real world in myriad ways. Thus, while the magic circle remains a significant and widely referenced

concept, the field of game studies continues to evolve with new theories and perspectives that build upon and sometimes challenge Huizinga's initial framework.

Roger Caillois' viewpoint to game studies, as articulated in his seminal work *Man, Play and Games* (year) builds on and extends Johan Huizinga's foundational ideas while introducing a more nuanced classification of games and play. His framework diverges from Huizinga's in significant ways, particularly in how he views the boundaries and functions of play, which can be seen as a response to and critique of Huizinga's concept of the magic circle. Caillois categorizes play into four primary types: *Agôn* (competition), *Alea* (chance), *Mimicry* (simulation), and *Ilinx* (vertigo). Each type of play involves different dynamics and experiences, suggesting that the magic circle is not a one-size-fits-all concept but rather a diverse set of spaces where different rules and realities can apply. For instance, *Agôn* games, like sports, focus on competition and skill, creating a magic circle where fairness and equal opportunity are paramount. In contrast, *Alea* games, such as lotteries or dice games, operate on luck and chance, establishing a space where fate, rather than skill, determines outcomes.

Caillois thus critiques the rigidity of Huizinga's magic circle by highlighting the interconnectedness of play and reality. This perspective is supported by contemporary game studies scholars who explore the socio-cultural impacts of games. For instance, Thomas Malaby in *Beyond Play: A New Approach to Games* argues that games are fundamentally contingent and emergent practices that cannot be fully separated from the contexts in which they occur. Malaby's work aligns with Caillois' view that the magic circle is a more dynamic and permeable boundary than Huizinga suggested. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman offer a detailed framework for understanding how games function and the roles they play in human culture (94). They define games as systems where players engage in artificial conflicts, defined by rules, that result in

quantifiable outcomes. This definition encapsulates the structured nature of games, emphasizing the importance of rules as the foundation upon which games are built.

The exploration of play as a fundamental aspect of human behavior reveals its intricate connections to culture, community, and identity. The interplay between traditional rituals and modern gaming practices highlights the continuity of these expressions across time, illustrating how they serve to reinforce social bonds and facilitate personal transformation. Both ancient and contemporary forms of play are imbued with symbolic significance, enabling participants to navigate their identities and relationships within distinct yet interconnected spheres. Insights from game studies illuminate the evolving nature of play, emphasizing its role not only as a means of entertainment but also as a powerful medium for cultural expression and social connection. Ultimately, understanding the dynamics of play allows for an appreciation of its rich heritage and ongoing relevance in shaping communal identities and fostering meaningful interactions in an increasingly digital world. In this way, play transcends the boundaries of mere pastime, becoming a vital thread woven into the fabric of human culture, one that continues to evolve and resonate with each new generation.

1.2 From *Tenochtitlán* to Machu Picchu: The Cultural Importance of Play in Ancient Civilizations

The history of play in Latin America is deeply rooted in the rich cultural and societal frameworks of pre-Colombian civilizations, particularly in Mesoamerica. The Aztecs, Mayas, and Incas exemplify advanced civilizations through their social structures and architectural achievements. The Aztecs had a hierarchical society led by a divine emperor and built the intricate city of *Tenochtitlán*, featuring canals and the *Templo Mayor*. The Maya established independent city-states, showcased by the monumental pyramids of Tikal and the carved stelae

of Copán. The Incas, under the Sapa Inca, constructed Machu Picchu, known for its dry-stone architecture, and the impressive fortress of *Sacsayhuamán*. These civilizations also placed significant importance on recreational activities and games, which were intricately woven into the fabric of their daily lives and spiritual beliefs. Public festivals and communal rituals often included elements of play and were central to Mesoamerican public life. These events combined religious ceremonies with games, dances, and theatrical performances, creating a festive atmosphere that reinforced social bonds and communal identity.

The Aztecs celebrated numerous religious festivals throughout the year, each deeply rooted in their mythology and agricultural cycles. For example, the Feast of the Sun (*Toxcatl*) was dedicated to the god Huitzilopochtli and involved athletic competitions, including a ball game that was a blend of sport and ritual. During this festival, participants also engaged in theatrical reenactments of mythological events, illustrating the Aztec creation story and the gods' struggles, which reinforced communal beliefs and social cohesion. The festival concluded with communal feasting, where people shared traditional foods, strengthening community ties. Another significant festival was the Feast of *Tlaxochimaco*, which celebrated the blooming of the cactus flower. It involved the gathering of flowers and offerings to the gods, showcasing the Aztecs' deep connection to nature. The festival also included dance performances and music, where participants donned elaborate costumes and masks that represented various deities and mythical creatures. The *Panquetzaliztli* festival honored Huitzilopochtli and included a month-long series of ceremonies culminating in a grand procession. Participants decorated their homes and public spaces with vibrant banners and offerings, and the celebrations featured lively music, dancing, and the reenactment of the god's triumphs, emphasizing the importance of warfare and sacrifice in Aztec culture. These festivals not only served religious purposes but also functioned

as vital social events that reinforced the Aztecs' communal identity, cultural heritage, and adherence to their cosmology (Hassig, 20).

Such festivals provided an opportunity for individuals from different social strata to come together and participate in shared cultural practices. They also allowed for the display of physical prowess and skill, contributing to the social status and prestige of successful participants. The integration of play into these public events underscores its multifaceted role in Mesoamerican society, serving both as a form of entertainment and as a means of reinforcing social cohesion and religious devotion. Play and games were integral to these cultures, serving not only as recreational activities but also as tools for education, socialization, and religious expression through ritual.

Traditional activities associated with games, which often included elaborate costumes, masks, and dramatic narratives, engaged participants in shared cultural experiences in pre-Colombian Latin American settings (Schechner, 1988). These performances were imbued with symbolic meaning, and participants often reenacted mythological stories and historical events that reinforced communal identity and conveyed moral and spiritual lessons. In pre-Colombian Latin America, play and performance were deeply integrated into the social, religious, and political fabric of indigenous societies, and games and rituals that included these elements served as essential mechanisms for expressing cultural identity, transmitting knowledge, and reinforcing communal cohesion between performers/players and among the viewing public.

Among the Aztecs, for instance, ceremonial rituals such as the annual festival of *Panquetzaliztli*² involved dramatic reenactments of mythological narratives and historical events. These performances were intricately choreographed and included the use of masks and costumes to depict gods, ancestors, and legendary heroes (Carrasco, 1998). Such rituals were not mere entertainment but profound expressions of spiritual beliefs and moral teachings, aimed at reinforcing communal values and societal norms (Townsend, 1992). Anthropological studies emphasize the transformative nature of these theatrical rituals, drawing upon Victor Turner's concept of *performance as ritual*³ and *communitas*⁴. Turner argued that rituals create a liminal space where ordinary social roles and norms are temporarily suspended, allowing for communal participation in shared experiences that strengthen social cohesion and cultural continuity (Turner, 1969). In the context of pre-Colombian civilizations, these theatrical performances, understood as forms of play, served as rituals that facilitated collective identity formation and reaffirmed the interconnectedness between humans, gods, and the natural world.

Civilizations, such as the Maya, Aztec, and Inca, placed significant importance on various forms of play, most notably the Mesoamerican ballgame, which was both a sport and a

² The festival of *Panquetzaliztli* was a significant annual celebration in Aztec culture, dedicated to the god Huitzilopochtli, the patron deity of war and the sun. It took place in the Aztec month of *Panquetzaliztli*, which roughly corresponds to late November and early December in the Gregorian calendar. This festival was particularly important in Tenochtitlan, the capital city of the Aztec Empire (now Mexico City), where it involved elaborate rituals, ceremonies, and public celebrations.

³ *performance as ritual* is a theoretical framework that examines how certain forms of human behavior and expression, particularly theatrical performances and ceremonial acts, function as rituals within social and cultural contexts. Turner, an anthropologist known for his work on symbolism, ritual, and cultural performance, argued that rituals are not solely religious or formalized activities but encompass a wide range of social practices that serve specific cultural purposes.

⁴ *Communitas* refers to a state of perceived togetherness or collective solidarity experienced by individuals or groups during certain rites of passage, rituals, or other liminal experiences.

sacred ritual (Whittington, 16). The Mesoamerican ballgame was played with a rubber ball on a specially constructed court. The rules and methods of play varied among different cultures, but the game often involved players using their hips, elbows, and knees to keep the ball in motion without letting it touch the ground (Scarborough, 1991). The game's physical demands and strategic complexity made it a popular spectator sport, akin to how modern sports events draw large crowds. Beyond its entertainment value, however, the ballgame also held significant religious and cosmological meanings. The courts were often built near temples and aligned with celestial bodies, symbolizing the connection between the earthly and divine realms. The game's iconography and the architectural layout of the courts reflected cosmological themes, such as the movement of the sun and stars, the cyclical nature of time, and the perpetual struggle between order and chaos (Taladoire, 30-35). These elements emphasize the game's role in perpetuating and reinforcing the cosmological principles central to Mesoamerican worldviews.

The dual nature of the ballgame—as both sport and sacred ritual—illustrates how play functioned as a bridge between the mundane and the divine. It allowed participants and spectators to engage with their culture's spiritual beliefs tangibly and immediately. Through the physical act of playing and the communal experience of watching, individuals could connect with their gods, ancestors, and the larger cosmic order (Whittington, 54-57). This integration of play and ritual fostered a deep sense of unity and continuity within these civilizations, reinforcing societal values such as community and cooperation, fostering a sense of belonging among participants. Rituals honored deities and demonstrated respect for the divine, while festivals transmitted cultural identity and heritage across generations. Celebrations that honored ancestors emphasized the importance of familial ties, and certain games reinforced social

hierarchies within communities. Additionally, many rituals aimed to maintain balance with nature and reflected the resilience and dedication of individuals to the welfare of the community.

One of the first written accounts describing the relationship between the divine and the real is The *Popol Vuh*, a foundational sacred text of the K'iche' Maya, detailing the creation of the world, the adventures of gods and heroes, and the history of the Maya people. It is divided into several parts, with the first detailing the creation myth, the formation of the Earth, and the gods' attempts to create humanity. The most celebrated section recounts the story of the Hero Twins, Hunahpú and Xbalanqué, who embark on a series of adventures, including a journey to the underworld, Xibalbá, to defeat its lords. This narrative is not only a mythological tale but also serves as a rich tapestry of ritual, play, and cultural values, intertwining these elements in ways that highlight their significance in Maya society.

The connection between games, rituals, and play in the *Popol Vuh* is profoundly illustrated in the tale of the Hero Twins, particularly through their ballgame with the lords of the underworld. In the context of the *Popol Vuh*, the ballgame serves as a metaphor for the cosmic struggle between life and death, order and chaos (Christenson, 172). The game involves hitting a rubber ball with their hips and passing it through stone hoops mounted high on the ballcourt walls. The lords of *Xibalbá*, known for their trickery, set numerous traps and obstacles for the twins. For example, they give the twins a cigar and a torch, challenging them to return these items at dawn without having used them up. *Hunahpú* and *Xbalanqué* outwit the lords by cleverly substituting fireflies for the cigar's light and attaching red feathers to the torch to mimic its flame. The twins' success in these games is not just a matter of physical skill but also their intelligence and ability to read their opponents. By using their wits and magical prowess, they

manage to survive the deadly challenges of *Xibalbá*, ultimately defeating the lords in their domain. This victory not only avenges their father and uncle but also signifies the restoration of cosmic balance, underscoring the themes of resilience and the triumph of good over evil.

This interplay of game and ritual in the *Popol Vuh* aligns with that view play as a fundamental component of human culture, particularly in its ability to create *liminal*⁵ spaces where normal rules and realities are suspended (Turner, 201). Victor Turner describes these liminal spaces as transformative, where participants undergo a process of change, much like the Hero Twins who evolve through their trials in the underworld. Through the liminal space, the Twins gained wisdom, strength, and supernatural abilities. They cleverly outwit the lords of the underworld using their growing magical prowess, and their teamwork allows them to overcome deadly challenges. The ritualistic aspects of their journey, including the ballgame, are performative acts that reinforce social norms and cosmological principles such as their willingness to sacrifice themselves and their subsequent rebirth symbolize the cyclical nature of life, death, and rebirth. These actions reinforce social norms such as justice and retribution, as the twins' journey avenges their father and uncle, highlighting the importance of these values. The twins' victory over the lords of *Xibalbá* elevates the triumph of good over evil, an essential cosmological principle. Their teamwork and reliance on each other emphasize the importance of community and cooperation in overcoming adversities, while their success in the ballgame and trials brings honor and glory, reflecting the cultural emphasis on achieving distinction and recognition through skill and valor.

⁵ Liminality refers to a transitional or in-between phase in rites of passage rituals where individuals or groups experience a temporary suspension of social norms, hierarchies, and distinctions. During this liminal phase, participants often undergo profound psychological and social transformations as they move from one social status or identity to another.

Furthermore, Huizinga's concept of *Homo Ludens* emphasizes that play is a core component of culture, where structured games and unstructured play alike contribute to social cohesion and the transmission of cultural values (Huizinga, 64). *Popol Vuh* intricately weaves together games, rituals, and play, particularly in the tale of the Hero Twins, to reflect the profound cultural and spiritual values of the Maya. This narrative aligns with anthropological and performance theories that emphasize the transformative power of play and ritual in human societies, reinforcing social norms and cultural continuity.

Play and ritual were also important aspects of Aztec civilization. Aztec culture, flourishing in central Mexico from the 14th to the early 16th century, was a highly sophisticated and complex civilization. The Aztecs, who called themselves *Mexica*, established their capital, *Tenochtitlán*, on an island in Lake Texcoco, creating a city renowned for its grandeur, featuring expansive temples, palaces, and bustling markets. The society was stratified, with a powerful ruling class, a class of priests who wielded significant influence, and a large population of farmers, artisans, and merchants (Smith, 20). Religion played a central role in Aztec life, with a pantheon of gods linked to natural elements and human activities. Human sacrifice was a critical part of their religious practices, believed to appease gods and ensure cosmic order (Carrasco, 10-15). The Aztecs also excelled in various crafts, producing exquisite textiles, pottery, and elaborate feather work. Their economy was highly developed, featuring extensive trade networks and a tribute system that collected goods from conquered regions. Social gatherings, feasts, and festivals were common, often involving music, dance, and elaborate ceremonies, reflecting the Aztec's communal and celebratory spirit (Berdan, 1982).

The arrival of the Spanish to the capital city of *Tenochtitlán* in 1519 marked a pivotal moment in the history of the Aztec Empire and Mesoamerica. Led by Hernán Cortés, the Spanish expedition was initially received with a mix of awe, curiosity, and apprehension by the Aztecs, largely due to the prophecies and omens predicting the return of *Quetzalcoatl*, a revered deity.⁶ Moctezuma II, the Aztec emperor, welcomed Cortés with gifts and hospitality, attempting to appease the foreigners whom he might have perceived as divine or semi-divine beings. This initial hospitality was part of a complex interplay of diplomacy and intimidation, at the heart of which was a focus on game play. Cortés, adept at manipulation and recognizing the political dynamics, exploited Moctezuma's hesitation and the internal strife within the Aztec Empire, including dissent among tributary states (Leon-Portilla, 25-27). Despite the courteous reception, tension simmered beneath the surface, fueled by cultural misunderstandings and the Spaniards' relentless pursuit of gold and resources. The fragile peace eventually crumbled, leading to conflicts that culminated in the capture of Moctezuma and the eventual siege and fall of *Tenochtitlán*.

Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, a Spanish Franciscan friar⁷ and ethnographer, documented the encounter between Aztec Emperor Moctezuma and the Spanish *conquistadores* in his seminal work *General History of Things of the New Spain*, and one account in particular focuses

⁶ According to Aztec prophecy, *Quetzalcoatl*, who had once ruled the land and brought knowledge and culture to the people, would return in a year marked by *Ce Acatl*. This prophecy added to the confusion and hesitation of the Aztec emperor Moctezuma II when Hernán Cortés and his Spanish expedition arrived in 1519, coinciding with a *Ce Acatl* year, leading to the mistaken belief that Cortés might be the returning god Quetzalcoatl.

⁷ Spanish friars began focusing on documenting the customs and cultures of the Indigenous people in Mexico as part of their broader mission of evangelization and cultural assimilation. The primary goal of the friars was to convert the indigenous population to Christianity. Understanding the local customs, languages, and belief systems was essential for effective communication and teaching.

on a game of dice Moctezuma and Hernán Cortés. Sahagún's account of Moctezuma playing dice with the Spaniards highlights a moment of cultural exchange and interaction between the Aztec ruler and Europeans. The act of playing a game together served as a form of communication and diplomacy, allowing the two parties to establish a rapport and bridge cultural differences, however temporarily.

This strategic framing is further supported by the Spaniards' broader tactics during their conquest, which often involved exploiting cultural exchanges to gather intelligence and manipulate local power structures. By engaging in the game of dice, Cortés could observe Moctezuma's responses, assessing his strengths and vulnerabilities. This information was crucial for the Spaniards, who sought to understand and ultimately destabilize the Aztec political system from within (Hassig, 35). Moreover, the game of dice, imbued with elements of chance and fate, may have symbolized the shifting power dynamics between the two groups. While Moctezuma intended to showcase Aztec hospitality and control the narrative of their encounter, Cortés used the same game to subtly shift the balance of power, embedding Spanish influence within the Aztec court through seemingly innocuous interactions. This dual interpretation of the game underscores the complex interplay of power, strategy, and cultural exchange that characterized the initial phases of the Spanish conquest.

The dice game described above was called *Patolli* was a prominent board game in Aztec society. The game was played on a cross-shaped board, divided into 52 squares, which corresponded to the Aztec calendar cycle. Each player had six markers, and the objective was to move all markers around the board based on the roll of dice, (typically made from beans or stones marked with dots). The dice determined the number of spaces a player could move their

markers. The game involved strategy and chance, with players navigating their pieces while trying to capture their opponents' markers and send them back to the start. *Patolli* was often accompanied by heavy gambling. Players wagered items of significant value, such as precious stones, cloth, food, and even their own freedom, making the stakes extremely high. *Patolli*, as played by the Aztecs, was deeply entrenched in ritual and symbolism, reflecting the complex interplay between daily life and the spiritual realm. The game board's 52 squares symbolized the cosmic order and the cyclical nature of time. This design was a representation of the sacred calendar, known as the *Tonalpohualli*, which was central to Aztec cosmology and influenced various aspects of their life, including agriculture, politics, and religious ceremonies (Townsend, 2009).

Each roll of the dice in *Patolli* was seen as an invocation of fate, with outcomes believed to be influenced by the gods. This belief in divine intervention is underscored by the importance of *Macuilxochitl*, the god of games, music, and dance, who was often invoked before the game commenced. Players would perform specific rituals to seek his blessings, hoping to gain favor and ensure success in the game (Díaz del Castillo, 310). These rituals could involve offerings, chants, and other ceremonial acts designed to appease and honor the deity.

Hernán Cortés and his men leveraged alliances with discontented tributary states, and exploited Moctezuma's initial hospitality and belief in prophecies to their advantage. The high stakes of *Patolli*, where players wagered valuables or even personal freedom, mirror the dire consequences faced by the Aztecs as they engaged with the Spaniards, ultimately risking their empire and way of life. The Spaniards' ability to exploit the perception that they were divine figures helped them gain Moctezuma's trust and access to the heart of the empire and relied on

the same belief system that favored divine intervention and blessing by the god of games, *Macuilxochitl*. This psychological manipulation was crucial in disarming the Aztec leadership both literally and figuratively, making the subsequent military conquest more manageable. Furthermore, just as a skilled *Patolli* player capitalized on their opponent's missteps, the Spanish capitalized on the internal divisions and the strategic errors of the Aztecs. This metaphor underscores how the Spanish conquest, like a game of *Patolli*, involved a combination of skillful persuasion, exploitation of belief systems, and strategic gambits to achieve dominance over a seemingly stronger opponent.

While the Aztec Empire flourished in the highlands of central Mexico with its capital at *Tenochtitlán*, the Inca Empire rose to prominence in the Andean region of South America. Both civilizations developed sophisticated administrative systems, remarkable architectural feats, and rich religious traditions, yet they were distinct in their social structures and geographic challenges. As the Aztecs dominated Mesoamerica, their contemporaries, the Incas, were consolidating power across a vast expanse of rugged terrain, from the deserts of northern Peru to the fertile valleys of the Sacred Valley, eventually creating the largest empire in pre-Colombian America. The mystical history of the Inca Empire is steeped in legend and religious significance. According to Incan mythology, the empire's origins can be traced back to the sun god *Inti*, who sent his son, *Manco Cápac*⁸, and daughter, *Mama Ocllo*⁹, to earth to civilize humanity.

⁸ *Manco Cápac* is believed to be the first ruler and founder of the Inca dynasty. *Manco Cápac* was said to have emerged from the waters of Lake Titicaca and led his people to establish the city of Cusco, which became the capital of the Inca Empire. He is often depicted as a cultural hero who introduced agriculture, architecture, and social order to the Andean people.

⁹ *Mama Ocllo* is depicted as *Manco Cápac*'s sister or wife, and together with him, they are credited with teaching the Inca people various skills and customs necessary for civilized life.

This divine lineage justified the Sapa Inca's authority, reinforcing the notion that the emperor was the living representative of *Inti* on earth (D'Altroy, 44). The Incas believed in a pantheon of gods, with *Inti* being the most revered. Religious practices included elaborate ceremonies and rituals designed to appease these deities and ensure the empire's prosperity. Human and animal sacrifices were common, especially during significant events or crises. The Incas also held a cyclical view of history, believing that time was divided into ages or "suns," each ending in a cataclysm before a new era began (Cobo, 16-21). In terms of social structure, Incan society was highly stratified, with the Sapa Inca¹⁰ at the top, followed by the nobility, and then the commoners. The basic social unit was the *ayllu*, a kinship group that managed land and labor collectively. The *mit'a* system¹¹ required commoners to provide labor for state projects, such as construction of roads, bridges, and agricultural terraces, which were crucial for maintaining the empire's infrastructure and food supply (Murra, 81). Despite the rigid hierarchy, the Incas practiced a form of social welfare, ensuring that the elderly and infirm were cared for by the state. This combination of communal labor and state support helped sustain the empire's stability and growth.

Atahualpa, the last emperor of the Inca Empire, led a sophisticated civilization known as *Tawantinsuyu*, which spanned diverse landscapes in western South America. His reign was marked by a brutal civil war against his half-brother Huáscar, but it was cut short by the arrival of Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro in 1532. Captured in *Cajamarca* despite offering a vast ransom, Atahualpa was executed, signaling the empire's decline (Hemming, 62). Felipe

¹⁰ *Sapa Inca* refers to the ruler or emperor of the Inca Empire.

¹¹ The *mit'a* system was a form of mandatory labor service used in the Inca Empire to fulfill state obligations. It was a crucial component of the Inca economic and social structure, designed to support the empire's infrastructure, agricultural production, and military efforts.

Guaman Poma De Ayala, a mestizo chronicler born in the early 1550s, documented the impact of Spanish colonization on indigenous societies. His mixed heritage and noble status allowed him to advocate for indigenous rights and social justice through his writings and illustrations, reflecting his Quechua identity and experiences navigating colonial society.

Guaman Poma de Ayala authored and illustrated an extensive manuscript known as *Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno* (New Chronicle and Good Government), completed around 1615. This remarkable work¹² consists of over 1,200 pages and includes detailed accounts of Inca history, Spanish conquest, colonial abuses, and proposals for better governance under Spanish rule. It also mentions various games and pastimes practiced by the indigenous peoples of the Andean region during the time of the Inca Empire. One of the games documented, which was also used by Atahualpa while imprisoned by the Spanish, is *taptana*. The game holds deep cultural and ritualistic significance among the Quechua-speaking peoples of the Andes, particularly in Peru and Bolivia.

This Incan game derives its name from the Quechua word *taptana*, which means "to throw" or "to hit." It is a traditional game played during important festivals and ceremonies, serving not only as entertainment but also as a ritualistic and symbolic activity. Players use slingshots or *huatana* to hurl small clay or stone discs, known as *kachas*, towards a target called the *pari*. The objective is to strike the *pari* accurately, demonstrating skill and precision. Symbolically, *taptana* represents themes of balance, harmony, and spiritual connection with

¹² Guaman Poma's manuscript is invaluable for its insights into both Inca society and the impact of Spanish colonization on indigenous peoples. His work serves as a testament to his commitment to preserving Andean history and advocating for justice and reform within the colonial context. While the manuscript is highly regarded as a document of Incan history.

nature. The *kachas* are often adorned with intricate designs or symbols that hold cultural and cosmological meanings, reflecting the worldview and beliefs of the players. The game is believed to strengthen community bonds, promote healthy competition, and honor ancestral traditions. In some communities, *taptana* is associated with agricultural rituals, where successful play is thought to ensure bountiful harvests and prosperity for the community. Moreover, the act of playing *taptana* is seen as a form of offering to *Pachamama*¹³ (Mother Earth) and other Andean deities, seeking their blessings and protection.

Taptana was primarily a communal and ritualistic activity rather than a deliberate form of persuasion. However, its role in communal life and cultural practices indirectly influenced social dynamics and community decision-making. Within Andean communities, the game fostered social cohesion and strengthened interpersonal relationships through friendly competition and shared participation. King Atahualpa was imprisoned by the Spanish conquistadors in a dramatic and unexpected turn of events during their conquest of the Inca Empire. In November 1532, Francisco Pizarro and his men lured Atahualpa to the town of *Cajamarca* under the pretense of a peaceful meeting. As Atahualpa arrived, surrounded by a large entourage, the Spanish ambushed him, taking advantage of their superior weaponry and tactical surprise. Pizarro's forces swiftly overwhelmed the Inca warriors, capturing Atahualpa and killing many of his followers. Once in captivity, Atahualpa was held in a small room, where he negotiated with the Spaniards for his freedom by offering an astonishing ransom of gold and silver, pledging to fill a chamber to the height of his outstretched arm. Despite this promise, the circumstances of his imprisonment grew

¹³ Pachamama represents a profound spiritual and cultural figure for Andean peoples, embodying principles of fertility, reciprocity, and spiritual interconnectedness with the natural world. She continues to play a vital role in shaping identity, values, and community life among indigenous groups in the region.

increasingly dire as Pizarro and his men plotted their next moves, ultimately leading to Atahualpa's tragic execution after eight months of captivity.

In his introduction to the chapter on the "*Imprisonment and Execution of Atahualpa Inka*," Guaman Poma provides insight into how the Incan leader spent his time during imprisonment: "*Atahualpa, while imprisoned, conversed with Don Francisco Pizarro and Don Diego Almagro, as well as with other Spaniards, and played with them in the game taptana*" (Guaman Poma 251). *He was a remarkably peaceful prince and found contentment in this interaction with the Christians.* Based on the account, Atahualpa likely believed he could save himself through the persuasive nature of play and friendly competition, viewing the game of *taptana* as an opportunity for negotiation and diplomacy. By engaging in conversation and games with Pizarro, Almagro, and other Spaniards, he may have thought that establishing a bond or rapport through this interaction could sway them in his favor. His peaceful demeanor and willingness to connect with the Spanish through a shared activity suggested that he hoped to demonstrate his humanity and negotiate his freedom, seeing the game as a potential means to influence their decisions and foster goodwill.

Guaman Poma not only preserves the traditions of indigenous games but also highlights their multifaceted roles, such as community bonding, spiritual expression, and diplomatic interaction with Spanish conquerors. His documentation emphasizes the resilience of Andean cultural heritage amidst colonial disruption, advocating for the preservation of traditional games as vital to maintaining identity, social cohesion, and cultural continuity in the face of assimilation and erasure.

1.3 A Game of Hybridity: The Intertwining of Indigenous and European Gaming Cultures

With the arrival of European colonizers, indigenous gaming traditions transformed, blending with European customs to create hybrid forms of play. For instance, colonial-era games like *Lotería* emerged as a fusion of Spanish and indigenous influences, combining elements of European board games with traditional Mesoamerican symbols and imagery. *Lotería*, has its origins in Italy in the 15th century, where it was known as *Lo Giuoco del Lotto D'Italia* (The game of the lotto of Italy). Initially played as a form of gambling, it involved players marking numbers on a card based on the drawing of numbers from a pool. By the 18th century, the game made its way to Spain, where it underwent modifications that reflected Spanish culture, folklore and customs. The Spanish version of *Lotería* incorporated a distinct cultural identity that reflected the rich tapestry of Spanish society, folklore, and traditions. The game featured cards adorned with images and symbols that resonated with the cultural heritage of Spain, including representations of regional costumes, popular myths, and iconic elements of everyday life. For instance, illustrations of traditional Spanish occupations, local flora and fauna, and national symbols like the bull or the guitar were integrated into the game, highlighting the diverse cultural expressions found throughout the country. This cultural identity was further enriched by regional variations of the game, which included unique symbols and themes relevant to specific communities within Spain, allowing players to connect with their local heritage. By weaving these elements into *Lotería*, the game transformed from a simple numerical lottery into a vibrant reflection of Spanish life, fostering a sense of community and cultural pride among its players.

The game was brought to New Spain (modern-day Mexico) by Spanish colonists in the 18th century; and became popular during the colonial period in the late 18th and early 19th

centuries. Initially, *Lotería* was a hobby for the elite classes, but over time, it became widespread among all social classes. Initially more associated with the elite classes in Spain, where it served as a popular pastime among nobility and affluent individuals. Its origins as a lottery game allowed for social gatherings and leisure activities that were typically accessible to the upper echelons of society. However, as the game evolved and made its way to Mexico, it became a beloved game enjoyed by people across various social classes. In Mexico, the game transcended its elite origins and became a communal activity, played in homes, schools, and public celebrations. By the 19th century, *Lotería* had become entrenched in Mexican culture and began to spread throughout Latin America, evolving into a beloved traditional game that reflects the region's rich cultural heritage.

The game is similar to bingo, with players marking off symbols on a grid as they are called out. However, what makes the game uniquely Latin American is its incorporation of indigenous imagery and symbols. *Lotería* underwent adaptations and changes after it was brought to Latin America, particularly in Mexico, during the colonial period. In Spain, the game had its own version known as *Lotería Nacional*, which was primarily a state-run lottery system rather than the traditional game we associate with *Lotería* in Latin America today. The adaptation into a game with pictorial cards and a matching board format is attributed to its development in Mexico during the colonial era. This adaptation made the game more accessible and engaging, using illustrations that often depict Mexican cultural symbols, historical figures, and everyday objects. The game cards feature illustrations of figures and objects from Mesoamerican and colonial Mexican culture, such as *La Catrina*, *El Sol*, and *El Águila*. These symbols reflect a fusion of Spanish and indigenous influences, creating a hybrid form of play that resonates with both cultural traditions. *Lotería* has become an enduring part of Latin

American culture, and is still in homes, schools, and community gatherings across the region, showcasing how indigenous gaming traditions adapted and evolved in the wake of European colonization and how games convey those historical traces in the modern era.

Another example of the fusion between Indigenous and European influences in games is *Pelota Mixteca*, a traditional ball game from the Mixtec region of Oaxaca, Mexico. This game, which evolved from ancient Mesoamerican ball games like those played by the Aztecs and Mayans, involves teams competing to hit a rubber ball through a hoop using their hips, elbows, or knees. Before each match, players and spectators engage in ceremonies that feature dances, music, and offerings to honor the gods and seek blessings for the game. These rituals reflect the deep spiritual connection that Indigenous communities maintain with the sport, linking it to their agricultural practices, cosmology, and ancestral traditions. However, with the arrival of the *conquistadores*, and the introduction of European customs, the game began to incorporate new elements, notably the use of horses and equestrian skills.

Indigenous players adapted their traditional ball game to include mounted gameplay, adding a new layer of complexity and strategy to the sport. Riders utilized their equestrian skills to maneuver and control their horses while simultaneously attempting to strike the ball with precision and accuracy. This fusion of indigenous and Spanish colonial influences transformed *Pelota Mixteca* into a hybrid form of play that reflected the cultural exchange and adaptation occurring during the colonial period. The incorporation of horses and equestrian skills also elevated the social and cultural significance of the game within colonial society. As mounted gameplay became more prevalent, the sport gained popularity among both indigenous and Spanish colonial populations, transcending cultural boundaries and serving as a form of entertainment and social bonding for diverse communities. Additionally, *Pelota Mixteca* evolved

to include elements of horseback riding competitions, showcasing the athleticism and horsemanship of its participants.

The symbolic value of the game's blend of Indigenous and European influences is profound, representing a fusion of cultural traditions and a testament to the resilience and adaptability of Indigenous cultures in the face of colonialism. At its core, the game embodies the spirit of cultural exchange and hybridity, as it seamlessly integrates elements of both indigenous and European customs into a single sporting tradition. The incorporation of European influences, such as the use of horses and equestrian skills, symbolizes the complex dynamics of the colonial encounter and interaction. By adapting their traditional ball game to include mounted gameplay, Indigenous communities demonstrated their ability to assimilate new technologies and practices while retaining elements of their cultural identity. This blending of elements reflects the broader process of syncretism that characterized the colonial period, where diverse cultures merged and transformed in response to colonial hegemony.

1.4 Playful Innovations: The Influence of European Enlightenment and Colonial Dynamics on Latin American Games

The colonial period in Latin America was a time of profound cultural exchange and transformation, significantly influenced by the arrival of European colonizers and the imposition of their customs and practices. Among these exchanges was the blending of games, where indigenous gaming traditions encountered European forms, leading to the emergence of unique recreational activities that reflected the complex social dynamics of the time. Indigenous cultures had rich traditions of play, characterized by games that were often tied to ritual, community identity, and social cohesion. With the arrival of the Spanish and other European powers, these traditional practices encountered new forms of play, often brought by colonizers who sought to

replicate their familiar leisure activities in what they perceived to be the *New World*. This exchange was not merely a one-way imposition but rather a dynamic process where both cultures influenced each other, leading to the development of games that incorporated elements from both indigenous and European traditions.

One significant factor was the social function of games. In indigenous societies, games were integral to community life, serving purposes beyond mere entertainment. As we have seen, they often involved rituals and celebrations, reinforcing social ties and cultural identity. As European games were introduced, they were adapted to fit within existing social structures, enabling communities to blend new forms of play with their traditional practices. For example, incorporating European board games into communal gatherings allowed for preserving indigenous social customs while introducing novel elements that reflected the changing cultural landscape. The introduction of European games created new avenues for social interaction among different classes. Elite members of society often engaged with European pastimes, which gradually trickled down to broader segments of the population. As these games became more widely adopted, they were infused with local customs, reflecting the cultural diversity of the region. This blending of social classes and gaming practices contributed to creating a shared cultural space, where individuals from various backgrounds could come together, fostering a sense of community and mutual understanding.

Characterized by an emphasis on reason, scientific inquiry, and humanism, the Enlightenment period (17th and 18th centuries), as it is known, had far-reaching effects on various aspects of society, including the realm of games and leisure, by drawing on the profound intellectual and cultural transformations that changed European thought and social behavior. The Enlightenment's impact on games can be traced to its broader intellectual currents, which

emphasized reason and empirical evidence as the foundation for understanding the world. This shift in thought was reflected in the evolving nature of recreational activities, where games began to incorporate elements of strategy, logic, and intellectual engagement. The period saw the emergence of games that were not merely for entertainment but also served as tools for intellectual stimulation and social interaction. The salon culture is an example of this evolving nature. It emerged in France and hosted by influential women known as *salonnières*¹⁴, in their private homes.

These gatherings attracted leading intellectuals, writers, artists, and political thinkers. The salons provided a space where ideas could be freely exchanged, discussed, and debated. Figures like Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot frequented these salons, contributing to developing and disseminating Enlightenment ideals. The salons were crucial in promoting the principles of reason, liberty, and progress. They allowed for a democratization of knowledge, as people from various social classes could participate in intellectual discourse. This inclusivity helped spread Enlightenment beyond the elite, permeating broader society and challenging established norms and authorities. Furthermore, salons functioned as liminal spaces, where conventional social structures were temporarily suspended, enabling participants to engage in transformative dialogue, acquire new intellectual skills, and challenge existing paradigms. These interactions fostered personal growth and helped catalyze broader cultural change.

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¹⁴ *Salonnières* were influential women who hosted salons, and gatherings where intellectuals, artists, writers, and political figures came together to discuss and exchange ideas. Originating in France during the 17th and 18th centuries, these salons were central to the Enlightenment period, serving as incubators for new ideas and cultural movements.

principles of reason, liberty, and progress. They allowed for a democratization of knowledge, as people from various social classes could participate in intellectual discourse. This inclusivity helped spread Enlightenment beyond the elite, permeating broader society and challenging established norms and authorities. In *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (year), Dena Goodman delves into the intricate social and intellectual fabric of Enlightenment France, emphasizing the pivotal role of salons. Goodman illustrates how these salons were not mere social gatherings but were instrumental in shaping the intellectual landscape of the period. Goodman underlines the profound impact that *salonnières* had on the intellectual life of the Enlightenment. They curated the guest lists, set the agenda for discussions, and often steered the conversation in their salons. This allowed them to influence the flow of ideas and the development of intellectual trends. By fostering a culture of open dialogue and debate, *salonnières* ensured that a wide range of perspectives was considered, thus enriching the intellectual fabric of the Enlightenment.

As Enlightenment ideals permeated European societies, their influence extended beyond the continent, reaching Latin America during the height of the colonial period. This transition was facilitated through the movement of ideas, people, and educational practices, leading to profound changes in Latin American cultural and intellectual life. European Enlightenment thinkers, such as Voltaire and Rousseau, emphasized reason, empirical evidence, and the value of intellectual exchange. These ideas were carried to Latin America by colonial administrators, missionaries, and intellectuals who traveled between Europe and the New World, bringing with them new concepts and methodologies that began to take root in the colonies (López, 2013).

The creation of universities such as the Universidad de Buenos Aires in Argentina (founded in 1821) and the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* in Mexico (founded in

1551, but significantly reformed in the 18th century) reflected Enlightenment ideals by promoting curricula focused on reason, science, and modern knowledge (Torre, 30-36). These institutions played a crucial role in spreading Enlightenment thought by educating new generations of Latin American leaders and thinkers who were well-versed in contemporary European philosophies.

In addition, the adaptation of European Enlightenment ideas can be observed in the rise of intellectual salons and *tertulias* in Latin America. Similar to the salons of Paris, these gatherings became important venues for the exchange of ideas, fostering intellectual dialogue and debate among Latin American elites. For instance, the *tertulias* held in Mexico City and Buenos Aires provided spaces where Enlightenment concepts could be discussed and disseminated among the local intellectual circles, influencing cultural and political discourse (García, 2017). These gatherings often featured discussions on political reform, scientific progress, and social change, reflecting the broader Enlightenment ethos of challenging established norms and promoting progress.

They often took place in cafes, literary salons, and private homes, creating a relaxed atmosphere conducive to free-flowing conversation. The discussions that took place in these *tertulias* often challenged existing colonial structures, and members advocated for political and social change. Participants debated concepts such as the social contract, republicanism, and the role of reason in governance. This intellectual ferment contributed to a growing sense of dissatisfaction with colonial rule and a desire for greater autonomy. As Enlightenment ideas took root, they inspired a range of movements aimed at achieving independence from Spanish control. In this context, games played a surprisingly significant role in reflecting and reinforcing Enlightenment values.

The period saw the introduction and adaptation of European games, such as chess and card games, into Latin American societies. These games, valued for their strategic and intellectual demands, were more than mere pastimes; they became symbols of the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason and rationality. In addition to political discussions, *tertulias* often featured games. In *tertulias* and other social settings, games provided activities in a manner that was both intellectually stimulating and socially interactive.

While specific games played during *tertulias* may have varied, they often reflected the interests and preferences of the participants. For example, the card game *Truco* was a popular choice, providing a lighthearted diversion from more serious discussions. It is a trick-taking game of Spanish origin that involves bluffing, strategy, and psychological tactics, with players attempting to outwit their opponents to win tricks and points. It was not only a source of amusement but also a platform for social bonding and camaraderie. Players would engage in spirited rounds of gameplay, engaging in friendly competition and banter as they attempted to outmaneuver their opponents. The game fostered a sense of conviviality and community among participants, breaking down social barriers and facilitating connections among individuals from diverse backgrounds. *Truco* served as a vehicle for cultural expression and identity.

As players engaged in the game, they drew upon shared cultural references, linguistic nuances, and regional variations, enriching the gameplay experience with elements of local heritage and tradition against a backdrop of political tension and burgeoning revolutionary ideas. The game of *Truco*, a popular card game in many Latin American countries, became more than just a pastime; it was a medium through which cultural identity and social commentary were subtly expressed. The various regional adaptations of the game incorporated local idioms,

historical anecdotes, and folk wisdom, making each game a reflection of the players' unique cultural backgrounds and collective experiences.

Additionally, the strategies and tactics employed in *Truco* reflected broader themes of cunning, strategy, and wit, qualities that were highly valued in Latin American societies during the wars of independence. In a period marked by political upheaval and the struggle for autonomy, the game's emphasis on bluffing, deception, and clever maneuvering mirrored the real-life tactics used by revolutionary leaders and fighters. The game's psychological complexity and the need for astute observation and quick thinking resonated with the strategic challenges faced by those involved in the independence movement. The game served as a social equalizer, bringing together individuals from different social strata to engage in a shared activity that required skill, intelligence, and a deep understanding of human nature. The playful yet competitive nature of *Truco* offered a microcosm of the larger societal struggles, where the ability to outwit an opponent in the game paralleled the broader fight against colonial oppression. *Truco* was not only a reflection of the region's cultural heritage and social dynamics but also a symbolic enactment of the broader political and revolutionary context. The game's intricate blend of strategy, cultural expression, and social interaction made it a powerful tool for both personal amusement and collective resistance, underscoring the multifaceted role of play in shaping and reflecting societal values and aspirations during a pivotal era in Latin American history.

1.5 Leisure as Legacy: The Impact of Games on Social Fabric in Post-Independence Latin America

The early 19th century was a time of monumental change in Latin America. Following the wars of independence from Spain, the region grappled with challenges of nation-building, political instability, and the integration of diverse cultural heritages. This transformative period

influenced all aspects of life, including recreational activities. Games, in particular, played a pivotal role in both preserving traditional cultures and assimilating new influences, thereby contributing significantly to the cultural fabric of post-independence Latin American societies. After achieving independence, Latin American countries faced the daunting task of establishing stable governance and economic systems. The region's political landscape was marked by frequent revolutions and power struggles, which often hindered consistent cultural and economic development.

Despite these challenges, games and recreational activities flourished as important expressions of community life and cultural identity. For instance, the ancient Mesoamerican ballgame *ullamalitzli* was revived during local festivals, reflecting a deep connection to indigenous traditions. Similarly, traditional sports like *tejo* in Colombia continued to be popular, involving community participation in explosive target-throwing competitions. Children and adults alike engaged in *rayuela*, a simple yet widespread hopscotch game that could be seen playing across urban and rural settings. In Argentina, board games like *Patos*, *Gansos y Cotorras* taught moral and societal lessons through playful engagements, while in Mexico, *escaramuza*, an all-female equestrian display, highlighted cultural pride and heritage during public celebrations. They served as mediums through which people could engage with and reflect upon their new national identities, negotiate social relations, and build communal bonds amidst ongoing social changes (Gonzalez, 445).

Traditional games, which had been marginalized or suppressed during colonial rule, experienced a resurgence as nations looked to their past to forge their new identities. In various parts of Latin America, this revival often took place during local celebrations and community gatherings, where games acted as symbols of cultural pride and connections to pre-colonial

heritages. For instance, in Peru, the game of *Sapo*, which involves players throwing metal discs at a box that has several holes topped with a brass "toad," gained renewed popularity. This game, deeply rooted in Andean culture, was played widely during community festivals, symbolizing both tradition and communal enjoyment. Similarly, in Chile and Argentina, traditional rodeo events became significant cultural festivities where local communities gathered to celebrate their *Gaucha*¹⁵ heritage. These events included competitions in horseback riding skills and cattle herding, echoing the rural lifestyles that characterized much of the region's history. Such activities were not only recreational but also served to strengthen communal bonds and reaffirm local identities.

European games continued to exert influence as well. Introduced during the colonial era, games such as chess, draughts, and various card games remained popular and became more ingrained in the local culture (Smith, 101). These games were not merely pastimes but played a significant role in the socialization process, acting as venues for interaction across different social strata in the increasingly diverse societies of urban Latin America. They facilitated new forms of social interaction, which were crucial in the post-independence era where social hierarchies were often in flux.

The late 19th century marked a significant era of cultural innovation in Latin America as local innovators and educators sought to reflect the sociopolitical context of nation-building in their creations. Board games emerged as particularly expressive tools during this time, with designs that encapsulated themes of exploration, development, and national history. These games

¹⁵ Gauchos are skilled horsemen from Argentina's pampas, symbolizing independence, resilience, and a connection to the land. Central to Argentina's cultural identity, they played a key role in cattle ranching and are celebrated in folklore and literature

were more than mere entertainment; they served educational purposes, introducing players to the geographical landscapes, pivotal historical events, and key figures that shaped their nations. For instance, *adugo*¹⁶ a popular board game in Brazil featured a map-based gameplay where players navigated the diverse regions of the Amazon, learning about its ecology and the historical significance of various settlements along the way. Similarly, in Argentina, a board game called *The Path of the Liberator* allowed players to follow the routes of independence heroes like San Martín, integrating challenges and trivia about significant battles and political milestones encountered during the campaigns for independence. Public festivals and celebrations also provided fertile ground for the display and evolution of traditional games, which were often ingeniously adapted to resonate with national narratives. In Mexico, the game *Pirinola*, a spinning top used in a traditional game often played during the Day of the Dead and other festive gatherings, featured various commands on its sides such as *Toma uno* (take one) and *Pon dos* (put two). This game was not only a source of entertainment but also a teaching tool, as it was often accompanied by stories or lessons about Mexican history and folklore, weaving together play and cultural education.

Public festivals and celebrations also provided fertile ground for the display and evolution of traditional games, which were often ingeniously adapted to resonate with national narratives. In Mexico, the game of *Charrería*, which involves traditional Mexican equestrian skills and events such as roping and horseback riding, became a focal point during festivals celebrating national heritage. Adaptations of *Charrería* during these festivals often included historical reenactments and storytelling that highlighted Mexico's revolutionary and colonial

¹⁶ *Adugo* is an Indigenous Brazilian board game known as the "Jaguar Game." While it doesn't feature a map-based gameplay of the Amazon, it is deeply rooted in Brazilian culture and ecology, teaching players about the jaguar's significance and promoting strategic thinking.

past. For example, competitions and exhibitions were organized to showcase the skills of the Mexican *vaqueros* (cowboys) while also integrating elements of historical education about the role of cattle ranching and horseback riding in Mexican society and its evolution from Indigenous practices to contemporary national traditions.

According to Maria Gonzalez, these adaptations were created not merely for amusement; they served as educational tools that narrated the nation's past and its aspirations to the public (30). By embedding elements of national history and identity within the gameplay, these games reinforced national unity and pride, allowing participants to celebrate and learn and internalize key aspects of their cultural heritage. This dynamic interaction between game-playing and storytelling at public festivals provided a space for collective memory and historical continuity, helping communities across Latin America to forge a sense of unity and common identity through shared play.

1.6 Play and Progress in Latin America

The late 19th and early 20th centuries in Latin America were characterized by profound transformations in both the sociopolitical and economic domains. The postwar era of independence had left the region with the challenging task of nation-building, setting the stage for a unique cultural resurgence that often found expression in traditional games and festivals. Concurrently, the onset of the Industrial Revolution—though slower and more uneven in Latin America compared to Europe and North America—brought new technologies and economic changes that further influenced these cultural practices. During this period, Latin America witnessed the growth of urban centers, facilitated by the expansion of railway networks and the introduction of new industrial technologies. These urban centers became hotbeds of cultural activity, where traditional festivals were infused with new life and innovation. For example, in

Brazil, the *Festa Junina* (June Festival), which celebrates rural life and features traditional music, dance, and games, began to incorporate industrial products such as manufactured costumes and mass-produced food items, making the festivals larger and more accessible to a growing urban population.

In Mexico, the production of *Lotteria* game cards, traditionally hand-painted, shifted to being mass-produced using lithography. This not only made the game more widely available but also allowed for the inclusion of a broader array of symbols, reflecting a wider spectrum of Mexican society and folklore, thus deepening the game's cultural resonance during community gatherings and celebrations. Through these examples, it is evident that the Industrial Revolution did not merely alter the economic landscape of Latin America; it also reshaped its cultural fabric. Traditional games and festivals, while maintaining their core identities, adapted to include new technologies and ideas, reflecting the dynamic interplay between heritage and modernization. This blend of old and new helped solidify communal bonds and national identities in a rapidly changing world, demonstrating the powerful role of cultural practices in adapting to and reflecting broader societal changes.

As the Industrial Revolution made its gradual incursion into Latin America, it introduced new materials, manufacturing processes, and economic opportunities that significantly altered the social and cultural landscape of the region. The development of railways and the expansion of urban centers facilitated greater mobility and interaction among diverse communities, drastically reshaping local cultures and entertainment forms. The growth of urban areas brought diverse groups into closer contact, fostering a melting pot of traditions that gave rise to new forms of cultural expression, particularly in the realm of games and leisure activities. The introduction of printing presses was a particularly transformative development, revolutionizing

the way information was disseminated and contributing to the literacy and educational endeavors of the growing middle class. This technological advancement made card and board games more accessible and popular, extending their reach beyond small community gatherings into the broader public sphere. For instance, *El Turista*, a Mexican board game similar to Monopoly, emerged as a popular form of entertainment, teaching players about capitalism, real estate, and economic strategy—a direct reflection of the new industrial economy. This game not only provided entertainment but also served as a subtle commentary on the shifting economic policies and practices of the time, mirroring the move towards more capitalistic approaches within the region.

Additionally, the enhanced transport networks not only facilitated the physical movement of people but also the circulation of ideas and cultural goods, including games. In Brazil, regional games like *Peteca* (a traditional shuttlecock game) saw transformations in design and play due to the availability of industrial materials such as synthetic fabrics and rubbers, which improved the durability and performance of the game equipment. These changes made the game more appealing and accessible to urban dwellers, thereby contributing to its spread from rural to urban settings. This integration of industrial materials and processes into traditional games and the creation of new games reflective of the economic environment illustrates a broader trend: as Latin America industrialized, its cultural practices adapted, reflecting and responding to the economic transformations. Games became not just a source of leisure but also a medium for socialization, education, and the dissemination of new economic and cultural values. They provided a space for individuals to negotiate their identities and socio-economic realities in a region experiencing rapid change, acting as microcosms of the larger shifts in Latin American societies.

As nations struggled to forge their identities and economies in the wake of colonial rule, games played a crucial role in reflecting and shaping the emerging national and cultural narratives. The adaptation of traditional games to incorporate new industrial materials and themes, alongside the introduction of entirely new types of games influenced by industrial technologies, illustrates the complex interplay between cultural tradition and modernization. Through these developments, games became a significant medium through which Latin Americans could navigate the changes brought by both independence and industrialization, contributing to a shared sense of heritage and a forward-looking national identity.

1.7 Games at the Turn of the Century: War, Art, and Literature

The 20th century was a pivotal era for Latin America, marked by significant shifts in technology, literature, and art that profoundly reshaped the cultural landscape—this period witnessed the introduction of transformative technologies such as cinema and radio, which broadened the horizons of communication and entertainment across the region. Concurrently, literary movements, notably Modernism, challenged and enriched traditional narrative forms and artistic expressions. These technological and literary advancements influenced the development of games in Latin America, transforming them from simple pastimes into complex cultural artifacts that reflected and influenced societal norms and individual identities.

The aftermath of World War I marked a pivotal era of technological advancement, significantly altering global landscapes, economies, politics, and cultures. These advancements, though primarily driven by the needs and innovations of the war, later found profound peacetime applications that extended into Latin America. During the war, advancements in telecommunications such as radio and telegraphy were pivotal for coordinating military operations over vast distances. For example, the use of radio allowed for real-time

communication between front lines and command centers, a significant improvement over previous methods that were slow and unreliable (Klein, 125). After the war, these technologies found new life in civilian applications; radio, in particular, transformed from a tactical military tool into a cornerstone of civilian communication. By the 1920s, radio broadcasting had begun producing news, music, and entertainment. This transition was mirrored globally, including in Latin America, where countries in the region saw the rise of their own broadcasting stations, fundamentally altering how information and culture were disseminated across the continent.

A key station is XEAW¹⁷, which began broadcasting in the late 1920s. XEAW was known for its wide array of programming, including music, variety shows, and even live game shows, which were a novel form of entertainment at the time. These broadcasts not only provided entertainment but also played a crucial role in shaping the emerging radio culture in Mexico by making diverse cultural content and new forms of games accessible to a broader audience.

Popular game shows included *La Pregunta de los 64,000 Pesos*, a quiz program where contestants answered progressively challenging questions to win cash prizes, and *Adivinanzas Musicales*, where participants identified songs or composers based on short musical excerpts. The station gathered participants for these shows through methods such as mail-in submissions, where listeners would send letters to express interest or answer preliminary questions. It also relied heavily on live studio audiences, often selecting contestants directly from attendees, and

¹⁷ Radio XEAW was instrumental in shaping the local radio broadcasting standards and practices. The station provided a mix of entertainment and information, which catered to a broad audience. Its programming included live music performances, which were particularly popular and featured both local and international artists. Located in Mexico City, XEAW quickly became a pivotal platform for a variety of programming, including music, news, and entertainment.

engaged in community outreach through local clubs, schools, or organizations to recruit players. By fostering a connection with its listeners through these innovative approaches, XEAW helped establish radio as a central medium for entertainment and community engagement in Mexico.

The influx of Modernist literature, with its focus on psychological depth and narrative experimentation, also left a lasting impact on Latin American games. Writers like Jorge Luis Borges explored themes of memory, identity, and alternate realities, inspiring game creators to experiment with non-linear and multi-layered structures. Games began to feature complex scenarios that required players to navigate various perspectives and realities, much like the narrative techniques seen in Modernist literature. One notable example is *Aquellarre*, a Spanish-language tabletop role-playing game that gained significant popularity in Latin America due to its shared cultural and historical roots with the region.

The game's deep narrative complexity and its focus on folklore, history, and metaphysical themes align closely with Borges' fascination with overlapping realities, labyrinthine structures, and the interplay between myth and truth. Latin American players adapted *Aquellarre* to reflect their own traditions, incorporating regional myths and Indigenous folklore alongside the game's original medieval European setting. In *Aquellarre*, players craft characters with distinct motivations and psychological traits, navigating intricate adventures that blend historical realism with supernatural elements. These types of games bring to life the literary depth and experimental storytelling central to Modernism, allowing players to engage directly with the philosophical and narrative challenges they present.

The development of film technology, initially driven by wartime propaganda needs, flourished into a major industry after the conflict's end. The arrival of motion pictures revolutionized entertainment, ushering in the golden age of cinema during the 1930s and 1940s.

While the United States became a global production hub, Latin America was actively shaping its own cinematic identities during this period. In Mexico, for example, a robust national film industry rose to prominence, culminating in what is now recognized as the Mexican Golden Age of cinema. This movement brought forth a blend of melodrama, rural aesthetics, and nationalist sentiment, appealing to domestic audiences and capturing international attention. Elsewhere in Latin America, similar developments took root: Brazilian productions offered lighthearted comedies and musicals, and Argentine features presented narratives infused with tango culture and urban sensibilities. These industries did more than mimic foreign influences; they integrated global cinematic trends with local traditions, forging distinctive regional styles.

This era marked a transformative period for Latin American cinema, one characterized by experimentation, innovation, and a deliberate engagement with questions of cultural identity. Filmmakers drew on the legacy of silent film's visual language and the emerging possibilities of sound to craft narratives that spoke directly to local experiences and aspirations. In doing so, they not only enriched the cinematic landscape but also laid the groundwork for how games, both traditional and emerging, would be represented in film. Ultimately, these creative endeavors mirrored the complex social and cultural dynamics of the region, setting a precedent for future generations of storytellers and audiences.

Latin American filmmakers were pioneers in adopting and adapting film technologies and techniques that had been developed primarily in Europe and the United States. Innovations during this period included the experimentation with montage, the exploration of complex narrative structures, and the early adoption of sound, which began to emerge at the tail end of the decade. These innovations allowed filmmakers to create more dynamic and engaging storytelling, which often included depictions of popular cultural elements, including games.

Directors like Fernando de Fuentes¹⁸ and Emilio Fernández¹⁹ were beginning to make names for themselves.

These filmmakers, among others, were keen on incorporating scenes that depicted local games and festivities, which not only added a layer of authenticity to their films but also resonated deeply with local audiences. Emilio Fernández, for instance, often included festival scenes and community gatherings where games could be part of the background activity, contributing to the atmosphere and cultural setting. In *Enamorada* (1946), while the central narrative revolves around the relationship between an aristocratic woman and a revolutionary officer, the town's communal life unfolds in the margins of the frame. Moments of informal gatherings, market-day celebrations, and simple street games enrich the cultural tapestry onscreen. Even if these activities remain peripheral, their presence reaffirms the importance of shared pastimes—like card games or local street festivities—in reflecting the social fabric of Mexican life.

Similarly, Fernando de Fuentes' *Allá en el Rancho Grande* (1936) incorporates the spirit of rural Mexico through scenes of ranchero festivities. Though the plot focuses on romantic and

¹⁸ Fernando de Fuentes is often considered one of the architects of the Mexican Golden Age. Known for works such as *Vámonos con Pancho Villa* (1936) and *Allá en el Rancho Grande* (1936), de Fuentes combined elements of melodrama, humor, and nationalistic sentiment, helping to establish the ranchera film genre that resonated deeply with domestic audiences. His films often captured rural life, cultural traditions, and social issues, reflecting the complexity and diversity of Mexican identity during a transformative era in the nation's history.

¹⁹ Emilio Fernández, widely referred to as *El Indio* Fernández, rose to international prominence as both a director and a symbolic figure of Mexican national cinema. His films, such as *María Candelaria* (1943) and *Río Escondido* (1947), often showcased Mexico's indigenous heritage, rural landscapes, and moral struggles, blending lyrical imagery with powerful emotional narratives. Fernández developed a signature visual style that emphasized dramatic lighting, lush landscapes, and strong, dignified characters. His work contributed to Mexico's cinematic identity on the global stage, influencing filmmakers both at home and abroad and shaping the aesthetic and thematic contours of Latin American cinema during the mid-20th century.

social entanglements, the backdrop frequently reveals the presence of *charreadas* (Mexican-style rodeos), informal betting games, or even subtle references to activities like *lotería*. These were rarely central to the film's storyline, but they served to ground the cinematic experience in everyday rural life, presenting viewers with recognizable pastimes that mirrored their communities. In this way, the inclusion of such games—whether rooster fights, card games, or other traditional amusements—helped assert the cultural importance of these social gatherings. As a result, these films did more than tell a story; they provided a multifaceted cultural experience, showcasing familiar traditions and reinforcing communal bonds²⁰ that resonated with audiences of the time.

1.8 From Heritage to High-Tech

Games embody a central aspect of human culture, reflecting societal values, teaching skills, and providing entertainment. However, as technology advanced, the nature and scope of games transformed, leading to the creation of new forms of interactive media that blend history, art, literature, and digital innovation. This transformation is particularly evident in Latin America, where traditional games and narratives have been enriched by technology, creating a unique fusion of cultural heritage and modern digital experiences. The integration of multiple forms of artistic, visual, and digital media into a cohesive, unified experience is known as blended media. It involves combining different mediums—such as text, images, video, audio, and interactive elements—to create works that transcend the boundaries of traditional art forms. The concept of blended media is often associated with the convergence of technology and art,

²⁰ Soccer, or *fútbol* is also a Latin American traditional pastime celebrated throughout the region that strengthens communal and cultural bonds.

where various forms of creative expression are fused to enhance the impact, depth, and engagement of the content.

The invention of the computer in the mid-20th century was a pivotal moment in history as it introduced new possibilities for creating, distributing, and interacting with content. In the 1960s and 1970s, artists and technologists began experimenting with digital art, using computers to create visual works that blended traditional art techniques with cutting-edge technology. As technology began to permeate everyday life, the concept of blended media emerged, where different forms of art and media were combined to create new, multifaceted experiences. In Latin America, this trend manifested in the adaptation of traditional games into new formats that incorporated elements of art and literature. For instance, the traditional Argentine game *El Pato*²¹ was reimagined in digital formats, where the fast-paced horseback sport was transformed into an interactive experience accessible to players worldwide.

This blending of visual art, historical narratives, and interactive gameplay with the traditional sport of *El Pato* created a new kind of media experience, one that remained deeply rooted in cultural heritage while also engaging with modern gaming sensibilities. By combining the physicality and excitement of *El Pato* with the creative possibilities of digital media, these adaptations ensured that the sport continued to thrive in a new, virtual context. This approach not only preserved the game's cultural significance but also introduced it to a broader audience, expanding its reach and ensuring that this important aspect of Argentine heritage remained vibrant and relevant in the digital age.

²¹ *El Pato* is a game played on horseback that combines elements of polo and basketball. It was invented in the 17th century by gauchos whose playing field would stretch from one farm to the next.

This fusion of tradition and technology exemplifies how classic games can evolve into interactive media, paving the way for creating a new gaming experience. By harnessing the power of digital media to preserve cultural heritage while engaging modern audiences, these innovations laid the foundation for the diverse and immersive experiences that have led to how people engage with games today, in particular video games.

1.9 Video Games as Cultural Forces in Latin America

Despite their widespread impact, defining what constitutes a video game remains a complex and often contentious issue. The challenge lies in the medium's diversity, which encompasses a vast range of experiences, from simple mobile games to complex narrative-driven titles. At its most basic, a video game can be defined as a digital or electronic game that involves interaction with a user interface to generate visual feedback on a two- or three-dimensional video display device such as a TV screen, computer monitor, or handheld device. According to Jesper Juul, a prominent scholar in game studies, a video game is more complexly understood as "a rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable" (Juul, 36). This definition highlights key elements such as rules, player effort, and outcomes, which are central to the gaming experience

However, Juul's definition, while comprehensive, does not fully capture the diversity of video games. Video games can range from simple, skill-based challenges like *Tetris*²² to

²² Tetris is a tile-matching puzzle video game first released in 1984. Players rotate and arrange falling geometric shapes called *tetrominoes* to create complete horizontal lines, which then disappear. This simple yet engaging mechanic made Tetris one of the most iconic puzzle games in history.

complex narrative experiences like *The Last of Us*,²³ which blends storytelling, character development, and moral choices with traditional gameplay mechanics. The wide variety of genres, platforms, and player experiences complicates efforts to pin down a single definition that encompasses all aspects of video games. One of the primary challenges in defining video games is their inherent diversity. Video games are not a monolithic medium; they vary widely in terms of gameplay, artistic style, narrative structure, and purpose. For instance, games like *Minecraft*²⁴ allow players to explore and create in a sandbox environment with minimal goals or rules, while games like *Dark Souls*²⁵ offer tightly structured challenges with significant penalties for failure. Both are video games, yet they offer fundamentally different experiences to the player.

Moreover, the evolution of technology has expanded the boundaries of what can be considered a video game. The rise of virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) has introduced new forms of interactive media that blur the lines between traditional video games and other digital experiences. For example, *Pokémon GO* uses AR technology to overlay digital creatures onto the real world, combining physical activity with digital gameplay. Such innovations challenge traditional definitions of video games by incorporating elements of physical reality and expanding the concept of player interaction beyond the screen. The role of narrative in video games further complicates their definition. Some video games, such as *The*

²³ *The Last of Us* is an action-adventure survival game first released in 2013. It follows Joel and Ellie as they journey through a post-pandemic United States filled with infected creatures and hostile survivors. Combining intense gameplay with emotionally driven storytelling, *The Last of Us* set a new standard for narrative depth in video games.

²⁴ *Minecraft* is a sandbox video game first released in 2011, in which players explore a procedurally generated world, gather resources, and build structures, tools, and machines to survive and create their own unique environments.

²⁵ *Dark Souls* is an action role-playing game, first released in 2011, known for its challenging gameplay, intricate level design, and dark fantasy setting that encourages players to learn through trial, error, and perseverance.

*Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*²⁶ or *Red Dead Redemption 2*²⁷, are celebrated for their rich, immersive storytelling, rivaling that of films or novels. These games challenge the notion that video games are purely about gameplay and competition, instead emphasizing the importance of narrative and character development. As Salen and Zimmerman argue, video games "are dynamic systems that include the player as an active participant in the creation of meaning," which can be driven as much by story as by gameplay mechanics (Salen and Zimmerman 80). This perspective highlights the medium's potential for artistic expression, further broadening the scope of what video games can be.

The challenge of defining video games lies in their inherent diversity and the ongoing evolution of the medium. As video games continue to incorporate elements of art, literature, and technology, they defy simple categorization, encompassing a wide range of experiences that challenge traditional notions that define games. However, video games have rapidly evolved from niche entertainment into a global cultural phenomenon. In the dynamic and ever-evolving landscape of Latin American culture, video games have emerged as a significant force, reshaping traditional notions of cultural production, consumption, and identity. This integration of video games into the cultural fabric of the region reflects broader processes of globalization, technological advancement, and cultural hybridity. Scholars like Néstor García Canclini, Eric Hershberg, and Ulises Juan Zevallos Aguilar explore these themes in their work, providing

²⁶ *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* is an action role-playing game, first released in 2015, in which players control the monster-slayer Geralt of Rivia as he traverses a vast, open world filled with intricate quests, moral dilemmas, and richly detailed fantasy settings.

²⁷ *Red Dead Redemption 2* is an action-adventure game, first released in 2018, set in a vast and detailed Western environment where players navigate moral choices, survive against harsh frontier conditions, and influence their character's fate through narrative-driven gameplay.

insights into how these types of new media have become a meaningful component of Latin American cultural life.

Canclini's concept of cultural hybridity is particularly relevant when examining the insertion of video games into Latin American culture. Canclini argues that Latin American culture is characterized by a blend of traditional and modern elements, resulting in hybrid forms that challenge binary distinctions between the local and the global, the old and the new (Canclini, 45). Video games, as products of global technology and local creativity, exemplify this hybridity in ways that broaden similar intersections already inherent in traditional games in Latin America. They are a medium through which global cultural influences are adapted and reinterpreted within local contexts, contributing to the ongoing redefinition of Latin American identities. The integration of video games into Latin American culture reflects a complex process of cultural negotiation where local narratives are interwoven with global technologies. For instance, the storytelling traditions and mythologies that have long been part of Latin American cultural heritage are finding new expressions in the digital realm. These narratives, once confined to oral traditions, literature, and traditional arts, are now being reimagined through the interactive medium of video games. This interaction allows for a unique blend of cultural preservation and innovation, where age-old stories are told in new ways that resonate with both local and global audiences.

Canclini's concept of cultural hybridity asserts the idea that these games are not merely products imported from global markets, but rather, they are localized and transformed to reflect regional identities. As video games incorporate local folklore, historical events, and social issues, they become tools for cultural expression and preservation, even as they embrace the technological and narrative forms of a globalized industry. This blending is not just about adding

local flavor to a global product; it is about actively engaging with the global to create something distinctively Latin American. Through video games, players engage with their cultural heritage in interactive ways that were previously unimaginable. For example, games that incorporate elements of local history, indigenous folklore, or contemporary social issues allow players to explore and reflect on these themes within a framework that is both entertaining and educational. More than that, by engaging players in a process of meaning-making and co-creation, such games encourage active participation in reframing and challenging static or outdated systems of knowledge. In doing so, they open up a space for players to critically evaluate, reinterpret, and contribute to cultural narratives, pushing back against traditional modes of knowledge transmission that often lack flexibility and inclusivity.

This cultural negotiation is especially significant in a region where identity is often shaped by a history of colonization, migration, and cultural exchange. Video games offer a new medium through which these complex identities can be explored and articulated. Players are not just passive consumers of content; they actively participate in the narrative, making choices that can reflect their understanding and interpretation of their cultural heritage. This interactive element adds a new dimension to the concept of cultural hybridity, where identity is not fixed but is continually negotiated and redefined through engagement with global and local influences.

The cultural hybridity facilitated by video games also plays a crucial role in identity formation in Latin America. As Canclini notes, identity in the modern world is increasingly hybrid, shaped by a complex interplay of local and global influences (Canclini 52). Video games, with their ability to blend these influences, have become an important medium through which individuals and communities can explore and express their identities. In Latin America, where questions of identity are often tied to issues of language, ethnicity, and history, video games offer

a new way to engage with these questions. Through the characters they control, the stories they engage with, and the decisions they make, players navigate and negotiate their identities in the virtual space of the game. This process of engagement allows for a deeper connection to one's cultural heritage, while also opening possibilities for new forms of identity that reflect the realities of a globalized world. In this way, video games can contribute to the ongoing redefinition of what it means to be Latin American in the 21st century.

Eric Hershberg's work on globalization and cultural consumption provides another lens through which to understand the integration of video games into Latin American culture. Hershberg notes that globalization has led to the increasing availability of cultural products from around the world, which are consumed alongside local traditions, creating a complex cultural marketplace (Hershberg, 78). In Latin America, the widespread adoption of video games reflects this global flow of cultural goods, where international trends are absorbed and recontextualized within local settings. The role of localization in video games is a critical aspect of how globalization affects cultural consumption. Localization ensures that video games resonate with local audiences by incorporating culturally specific elements, such as language, humor, and societal norms, into the gameplay and narrative. This practice not only enhances the gaming experience for local players but also demonstrates how global cultural products are reshaped to reflect regional identities. For example, localized versions of video games in Latin America may include references to local festivals, historical events, or popular culture, which helps to ground the game in the local context. This approach acknowledges the cultural specificity of different regions, allowing players to see themselves and their culture reflected in a global medium. It also highlights the interactive nature of cultural consumption in a globalized world, where local and global influences continuously intersect and evolve.

As video games are adapted and localized for Latin American audiences, they also become agents of cultural exchange. Through online platforms and global distribution networks, these localized games can reach international audiences, introducing aspects of Latin American culture to players around the world. This exchange is bidirectional: while Latin American players engage with games developed in other regions, they also contribute to the global gaming landscape by infusing it with their cultural perspectives. Moreover, the global distribution of video games allows for the spread of cultural practices and values across borders. Games developed in one region can introduce players from other parts of the world to different cultural norms, social issues, and artistic traditions, fostering greater understanding and appreciation of global diversity.

However, this dynamic also has its challenges and criticisms. The globalization of video games can sometimes lead to the homogenization of cultures, where dominant cultural influences overshadow local traditions and narratives. Smaller or underrepresented communities may struggle to have their voices heard, as major studios often prioritize commercially viable content that aligns with global market demands. Furthermore, the rapid flow of cultural goods across borders can exacerbate inequalities, as access to the tools and platforms for game development remains unevenly distributed. As such, while globalization fosters interconnectedness and cultural exchange, it can also reinforce existing power imbalances, raising important questions about whose stories get told and whose cultural values dominate.

Another important aspect of video games about cultural identity is their role in preserving and transmitting cultural memory. Video games can serve as a form of digital storytelling, where the histories, myths, and traditions of a culture are passed down to younger generations. In this way, video games become a modern tool for preserving cultural heritage, ensuring that they

remain relevant in a rapidly changing world. In Latin America, where oral traditions and communal storytelling have historically played a significant role in cultural transmission, video games offer a new medium for these narratives. By incorporating elements of cultural memory into game design, developers can create experiences that resonate with players on a deep, emotional level. These games not only entertain but also educate, helping players to connect with their cultural roots and understand the historical context of their identity. The use of video games as a tool for cultural preservation is particularly important in a region where globalization and modernization have sometimes led to the erosion of traditional practices and beliefs (Zevallos Aguilar, 104). By engaging with these digital narratives, players can keep their cultural heritage alive, passing it on to future generations in a format that is both accessible and appealing.

1.10 Chapter Conclusion

The evolution of play, from ancient rituals to modern video games, reflects a continuous thread of cultural expression that transcends time and technology. Traditional games in Latin America were deeply embedded in the social, spiritual, and cultural fabric of indigenous societies, serving as vital tools for education, socialization, and religious expression. The arrival of European colonizers brought about significant transformations, blending indigenous traditions with European customs to create hybrid forms of play that resonated with the changing cultural landscape. In modern times, the advent of technology and digital media has further expanded the boundaries of play, allowing for the integration of art, literature, and technology into a unified experience. This blending of media is particularly evident in the adaptation of traditional Latin American games into digital formats, where the cultural heritage is preserved and reimagined for new generations.

The concept of cultural hybridity, as explored by Canclini, highlights how video games in Latin America serve as a medium for cultural negotiation, where local narratives are intertwined with global technologies. This dynamic interaction not only preserves cultural memory but also allows for the continuous redefinition of Latin American identities in a globalized world. As video games continue to evolve, they play an increasingly significant role in shaping cultural identities, reflecting the complex interplay of tradition and modernity, local and global influences. This ongoing transformation appeals to the importance of understanding play not merely as a form of entertainment but as a powerful medium for cultural expression and change, social connection, and identity formation in an ever-changing digital landscape.

CHAPTER 2

THE POWER OF CHOICE GAMES: PERSUASION, IMMERSION, AND LUDOLOGY

2.1 Interactive Appeal: How Video Games Captivate Through Psychology and Culture

The rise of video games as a dominant force in entertainment and cultural expression has prompted significant discourse on their definition and classification., video games blend multiple elements, including artistry, technological innovation, storytelling, performance, and interactivity. This hybrid nature challenges conventional media boundaries and sparks ongoing debates regarding their classification—whether they should be viewed as art, entertainment, or a new, distinct medium. As noted by researchers, video games “occupy a unique position in the landscape of cultural forms” (Salen and Zimmerman 78), blending play with narrative. This characteristic complicates their placement within existing frameworks.

One of the key reasons video games defy easy categorization is their inherent interactivity. Scholars argue that this interactivity sets games apart from other forms of media, as players are active participants in creating the narrative, and the outcome of the experience is often shaped by their decisions (Juul 25). Unlike traditional storytelling, where the audience is a co-creator of meaning, video games demand engagement and agency through the co-creation of content, thus offering a unique form of narrative experience. The player’s role as a co-creator of the experience complicates conventional definitions of storytelling and art.

The artistic value of video games is an area of ongoing debate. Henry Jenkins, in his discussion of games as narrative architecture, asserts that video games provide environments “where players can explore complex ideas and moral choices” (Jenkins 123). Some scholars, like Graeme Kirkpatrick, argue that video games represent a new form of art because they involve the player’s aesthetic and emotional engagement in ways similar to traditional art forms, such as visual art or cinema (Kirkpatrick 53). Others, however, caution that while games may exhibit artistic qualities, their primary purpose as commercial products designed for entertainment could limit their classification as art in the traditional sense (Smuts 94). The technological innovations at the heart of video games add another layer to their complexity. As digital technology evolves, video games continue to push the boundaries of what is technically and artistically possible, blending virtual reality, artificial intelligence, and complex narrative structures (Manovich 45). This constant innovation further distinguishes games from static forms of media and may support the argument that they represent a new, distinct medium.

The complexity of video game classification and definition is particularly evident in the growing Latin American video game market, where global gaming trends intersect with local narratives and cultural influences. As the region’s video game industry expands, developers are increasingly incorporating Latin American history, folklore, and social issues into their games, creating experiences that not only entertain but also reflect and preserve (and in some cases distort) cultural heritage. This emerging trend showcases how video games, as a medium, can serve as a means of cultural expression and preservation in addition to their entertainment value. As Kafai and Burke note, video games can function as “powerful platforms for cultural exchange” (Kafai and Burke 45), giving voice to underrepresented narratives and allowing for the exploration of local identities within a globalized foundation.

In terms of genre popularity, certain types of video games stand out as the most successful in driving large sales and widespread player engagement across Latin America. Open-world and action-adventure games are a favorite among players in the region, with titles like *Grand Theft Auto V*, *Red Dead Redemption 2*, and the *Assassin's Creed* series achieving massive success²⁸. These games offer players vast, immersive environments with the freedom to explore and engage in dynamic storytelling. The popularity of *Grand Theft Auto V*, for instance, is due to its combination of narrative depth, multiplayer interaction, and the open-ended nature of its gameplay, which continues to captivate players years after its release in 2013.

The game features a rich, immersive storyline with complex characters, engaging players in a cinematic experience that elevates it beyond conventional gaming narratives (Den of Geek). Its multiplayer component, *GTA Online*, provides a dynamic platform where players participate in a variety of activities, missions, and events, fostering a vibrant and active community that sustains long-term engagement (Sportskeeda).

²⁸ Open-world and action-adventure games, including *Grand Theft Auto V* (*GTA V*), *Red Dead Redemption 2* (*RDR2*), and the *Assassin's Creed* series, have achieved significant success globally and in Latin America. *GTA V* has sold over 200 million units, generating approximately \$8.6 billion in revenue as of November 2024. Similarly, *RDR2* has sold 67 million units worldwide, surpassing \$3.3 billion in revenue. Although specific revenue data for Latin America is unavailable, the region's growing gaming community has likely contributed to these figures (Sources: Levvvel, Expert Beacon). The *Assassin's Creed* series has sold over 200 million units globally, generating approximately \$4 billion in revenue between 2014 and 2024. Ubisoft's fiscal year 2023-24 financial report notes that the "Rest of the World" category, including Latin America, accounted for 16% of the company's €2.32 billion in total net bookings, indicating strong regional engagement with the franchise (Sources: Statista, Tech4Gamers, Ubisoft FY24 Report).

Additionally, the expansive open-world environment allows players to explore and interact with the game world freely, offering diverse and unpredictable experiences that remain compelling. In Latin America, the game's success can be partly attributed to its localization into Spanish and Portuguese, which makes it more accessible to players in the region. Moreover, the themes of urban life and social dynamics depicted in the game resonate with many players' lived experiences, creating a deeper connection to the content. As Latin America's gaming market continues to expand, the sustained popularity of *GTA V* demonstrates how its unique combination of storytelling, multiplayer engagement, and gameplay freedom appeals to a wide and culturally diverse audience.

Fighting games like *Street Fighter V*, *Tekken 7*, and *Mortal Kombat 11* have a significant presence in Latin America's gaming culture, supported by substantial data and notable events; The region's gaming market is robust, with Brazil and Mexico leading in revenue. In 2023, Brazil's gaming market generated approximately \$2.57 billion, while Mexico closely followed with \$2.56 billion. This financial success is partly due to the popularity of fighting games, which attract both casual players and competitive gamers (Allcorrect Games). Latin America hosts several prominent esports tournaments featuring these titles. For instance, the Evolution Championship Series (Evo)²⁹ Online in 2021 included Latin American regions, allowing players to compete in *Tekken 7*, *Street Fighter V: Champion Edition*, and *Mortal Kombat 11 Ultimate*.

²⁹ The Evolution Championship Series (Evo) is the largest and longest-running fighting game tournament, founded in 1996. It serves as a global stage for professional players to compete awarding world championship titles. Evo is pivotal in promoting fighting games as a major esports, celebrating the community, showcasing top-tier talent, and fostering international participation, including from Latin America.

Additionally, the 2Game Pro Tour Latam³⁰ is a significant regional tournament offering offline and online stages for games like the ones previously mentioned, culminating in finals at the FestiGame event in Chile (Liquipedia, 2Game).

The competitive scene in Latin America is vibrant, with players frequently achieving high rankings in international tournaments. For example, during Evo 2021 Online, players from Latin America excelled in various brackets, showcasing their skills on a global stage. Notable competitors, such as Chile's Kusanagi in *Street Fighter V*, have consistently placed among the top players in international events. This prominence is bolstered by a passionate community that organizes grassroots tournaments, fostering new talent and connecting players across regions. Coupled with the legacy of arcade culture in countries like Mexico and Brazil, where arcades once served as social hubs, the fighting game community continues to grow. These cultural and structural elements sustain the genre's success and position Latin America as a powerhouse in the competitive fighting game arena (The Game Haus).

Another genre that consistently drives significant sales in the region is sports simulation games, particularly *FIFA* and *Pro Evolution Soccer* (PES). These games, especially *FIFA* (Fédération Internationale de Football Association), maintain immense popularity due to the cultural significance of soccer in Latin America. With their realistic gameplay, multiplayer capabilities, and the ability to simulate real-life leagues, teams, and players, these games offer soccer fans a way to engage with their favorite sport on a virtual field. In countries like Mexico

³⁰ The 2Game Pro Tour LATAM is a regional fighting game tournament circuit in Latin America. The event serves as an official Evo qualifier, it provides a platform for players to showcase their skills, gain recognition, and prepare for international competition. The tour's sponsorships and prize structures often support winners in participating in global events like Evo, solidifying its role as a key steppingstone for competitive players in the region.

and Argentina, *FIFA* consistently ranks among the top-selling games each year, further solidifying the role of sports simulation games in Latin American gaming culture.³¹

A key part of understanding the appeal of these games is exploring the psychological mechanisms that make them so engaging. Self-Determination Theory (SDT),³² developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, is based on research that individuals are driven by the basic psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness (68). In the context of video games, these needs are met in diverse ways across various genres, making them a powerful medium for fulfilling psychological satisfaction.

Competence, or the desire to master skills and achieve goals, is a significant motivator in many video games. Players are drawn to games that challenge their abilities, allowing them to gradually improve through practice. In fighting games like *Street Fighter V* or sports simulations like *FIFA*, players must learn the intricacies of game mechanics, whether it is mastering complex combo moves or honing tactical strategies on the soccer field. As players invest time and effort into improving their performance, the game rewards them with victories, high scores, or rankings, providing a clear sense of progress and achievement. Research shows that players feel more satisfied when they experience success and competence within a game, as the feeling of

³¹ As of 2021, the FIFA series has sold over 325 million copies worldwide, making it the best-selling sports video game franchise. “Gaming Revenue by Country in Latin America.” *Statista*, 2024, [statista.com/forecasts/500035/gaming-revenue-countries-latin-america](https://www.statista.com/forecasts/500035/gaming-revenue-countries-latin-america).

³² Self Determination Theory in video games refers to the use of rewards and punishments to influence player behavior. Games often use positive reinforcement by rewarding players with points, achievements, or new levels for completing tasks, which encourages continued play. Negative reinforcement might involve removing obstacles or challenges once players achieve certain goals, motivating them to keep progressing. This system keeps players engaged by creating a cycle of rewards, ensuring they continue playing to achieve the next desirable outcome. Through these mechanisms, video games effectively maintain player motivation and involvement.

mastery encourages them to keep playing (Klimmt et al. 331). This drive for mastery mirrors the dedication seen in the ancient Mesoamerican ball game, where players honed their physical skill and strategic precision to achieve victory.³³ The same principles of improvement through practice and the reward of accomplishment, whether it is victory on the court or triumph in a virtual match, highlight a universal and enduring human pursuit of competence across time.

Autonomy, the need for control and freedom over one's actions, is another key driver in video game engagement. In open-world games like *Red Dead Redemption* or *Grand Theft Auto V*, players are given the freedom to explore vast environments, choose how to complete missions, and shape the narrative based on their decisions. This open-ended gameplay allows players to feel a strong sense of control over their in-game experience, fulfilling their need for autonomy. The ability to chart their own path, whether by engaging with side quests, focusing on the main storyline, or simply exploring the world at their own pace, empowers players to take ownership of their gameplay. This level of control is highly satisfying and keeps players invested, as they feel that their actions directly impact their progress and the outcomes of the game.

The third stage, relatedness, the desire to feel connected to others, is a key motivator in video game engagement, particularly in multiplayer or cooperative experiences. Games like *FIFA*, *Fortnite*, or *Overwatch* create opportunities for players to bond through shared goals or friendly competition, fostering meaningful social interactions. These connections satisfy players' need for relatedness by enabling them to collaborate or challenge others, building relationships in the process. For instance, *FIFA* allows players to join online leagues, participate in tournaments,

³³ See chapter 1 page 15 for a deeper discussion of the Mesoamerican Ball game.

or team up with friends in cooperative modes, cultivating a sense of belonging within a broader gaming community. Ryan, Rigby, and Przybylski emphasize that these interactions deepen engagement by fulfilling the intrinsic need for social connection and collaboration (Ryan, Rigby, and Przybylski 352). Similarly, the Mesoamerican ball game was deeply rooted in community, where the act of playing, whether as allies or adversaries, reinforced interpersonal and cultural ties. The communal nature of the ball game mirrors modern multiplayer gaming, where shared experiences, competition, and teamwork continue to strengthen social bonds.

These psychological needs do not exist in isolation—they are intricately woven into human culture, reflecting motivations that have endured across time. The desire for mastery, connection, and autonomy has shaped the way people engage with games, from ancient communal sports to modern virtual challenges. While the tools and contexts have evolved, the core experiences remain the same, revealing a deep continuity between past and present in how games fulfill fundamental human drives and bring people together through shared goals and achievements.

Games like *Red Dead Redemption* serve not only as entertainment but also as platforms for cultural reflection, incorporating elements of Latin American history, such as the Mexican Revolution (1910 -1922) and figures like *caudillos*.³⁴ Through characters like Colonel Allende³⁵,

³⁴ *Caudillos* were regional military leaders or political strongmen who emerged in Latin America during the 19th and early 20th centuries, often in the aftermath of independence movements. They wielded significant power through personal charisma, military control, and loyalty from local populations, frequently operating outside of formal legal or political structures. They were known for both their ability to maintain order and their tendency to rule through authoritarian means, often prioritizing personal or regional interests over national unity.

³⁵ While the last name Allende may resonate with Chilean President Salvador Allende, the character's name is symbolically connected to Mexican *caudillos* like Victoriano Huerta and Porfirio Diaz.

players can explore the political dynamics of the time, while incidents like the infamous *ley fuga*³⁶ offer a glimpse into historical practices. In the game world, players can witness prisoners being shot while allegedly trying to escape, a common method of extrajudicial killing during this period. The casual indifference of the townsfolk toward such brutality reflects how normalized violence had become under oppressive regimes, adding a somber layer to the player's experience and illustrating the grim realities of life in revolutionary Mexico.

These themes resonate strongly in the fictional provinces of *Nosalida* and *Chuparosa* in *Red Dead Redemption*, making the game's world feel like an extension of the literary tradition exploring despair in rural Mexico. Two landmark novels that depict the revolutionary period in Mexico, Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* and Mariano Azuela's *Los de Abajo* are deeply rooted in the theme of despair, capturing the struggles of rural Mexico during times of profound upheaval. *Comala*, the ghost town in Rulfo's novel, stands as a haunting representation of hopelessness, where the land itself seems to reflect the weight of past sins and unfulfilled promises. Similarly, *Los de Abajo* chronicles the Mexican Revolution through the eyes of common people, revealing how the ideals of justice and change are overshadowed by cycles of violence, betrayal, and loss. Both works use their settings to reflect a broader sense of societal failure, where the land and its people are caught in a relentless struggle, unable to escape the forces of corruption and conflict. These themes resonate strongly in the fictional provinces of *Nosalida* and *Chuparosa* in *Red*

³⁶ The *ley fuga* was a practice in Mexico during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly under the rule of Porfirio Díaz, where authorities would justify the extrajudicial killing of prisoners by claiming they were attempting to escape. This "law of flight" allowed law enforcement to shoot suspects who allegedly tried to flee custody, often without any real attempt to escape. It became a tool for eliminating political opponents and dissenters, symbolizing the widespread abuse of power during repressive regimes.

Dead Redemption, making the game's world feel like an extension of the literary tradition exploring despair in rural Mexico.

The game's fictional state of Nuevo Paraíso, located in Mexico, features provinces like *Nosalida* and *Chuparosa*, which are rich in cultural symbolism and narrative depth. *Nosalida*, meaning "no exit," embodies the same suffocating inevitability found in *Comala*. Just as *Comala* is a place of unrelenting stagnation and spiritual decay, *Nosalida* symbolizes the inescapable oppression faced by its people, caught in the clutches of corruption and violence. The town's name suggests that no matter how hard one tries, there is no hope of freedom—mirroring the despair woven into Rulfo's ghostly landscapes.

On the other hand, *Chuparosa*, with its layered meaning of "hummingbird" and "sucking the rose," parallels the draining of life and beauty explored in *Los de Abajo*. Azuela's depiction of the Revolution shows how the fight for justice often becomes an empty promise, leaving behind a trail of destruction and disillusionment. *Chuparosa* captures this same sentiment, where the vibrancy of the land and its people is steadily stripped away by greed, war, and exploitation. In both cases, the settings highlight the stark realities of rural life, where beauty and hope are perpetually at odds with the harshness of survival.

Together, *Nosalida* and *Chuparosa* reflect the despair and disillusionment found in *Pedro Páramo* and *Los de Abajo*. They are not just places within the game; they are symbolic extensions of a broader narrative tradition that grapples with the human cost of systemic corruption, revolution, and cultural decay. Like the ghostly echoes of *Comala* or the dashed hopes of the Revolution's fighters, these provinces reveal how deeply entrenched despair shapes

the world of Nuevo Paraíso, tying the game's narrative to the timeless struggles depicted in these iconic works of Mexican literature.

Through these environments, players are drawn into the complex historical and cultural fabric of the period, making the game an immersive reflection on the struggles of the Mexican people during this era. One of the key characters in this narrative is Abraham Reyes, a revolutionary leader who initially fights for the liberation of the people but gradually transforms into a power-hungry *caudillo*. Reyes' character arc reflects the tragic shift from idealism to corruption that often occurs in times of revolution. His transformation from a revolutionary hero to a dictator in the making evokes a sense of disillusionment, highlighting the cyclical nature of power and betrayal. This evolution adds emotional complexity to the game's exploration of revolution, providing players with a nuanced understanding of how personal ambition can distort the very causes for which leaders once fought.

This seamless integration of historical and fictional content as well as gameplay is also seen in the genre of fighting games, which hold a prominent position in the Latin American gaming landscape. Characters such as *El Fuerte* from *Street Fighter IV* and King from *Tekken* draw directly from *lucha libre* (Mexican wrestling), a unique and vibrant tradition deeply ingrained in Mexican culture. *Lucha libre*, known for its high-flying maneuvers, colorful masks, and dramatic storytelling, transcends mere entertainment to become a symbol of identity and resistance. Emerging as a popular spectacle during a time of social inequality, its storylines of underdogs triumphing over powerful adversaries resonated deeply with the working class, while

the mask became a symbol of defiance and individuality.³⁷ The *luchador's* mask also carries a connection to ancient rituals, evoking the pre-Columbian use of masks in Aztec and Maya ceremonies to represent deities, animals, or spirits. In modern times, *lucha libre* continues to reflect these layers of cultural heritage, combining resistance, transformation, and artistry, making its influence in gaming a powerful nod to Mexican traditions.

The colorful, flamboyant attire of these characters, such as *El Fuerte's* traditional *lucha libre* mask and wrestling gear, evokes a sense of cultural pride and recognition for players familiar with this iconic wrestling style. Similarly, King's jaguar mask and wrestling costume, paired with his powerful *lucha*-inspired moves, provide visual and emotional ties to a deeply respected tradition in Latin American culture. Additionally, the backdrops in these games often feature environments inspired by ancient Mesoamerican ruins, adding an extra layer of cultural resonance. Stages set in grand stone temples or pyramid-like structures, reminiscent of Mayan or Aztec ruins, allow players to engage with their region's deep historical roots. These environments, with their jungle settings and monumental ruins, not only create a visually stunning backdrop but also evoke a connection to Latin America's ancient civilizations.

For many players, these settings invoke a sense of cultural pride, reflecting both their modern identities and ancestral heritage. This pride is rooted in a palimpsest of gaming narratives, where original game settings and influences leave traces that bleed through into newer

³⁷ *Lucha Libre* it gained immense popularity during the 1930s and 1940s, a period marked by economic hardship and social inequality in Mexico. During this time, the working class faced significant struggles, exacerbated by the lingering effects of the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920) and the global Great Depression. For further exploration of *lucha libre's* cultural and historical significance, readers may consult Heather Levi's *The World of Lucha Libre: Secrets, Revelations, and Mexican National Identity*, which delves into the intricate connections between wrestling, identity, and Mexican popular culture.

creations. For instance, *Street Fighter II*'s Mexico-inspired stages and *Tekken*'s nods to *lucha libre* layered cultural representation into the genre early on, laying the groundwork for deeper connections in later games. These echoes of past games, layered over modern titles, create a continuous interplay of representation that reinforces the multi-cultural identity of the settings. The expressions and animations of these characters—exuding confidence, strength, and a sense of showmanship—reflect the larger-than-life personas central to *lucha libre* and ancient warrior archetypes. This blend of culturally significant clothing, ancient backdrops, and character design enhances the psychological appeal of these games, as players project aspects of their identity onto these avatars, creating a stronger bond between the player and the game (Klimmt et al. 354). For many Latin American players, fighting games are more than just skill-based competitions—they are opportunities to engage with culturally significant symbols that reflect their regional pride and historical legacy.

The interest in video games goes beyond the characters and stories themselves, extending into the mechanics and systems that keep players engaged. Operant conditioning—the use of reward systems to reinforce behavior—plays a major role in maintaining player engagement³⁸. In games like *FIFA* and *Street Fighter V*, the reward systems are designed to provide unpredictable but highly motivating reinforcements, such as unlocking new teams, characters, or achievements. This kind of variable ratio reinforcement, where rewards are given at irregular intervals, keeps players returning to the game, anticipating the next unlockable or achievement (Bavelier et al.

³⁸ The term "operant conditioning" was originally coined by B.F. Skinner, a psychologist, to describe a learning process where behavior is influenced by rewards or punishments. In the context of video games, Richard A. Bartle, a game design researcher, is often credited with drawing explicit connections between Skinner's behavioral theories and the design mechanics in video games.

763). Coupled with the intrinsic motivation derived from competence and autonomy, these reward systems create a positive feedback loop that encourages long-term engagement.

In many modern video games, "Seasons" play a crucial role in maintaining player engagement by periodically refreshing content, and the names given to these seasons significantly enhance their appeal. Titles like *Zero Point* in *Fortnite* or *Mayhem* in *Apex Legends* are crafted to evoke excitement and hint at the upcoming theme or narrative focus. These names often reflect major in-game changes or challenges, setting the tone for what players can expect and generating anticipation. By creating evocative, dynamic titles for each season, developers tap into players' emotional investment, using season names as a gateway to deeper immersion in the game world. Research by Jamie Madigan delves into the psychological principles that explain why players remain engaged with games over extended periods. This aligns with the design of "Seasons" and player card systems in games like *FIFA Ultimate Team (FUT)* or *Fortnite*, which keep players returning through similar mechanisms (Madigan 42). The unpredictable nature of these rewards taps into players' intrinsic desire for gratification, compelling them to keep playing in the hope of obtaining valuable in-game items.

Similarly, research by Daphne Bavelier and her colleagues explores how operant conditioning in video games influences cognitive engagement and retention. Their study examines how games reinforce certain behaviors by intermittently rewarding players, leading to sustained engagement (Bavelier et al. 763). This is especially relevant to the seasonal and reward-based systems seen in contemporary games, where the introduction of new content aligns with intermittent reinforcement principles through anticipation of exclusive rewards, as players continually seek out the next challenge or unlockable item. In addition to these

psychological mechanisms, Sebastian Deterding's work on gamification further expands on how game design taps into both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Deterding explains that systems like seasonal content and progression mechanics are designed to balance immediate satisfaction—such as mastering skills—with long-term rewards like exclusive items, effectively maintaining player interest over time (102). This balance explains the success of seasonal updates and reward systems: they combine the instant gratification of gameplay with the allure of unlocking time-limited content, ensuring players remain invested.

The appeal of seasonal content is amplified by the exclusivity tied to time-sensitive rewards. Battle passes and progression systems are often linked to each season, encouraging players to participate consistently to earn exclusive in-game items, skins, and achievements. The "fear of missing out" on rare content compels players to remain engaged, ensuring they return regularly. Names like *Last Stand* in *Call of Duty: Warzone* or *Fortune's Favor* in *Apex Legends* are not merely markers of new gameplay features; they serve as reminders that players have limited time to unlock unique rewards before they disappear.

Video games have evolved into a dynamic medium that merges cultural expression, psychological engagement, and interactive storytelling in ways that traditional media cannot achieve. Particularly in regions like Latin America, games function as more than just entertainment—they become platforms where local and global narratives intersect, allowing players to engage with cultural symbols, histories, and social issues in meaningful ways. This engagement is driven by the psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness, which developers skillfully weave into game mechanics to sustain player interest. By continuously updating content and offering fresh challenges, games ensure that players are not

only engaged by the mechanics but also by evolving cultural narratives and experiences. This combination of psychological appeal and cultural storytelling makes video games powerful tools for exploring identity, history, and social dynamics, offering players a unique, interactive form of cultural immersion. Through these layers of interaction, video games stand as a distinctive medium that fosters both personal engagement and a deeper understanding of diverse cultures.

2.2 Superficiality in Gameplay Mechanics and the Role of Ludology

As players engage with video games, their immersion is often driven by a combination of psychological factors that draw them into the game's world. Games tap into core psychological motivators, such as the need for mastery, autonomy, and social connection, in addition to in-game rewards, and offer a space where players can challenge themselves, make meaningful choices, and engage with the narratives and characters presented to them. This engagement is compelling in games that incorporate cultural symbols or emotional themes, as these elements can provide an added layer of depth to the reward-based mechanics, inviting players to connect not only with the gameplay but also with the cultural or emotional significance woven into the experience. By integrating meaningful cultural narratives or symbolic content, games can create a richer, more immersive world that resonates on multiple levels, encouraging players to reflect on the themes and environments they explore.

However, when these cultural elements are only superficially incorporated, the connection between the player and the game can weaken. For example, in *Call of Juarez: The Cartel*, players are thrust into the violent world of drug cartels and the chaos they bring to Mexican cities. The game attempts to build emotional tension through its dramatic environments and storyline. Still, as players progress, it becomes clear that the deeper cultural elements—such

as the portrayal of Mexican cities, citizens, and law enforcement—are not meaningfully integrated into the gameplay. While the game initially promises a complex narrative set in a politically charged environment, cultural aspects become mere aesthetic backdrops, disconnected from the mechanics and choices that drive the player's actions. Instead of enhancing the user experience or encouraging thoughtful reflection on the issues depicted, these elements are relegated to surface-level embellishments, reducing the *Call of Juarez: The Cartel*'s capacity to engage players in a meaningful exploration of the themes it touches upon.

The game's backdrop—focused on the U.S.-Mexico border and the violent conflict between law enforcement and drug cartels—naturally connects to broader themes of border militarization, which had become a contentious topic in political discourse. *Call of Juarez: The Cartel* was released in 2011, at a time when tensions between the U.S. and Mexico over border security and militarization were at an all-time high. In the early 2010s, the issue of drug trafficking, immigration, and border control had become central to geopolitical discussions, with both nations focusing on tightening security and combating organized crime.

By the time of the game's release, the U.S. government had significantly increased its efforts to militarize the border, particularly in states like Arizona, Texas, and California. These efforts included deploying additional federal agents, drones, and surveillance systems, as well as building infrastructure such as border walls and checkpoints, reflecting the intensifying focus on securing the region. This militarized landscape not only provided a timely context for the game's setting but also reflected the real-world anxieties of the period. In the early 2010s, the U.S. had constructed approximately 649 miles of fencing along the southwest border, consisting of 299

miles of vehicle barriers and 350 miles of pedestrian fence.³⁹ This substantial infrastructure aimed to prevent unauthorized crossings and enhance surveillance capabilities. Additionally, the Border Patrol operated 71 traffic checkpoints, including 33 permanent traffic checkpoints, near the Mexico–United States border, further emphasizing the physical and logistical measures taken to control the movement of people and goods.

Regarding personnel, the number of Border Patrol agents assigned to the southern border increased dramatically, rising from 8,580 in 2000 to over 20,000 by 2009.⁴⁰ This increase represented a significant expansion of manpower, aimed at combating drug trafficking and unauthorized immigration more effectively. These substantial enhancements in border security infrastructure and personnel underscore the heightened focus on border militarization during that period, providing a historical and political backdrop that resonated with the themes explored in the game. The Mérida Initiative, a security partnership between the U.S. and Mexico aimed at combating drug trafficking and organized crime, also escalated tensions, with critics arguing that it emphasized militarized responses at the expense of addressing root causes like poverty and inequality. The game's narrative, set in a world of drug cartels, violence, and corruption, could have served as a powerful commentary on these real-world dynamics. However, the game misses this opportunity by failing to integrate these important geopolitical components into its mechanics, reducing the potential impact of its setting.

³⁹ United States Government Accountability Office. "Border Security: DHS Has Made Progress in Securing the Southwest Border, but Additional Actions Are Needed." *GAO Report to Congressional Committees*, May 2011.

⁴⁰ Politifact. "More Border Security and Patrols under Obama Than Previous Administrations." *Politifact*, 1 July 2013.

Instead, the game primarily focuses on violent shootouts and action sequences, while the geopolitical significance of border militarization—its impact on both nations, on local communities, and the broader war on drugs—is barely acknowledged. Rather than engaging players in a nuanced exploration of the moral and political implications of militarized borders, the game reduces the border conflict to a simple backdrop for violent action. Players are thrust into a series of firefights and high-octane missions, with little attention given to the systemic and human costs of such militarization. The game's mechanics reinforce this simplification, almost exclusively focusing on combat rather than providing opportunities for the player to interact with or reflect on the political and social complexities of the border region.

This missed opportunity is significant because video games, as interactive media, have the potential to immerse players in complex systems, and encourage and reward them to think critically about real-world issues. In this case, *Call of Juarez: The Cartel* could have offered a deeper narrative about the consequences of border militarization—such as the displacement of communities, the erosion of civil liberties, or how increased militarization fuels the very violence it seeks to combat. Instead, the game leans into familiar action tropes, sidelining the potential for meaningful engagement with these pressing geopolitical realities.

By not emphasizing the consequences of border militarization within its gameplay, the game fails to tap into the unique capacity of video games to simulate real-world dynamics and encourage critical reflection. While *Call of Juarez: The Cartel* situates itself in a politically charged environment, the lack of attention to how border tensions and militarization shape the region's reality results in a superficial experience that glosses over the broader implications of its setting. This gap in the game's design highlights a broader issue within the industry: the failure to

fully leverage the interactive nature of video games to explore complex socio-political themes in ways that can foster deeper understanding and discussion.

Mexican officials, including local politicians and lawmakers, argued that *Call of Juarez: The Cartel* trivialized the real struggles and violence faced by the country due to organized crime. The game was criticized for turning these serious issues into entertainment, which not only lacked sensitivity but also misrepresented the complexity of the situation. In particular, Ricardo Boone Salmon, a member of the state of Chihuahua's Legislature, led the charge to ban the game, calling it a glorification of the violence that had claimed thousands of Mexican lives—especially in the city of Juarez.⁴¹ He and others feared that the game would contribute to the negative image of Mexico abroad, further damaging the country's reputation at a time when it was already dealing with diplomatic challenges due to the ongoing drug war.

In 2011, the request to ban the game was further escalated to Mexico's Secretariat of the Interior, with officials claiming that the game promoted violence and contributed to the desensitization of players toward the very real issues of organized crime. Boone Salmon expressed concerns that video games like *Call of Juarez: The Cartel* could also negatively influence younger players by normalizing violence, particularly in the context of the drug war. The portrayal of Mexican law enforcement as corrupt and ineffective further added to the game's problematic impact, as it undermined efforts by the Mexican government to address and reform its image on the international stage.

⁴¹ CBS News. "Call of Juarez: The Cartel Video Game Faces Possible Ban." *CBS News*, 2 March 2011, www.cbsnews.com/news/call-of-juarez-the-cartel-video-game-faces-possible-ban/.

Eddie Guerra, a DEA agent with a significant gambling addiction, is one of the main protagonists in *Call of Juarez: The Cartel* and offers a unique opportunity for representation, but his character ends up reinforcing familiar stereotypes rather than providing depth or complexity. Guerra, a Mexican-American character, could have been an important figure in the landscape of video game protagonists. Before him, there had been very few prominent Hispanic main characters in games, and most representation had been limited to side characters or villains, such as in *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (2002) or *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon* series (2001).

When the game was released, a clear gap in providing complex, culturally nuanced Hispanic characters in gaming was evident. Characters like Eddie Guerra could have served to bridge that lacuna by offering a narrative that reflected his dual identity as both Mexican and American, grappling with the social and cultural tensions that come with such a background. More significantly, Guerra's identity and profession offer another opportunity to explore the internal conflict of working as a DEA agent while also being of Hispanic descent fighting against the drug trade in Mexico and the U.S.-Mexico border region. These juxtapositions would have opened possibilities for examining broader socio-cultural, economic, and political issues in the region and about intersectional questions of identity.

However, instead of delving into these complexities, the game reduces Guerra's character to a shallow portrayal that emphasizes his moral flaws—particularly his gambling addiction—without adding any layers to his identity or struggles. This portrayal reduces Hispanic characters to corrupt or morally compromised figures, squandering the chance to offer a positive or multifaceted portrayal of a Hispanic protagonist. In terms of missed opportunities, Guerra's character could have been developed to reflect the real tensions between law enforcement,

identity, and the impact of the drug war on Mexican American communities. His story could have served as a much-needed exploration of these economic, cultural, and socio-political issues in video games.

Given the scarcity of Hispanic protagonists in video games before Guerra, his character uniquely held the potential to break new ground. Unlike Rico Rodriguez from *Just Cause* (2006) or Juan Aguacate from *Guacamelee!* (2013), Guerra could have stood out as a more grounded, realistic figure in a narrative set against the backdrop of real-world issues.⁴² Instead, his portrayal fell into the trap of reinforcing negative stereotypes, missing the chance to make a meaningful impact on how Hispanic characters are represented in mainstream gaming. This is particularly evident in one of Eddie's side quests, where players are tasked with picking up stashes of drugs hidden around the map. The fact that a DEA agent, supposedly representing law enforcement, is also engaging in illicit activity reinforces problematic associations between Mexican Americans and corruption or criminality. Instead of offering complex cultural or moral conflicts that accurately reflect real-world referents, the game uses one-dimensional stereotypes and elements to advance a shallow narrative.

⁴² Rico Rodriguez, the protagonist of the *Just Cause* series, is portrayed as a larger-than-life action hero of Hispanic descent. While his character celebrates some aspects of Latin identity, his cultural background is minimally explored, and the games emphasize exaggerated action over meaningful representation. Similarly, Juan Aguacate, the lead character in *Guacamelee!*, is a luchador in a vibrant, comedic world inspired by Mexican culture. However, his depiction leans heavily into caricature and satire, prioritizing humor and gameplay over authentic or nuanced representation. Both characters, while iconic, lack the depth and complexity that could address the broader underrepresentation of Hispanic characters in video games. Eddie Guerra, despite being flawed, holds potential to address these gaps by situating a Hispanic protagonist in a narrative addressing social and political issues.

From a *Self-Determination Theory* standpoint, the game rewards players for completing Eddie's morally questionable side quest, allowing them to feel a sense of accomplishment and mastery by successfully retrieving the drug stashes. By incentivizing such behavior, the game encourages players to engage in actions that weaken Eddie's role as a law enforcement officer and amplify his penchant for moral corruption. Rather than prompting players to question these ethically dubious missions, the mechanics of the game reinforce them as standard objectives, aligning player satisfaction with actions that exploit the character's struggles. This dynamic reduces the opportunity to explore Eddie's personal or cultural complexities and instead turns his questionable decisions into gameplay objectives, reinforcing a problematic portrayal of his character that lacks meaningful depth in his identity or geopolitical setting.

However, the most oversimplified portrayal in *Call of Juarez: The Cartel* comes through the depiction of Mexican cartel members. These characters, who act as the primary antagonists, are presented in a one-dimensional manner. They often speak in heavily accented English peppered with Spanish phrases like *cabrón* (bastard or asshole) or *gringo* (A slightly derogatory connotation referred to Americans), intended to evoke a sense of menace. However, this use of language is inauthentic, reflecting a lack of genuine understanding of Mexican dialects or the socio-political context of the drug war. Their use of dialect and slang further alienates them as "others," presenting them as exoticized villains. The dialogue they use—filled with threats and offensive language—contributes to the game's superficial treatment of the drug war, where the complexity of cartel violence in Mexico is flattened into a black-and-white narrative of good law enforcement versus bad cartel members. The cartel members are almost exclusively portrayed as violent, lawless criminals with little nuance or backstory.

This lack of distinction in character development strips away the opportunity for the game to explore the human realities behind these figures, such as the socio-economic conditions that force individuals into cartel involvement, including extreme poverty, lack of employment opportunities, and systemic inequality in regions heavily affected by organized crime. Additionally, the game overlooks the internal conflicts within Mexican society, such as the struggle between communities trying to resist cartel influence, the corruption within local and federal governments that complicates law enforcement efforts, and the challenges faced by individuals coerced into cartel life to protect their families. By failing to address these complexities, the game reduces a deeply nuanced issue to a simplistic narrative of good versus evil.

These misrepresentations are not confined solely to the game's visuals or narrative. The player's interaction with the game world, through its mechanics and systems, plays a critical role in how these cultural elements are experienced. This is where the concept of ludology—the study of gameplay mechanics and how players interact with game systems—becomes crucial. Scholars like Gonzalo Frasca emphasize that understanding games requires an examination not just of their narrative content but of their mechanics, as these mechanics shape player behavior and engagement with the game's themes (Frasca 221). Ludology, as defined by Frasca and other scholars, is the study of games through their rules, systems, and mechanics rather than their narrative or visual content alone. Frasca, a leading figure in game studies, argues that games are simulations rather than traditional narratives, meaning they present dynamic systems with which players interact, as opposed to linear storytelling (Frasca 227).

This distinction is key to understanding how games communicate cultural ideas through interaction. While a film might portray violence or stereotypes visually, in a video game, these elements are reinforced through the actions players are required to take. Players are not passive observers or readers of text, but active participants, and their engagement with the game's mechanics directly influences how they interact with and perceive the cultural content embedded in the game. Jesper Juul, another leading figure in game studies, introduces the idea that games are *half-real* experiences, meaning that their rules and mechanics exist in conjunction with the fictional worlds they create (Juul 34). This duality of games — where the player must navigate the systems and create the narrative — is essential to understanding how games convey meaning and influence player experiences. Mechanics do more than facilitate gameplay; they actively shape how players interpret and take action in the game's world. When the mechanics focus solely on action or combat, players are often forced into a particular mode of interaction that may oversimplify or even distort the complexities of the game's setting or themes.

In many cases, games that focus on violent interactions limit players' ability to engage with deeper socio-political contexts or nuanced cultural narratives. Rather than encouraging exploration or moral decision-making, games that rely heavily on combat systems reduce complex issues to action-driven experiences. This dynamic, as framed by Juul, reveals how game mechanics can either enrich or undermine the potential for meaningful cultural representation. By prioritizing mechanics that emphasize violence or simplistic objectives, games often fail to provide the opportunity for players to engage critically with the themes or environments they are navigating.

For many years, video games have depicted countries, particularly those in Latin America and the Middle East, in a simplistic and often harmful manner. This trend can be traced back to older games where entire regions were depicted as violent, lawless, or exotic, often without any attempt to understand or accurately represent the cultures being shown. The lack of accuracy in these portrayals has contributed to the reinforcement of negative stereotypes and the oversimplification of diverse nations and heritage into simplified settings for conflict and violence (Shaw 80).

Among many examples, *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter* (2006), set in Mexico City during a fictionalized near-future war, presents Mexico as a chaotic war zone, overrun by gangs and insurgents, with little emphasis on the country's rich cultural heritage or the complexities of its political landscape. Mexico is portrayed exclusively as a battleground, one where American forces must intervene, reinforcing the notion of Latin American countries as unstable and dependent on or subject to foreign intervention. While the game's mechanics focus on military strategy and action, the setting is treated merely as a violent, exotic locale, without any real exploration of the people or culture affected by the war (Leonard 170).

Mercenaries 2: World in Flames (2008) is an open-world action-adventure game that casts players as one of three mercenaries—Mattias Nilsson, a gruff Swedish soldier with a penchant for violence; Jennifer Mui, a British ex-operative known for her precision and cunning; or Chris Jacobs, a tough-talking American former soldier. Each character brings a unique personality and skill set, but their goal is the same: to wreak havoc and collect paychecks. The central storyline revolves around Ramón Solano, a Venezuelan businessman-turned-dictator who betrays the mercenary protagonist early in the game. This betrayal sets off a revenge-driven

campaign in which the player dismantles Solano's empire piece by piece, while also working with or against various factions, including corrupt government forces, local guerrilla fighters, private militias, and multinational oil companies.

Solano serves as the game's primary antagonist, depicted as a caricature of a power-hungry dictator obsessed with controlling Venezuela's vast oil reserves. Alongside Solano, the game introduces a variety of faction leaders, each more exaggerated than the last, ranging from bombastic military commanders to unhinged guerrilla leaders, none of whom are given much depth beyond their roles as enemies or allies in the chaotic setting. The gameplay centers on destruction, with players able to demolish nearly every structure in the open world, from sprawling military complexes to oil refineries, using an arsenal of weapons, vehicles, and airstrikes. This over-the-top action creates an explosive playground for players but sacrifices meaningful engagement with the setting or its people.

While the game delivers high-octane action, its portrayal of Venezuela is problematic. The emphasis on petroleum infrastructure and factional battles ties loosely to Venezuela's real-world status as one of the world's largest oil exporters, but the game fails to explore the deeper geopolitical and social implications. In reality, Venezuela's oil wealth has historically been a double-edged sword, fueling both economic growth and severe political instability. The nationalization of the oil industry under then-president Hugo Chávez in the early 2000s created tensions with multinational corporations and foreign governments, especially the United States, which relied heavily on Venezuelan oil imports. This real-world context could have enriched the narrative, but instead, the game reduces these issues to simplistic missions where players destroy

oil refineries or seize control of them, sidelining the complex history of resource management, inequality, and corruption tied to Venezuela's petroleum sector.

Furthermore, the game's depiction of Venezuela as a dystopian wasteland ignores the lived realities of its people. Instead of engaging with the socio-economic conditions that have shaped the nation, such as the impacts of oil dependence, government mismanagement, and humanitarian crises, *Mercenaries 2* relies on tired stereotypes of Latin America as a chaotic, lawless region. The game's characters—though colorful—are one-dimensional, and its narrative glosses over the nuanced struggles of Venezuelans caught in the crossfire of political and economic turmoil. By transforming Venezuela into a playground for destruction, *Mercenaries 2* exemplifies how games can reduce complex societies to shallow backdrops for entertainment, missing opportunities to explore meaningful stories tied to real-world issues.

2.3 Outsiders as Heroes: The White Savior Trope in Latin America-Themed Video Games

This reductive approach is not unique to games like *Mercenaries 2*, but reflects a broader trend in video games, particularly those set in non-Western regions. These games often rely on narratives of Western intervention, where the protagonist—typically an American or Western hero—is tasked with resolving crises in foreign lands. In such titles, violent conflicts dominate the storylines, positioning the hero as the sole agent capable of restoring order in environments depicted as inherently chaotic or lawless. This "white savior" trope, pervasive across many forms of media, highlights a cultural bias that reduces non-Western societies to backdrops for Western heroism.

In many action-oriented video games, players embody a Western figure who enters foreign territories depicted as unstable or war-torn and mechanics focus heavily on violence as a solution. The player is often given control over an armed protagonist who must defeat a host of “internal” enemies—whether insurgents, terrorists, or corrupt governments—to bring stability to this foreign land. The emphasis on violence as the primary means of problem-solving diminishes any opportunity for engagement with the deeper cultural or socio-political issues at play in these regions. The imposition of control by a leader from a foreign land invokes references to imperialism, colonialism, and authoritarianism.

One of the key problems with these narratives is how they frame foreign populations. Local characters are often portrayed either as helpless victims who require rescue or as antagonists contributing to the instability. These characters are given little backstory or development, existing primarily to serve the narrative of the Western protagonist. In this sense, the agency of non-Western characters is minimized, and their cultures reduced to mere stages for the hero’s journey. These portrayals flatten the complexities of the regions and peoples they depict and reinforce the idea that Western intervention is always justified and necessary. The repetition of this trope across multiple video game titles reveals a broader issue with representation in the gaming industry. Games are powerful storytelling tools, capable of shaping players’ perceptions of the world. When non-Western countries are consistently portrayed as dangerous or lawless, and when the solutions to their problems are invariably framed as external, these frameworks reinforce a Western-centric, imperialist view of global dynamics. This perspective not only ignores the richness and diversity of these cultures as well as the ability of nations to solve their own internal problems, but it also suggests that the West has a natural right or obligation to intervene, often through military or violent means.

This dynamic is exemplified in *Call of Duty: Black Ops (2010)* a military shooter game, that takes place during a fictionalized version of the Bay of Pigs mission, which features CIA operative Alex Mason's attempt to assassinate Fidel Castro during a failed U.S. invasion of Cuba. This mission depicts Cuba as a hostile and dangerous environment, with Cuban military forces presented as antagonists. The focus is on high-paced action and combat justifies the narrative, rather than solutions based on any meaningful engagement with the historical and political complexities of the Cuban Revolution, Cold War politics, and interventionism in Latin America.

In this mission, Mason serves as the quintessential American hero. The game simplifies the complexities of U.S.-Cuban relations by turning Cuba into a backdrop for military action. However, the fraught relationship between the U.S. and Cuba that serves as the reference for this game predates the Cold War, with roots in U.S. interventionism during the Spanish-American War (1898), which resulted in Cuba's independence from Spain but ushered in decades of American influence. The Platt Amendment of 1901, for example, granted the U.S. the right to intervene in Cuban affairs, effectively limiting Cuba's sovereignty and laying the groundwork for resentment. By the mid-20th century, U.S. political and economic dominance in Cuba, often in support of corrupt leaders like Fulgencio Batista, exacerbated social and economic inequalities, contributing to the rise of Fidel Castro's revolution.

Batista, who initially served as Cuba's elected president from 1940 to 1944, returned to power through a military coup in 1952, becoming an authoritarian ruler backed by U.S. interests. During this period, American corporations controlled a significant portion of Cuba's sugar, tobacco, and tourism industries, further entrenching economic disparities. Batista's regime prioritized U.S. business interests over the welfare of Cuban citizens, leading to widespread

poverty and discontent. These conditions fueled revolutionary sentiments, culminating in Fidel Castro's successful overthrow of Batista in 1959, marking the start of a socialist government that sought to dismantle U.S. influence on the island.

The Cold War further intensified these tensions, as Cuba became a key battleground in the geopolitical struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. Following Castro's alignment with the Soviet bloc, U.S. attempts to destabilize his regime—including the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 and numerous assassination plots—heightened hostilities. Soviet intervention, exemplified by the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, further cemented Cuba's role as a flashpoint in Cold War politics. Within this broader context, Latin America often became a "third world" battleground, caught between two superpowers seeking to assert their influence. U.S. interventionist policies, including covert operations and support for authoritarian regimes, sought to counteract Soviet influence in the region, but these actions often exacerbated instability and fostered anti-American sentiment.⁴³

By portraying Cuba as little more than an exoticized backdrop for violent conflict, *Call of Duty: Black Ops* disregards this complex history, reducing a century of political, social, and economic struggles into a simplified narrative of heroism and military might. The omission of these historical nuances undermines the opportunity to engage players with the intricate

⁴³ For a deeper exploration of U.S. interventionist policies and their impact on Latin America, consider Eduardo Galeano's *Open Veins of Latin America*, which examines the historical exploitation of the region's resources and people. Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer's *Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala* provides an in-depth analysis of the CIA-led overthrow of Guatemala's government in 1954. William Blum's *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II* offers a broader look at U.S. military and CIA interventions, including extensive coverage of Latin America.

dynamics of Latin American politics during the Cold War and beyond, where nations like Cuba often became pawns in a larger geopolitical game.

The rendering of Cuban forces as the enemy reinforces a Cold War-era depiction of Cuba as a dangerous and corrupt regime, requiring, and justifying U.S. intervention. This approach aligns with broader patterns in military shooter video games, where non-Western countries are often depicted as chaotic and in need of external saviors (Huntemann and Payne). By centering American involvement and violence as the solutions, the games effectively reinforce Western-centric narrative, where military action becomes synonymous with justice (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter). One of the distinguishing features of *Black Ops* is its use of real historical footage, particularly related to the Cold War. Clips featuring figures like John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev lend an air of historical legitimacy to the game's fictionalized narrative. While this blending of real and fictional events could offer opportunities for players to reflect on the complexities of the Cold War, the game instead leans heavily into the action, prioritizing violent entertainment over critical engagement (Thompson 74). The historical context is ultimately reduced to the background with a focus on violent confrontation, and the player can only gloss over the deeper socio-political hemispheric and global dynamics that shaped U.S.-Cuba relations.

Furthermore, *Call of Duty: Black Ops* reinforces common themes found in so-called military shooters, where violence is not only justified but glorified in these kinds of video games. Johan Höglund's analysis of military-themed games highlights how the emphasis on combat in these titles creates an implicit endorsement of Western interventionist policies. By relying on action-driven mechanics, games like *Black Ops* often avoid engaging with the ethical implications of these interventions, focusing instead on providing players with a thrilling

experience (Höglund). In *Black Ops*, The Bay of Pigs mission, in particular, simplifies the Cuban military and political system to mere targets, with little attempt to offer depth or cultural context (Salvador and Sherry 116). The Cuban forces are portrayed as faceless enemies, existing solely to be defeated by the player, which disregards the complex historical and ideological motivations behind their actions. By reducing the Cuban Revolution to a backdrop for an action sequence, the game erases the broader narrative of anti-imperialist struggle and the socio-political upheaval that defined Cuba during the Cold War era.

This lack of subtlety not only misrepresents the intricacies of the Cuban government and military but also reinforces a one-dimensional, U.S.-centric view of the events, presenting Cuba merely as an antagonistic force without exploring the underlying reasons for its resistance or its alignment with the Soviet Union. Such a portrayal leaves players without a balanced and informed perspective on a pivotal moment in Latin American history. This focus on violent gameplay and the "white savior" narrative elides the complexity of geopolitical conflicts in favor of simplistic, action-driven solutions, where American forces, per game reference only, are cast as the only answer to global threats.

By integrating real historical footage with fictionalized events, *Black Ops* blurs the line between entertainment and reality, reinforcing a Western-centric view of the Cold War. While these narratives and interactions are often compelling from a gameplay perspective, they raise important questions about (mis)representation and the role games play in shaping cultural perceptions. As video games continue to evolve as a medium, there is a growing need for storytelling that moves beyond the white savior trope. Developers have an opportunity to explore more complex and diverse narratives, ones that reflect the realities of the regions they depict and

give voice to the people living there. In doing so, games could move away from reinforcing outdated power dynamics and offer more meaningful representations of global cultures and national autonomy.

This approach aligns with Frasca's idea that games, through their systems and mechanics, can do more than entertain—they can simulate real-world situations and inspire critical thinking without being overtly didactic. His work on serious games proposes that, by focusing on gameplay mechanics, developers can provide players with a more immersive understanding of the socio-political realities they engage with, allowing for a more deeply reflective experience rather than a passive one.⁴⁴ Frasca argues that these games should teach or instruct and offer players a space for exploration and critical engagement. In his view, serious games stand apart from traditional educational games because they do not aim for simple solutions or learning outcomes; instead, they encourage deeper thought and analysis of multifaceted issues (Frasca 56-58).

The point-and-click game Madrid is a prime example of how ludo-logical design can encourage players to grapple with socio-political realities. The game *Madrid*, released after the 2004 Madrid train bombings, begins with a clear message: "In memory of the victims of the March 11, 2004 terrorist attack. "This memorial sentence sets the tone for the experience, suggesting that the game is meant to commemorate rather than entertain. To accomplish this, the

⁴⁴ Serious games are video games designed not primarily for entertainment but to provoke reflection, raise awareness, and engage players with complex social, political, or ethical issues. These games leverage the medium's interactive nature to simulate real-world dilemmas and explore the consequences of actions within a system. Rather than simply presenting a narrative or moral through passive storytelling, serious games engage players through gameplay mechanics that mirror real-world complexities.

game is based on a philosophical stance that there is something that needs to be commemorated because it holds importance (either positive or negative). What is commemorated, how it is commemorated, and what the commemoration means are based on values assigned by communities, gamers, programmers, etc. These commemorative actions are political and to understand their complex meanings, players must employ critical analysis.

The *mise-en-scène* of the game is simple but deeply symbolic. Players are placed in a city square filled with people holding candles, a visual representation of a public vigil. The people's shirts bear the names of various cities affected by terrorism, such as Paris and Tokyo, creating a sense of global solidarity against the shared trauma of violence. The candles are central to the game's mechanics: players must keep the flames lit, symbolizing the fragile and ongoing effort to honor victims and resist the darkness that terrorism brings. This act of maintaining the light against the possibility of it being extinguished elevates the theme of resilience in the face of tragedy.

The gameplay in *Madrid* is minimal, with no traditional objectives or scores. Instead, the player's only task is to keep the candles lit, a simple yet poignant act that requires focus and care. If the candles go out, it suggests the fragility of memory and the ease with which the impact of such tragedies can be forgotten. This design encourages players to reflect on the effort required to maintain awareness and honor the memory of those lost to terrorism. The presence of city names on the shirts of the candle holders emphasizes the universality of terrorism's impact. By including cities like Paris, Tokyo, and others, Frasca extends the game's emotional reach beyond Madrid, showing that the suffering caused by terrorism is not limited to one place but is a shared

global experience. This also subtly critiques the global nature of terrorism and how it connects different societies through shared tragedy.

The use of real-world references, such as the city names and the quiet act of candle lighting, creates a deeply emotional experience that challenges the player to engage with the socio-political realities of terrorism. Rather than serving as generic settings, these cities are imbued with the weight of shared global history, acting as reminders of how terrorism transcends borders and cultures to leave a lasting impact and toll on humanity. This grounding in collective memory forces players to confront terrorism not as a distant abstraction but as an issue with profound human consequences. Unlike traditional games that reduce global issues to action-packed violence and hero narratives, *Madrid* shifts the focus to introspection and collective mourning. Through its minimalistic gameplay, it creates an interactive space that prioritizes reflection over reaction, compelling players to consider the broader implications of violence.

The act of keeping a candle lit serves as both a literal and symbolic action. Every flicker and adjustment of the flame mirrors the ongoing global struggle to counteract terrorism without succumbing to fear or retaliation. The game subtly critiques how traditional responses to terrorism, often militarized and retributive, can perpetuate cycles of violence and deepen societal divides. Instead, *Madrid* emphasizes the power of memory and unity, urging players to consider how collective solidarity and remembrance can act as counterweights to extremism.

Through its choice of mechanics, *Madrid* also challenges the player to question their own agency within these systems. Unlike action-heavy games where victory is achieved through force, *Madrid* strips away power fantasies, replacing them with vulnerability and perseverance. This stark contrast reveals how the causes of terrorism—systemic inequality, political

marginalization, and the fallout from foreign interventions—are deeply ingrained in global structures that cannot be "defeated" in a conventional sense. The game's quiet, meditative design creates an experience that resonates on an emotional and intellectual level, asking players to grapple with the complexity of global terrorism and its human cost. By engaging players in this way, *Madrid* transforms the act of play into a profound exercise in empathy, reflection, and collective responsibility.

A more thoughtful approach to storytelling has the potential to break away from the oversimplification of settings and the ubiquitous use of violence that precludes real inquiry into issues and patterns. By focusing on stories that reflect the realities of the regions being depicted and provoking users to ask questions and think critically about what is presented and how it is portrayed, creators can offer more meaningful narratives that respect and encourage users to engage with the complexity of global cultures and the individuals who live within them. As storytellers move toward these more intricate portrayals, there is room for a deeper connection and understanding of the diverse global landscapes that these narratives attempt to capture. This approach encourages a more thoughtful and respectful reflection and dialogue on global issues, pushing beyond simplistic depictions and allowing authentic exploration of the human experience.

2.4 Resisting the Rules: The Semiotic Power of Latin American Video Games

In video game studies, rule-based systems are essential to understanding how games function as interactive experiences distinct from other forms of media.⁴⁵ Games operate as

⁴⁵ Rule-based systems in video games are the structural mechanics that guide player interaction, simulate complex environments, and enable the game to function as an interactive experience.

systems where rules govern the possibilities of action within the game world. The player's understanding of these rules, and how they navigate them, forms the basis of the experience. This is true for simple games like *Tetris*, where rules dictate the arrangement of blocks, to more complex games like *SimCity*, where players engage in urban planning and manage various social, economic, and environmental factors. In both cases, the rules provide structure, but they also offer freedom.

In *September 12 (2003)*, another game designed by Gonzalo Frasca as a critique of the War on Terror, players are tasked with eliminating terrorists in a Middle Eastern town using missile strikes. However, the game's mechanics reveal an unsettling reality: Every missile also kills civilians, and the grieving survivors of these civilians transform into new terrorists. This cycle of violence is unbreakable, forcing players to confront the consequences of their actions. The game deliberately avoids a traditional win condition, making the point that violent responses to terrorism only exacerbate the problem.

The message is conveyed through a non-traditional narrative, using mechanics that govern the player's interactions instead of through dialogue or scripted storylines. By making the cycle of violence inevitable, the rules themselves force players to experience the futility of their decisions firsthand. This approach uses the game's systems to simulate real-world processes, creating a lived experience where players feel the emotional and moral weight of their actions. As a result, Frasca's game not only critiques militaristic approaches to terrorism but also highlights the unique capacity of rule-based systems to provoke critical thinking and self-reflection in ways that traditional narratives cannot achieve.

The power of rule-based systems in video games lies in their ability to engage players on both a mechanical and cognitive level. By interacting with a game's systems, players become part of a dynamic process, learning and adapting as they go. This interactivity enables games to function as more than just entertainment; they become platforms for exploration, experimentation, and reflection. For example, in *Papers, Please*, a game designed by Lucas Pope in 2013, players take on the role of an immigration officer in a fictional totalitarian regime. The game's rules force players to make morally difficult choices about who to admit into the country, balancing strict governmental policies against their ethics. The game simulates the pressures of bureaucratic systems, encouraging players to reflect on the human cost of such policies.

Rule-based systems also facilitate procedural rhetoric, where the rules themselves communicate ideas.⁴⁶ Through gameplay mechanics, players are persuaded to think critically about the systems they engage with. In this way, games become a unique medium for exploring complex issues, offering a level of interaction and engagement that many other forms of media cannot match. While a film might depict a violent conflict, a game allows players to experience the dynamics of that conflict firsthand, revealing the underlying structures that govern it. The experience is not passive; it is actively shaped by the player's engagement with the material enclosed within the system of rules. By navigating these systems and making choices within

⁴⁶ Procedural rhetoric is a term coined by Ian Bogost to describe how video games and other interactive systems use rules and processes to convey ideas, arguments, or messages. Unlike traditional rhetoric, which relies on language or visuals, procedural rhetoric operates through the mechanics and interactions within a system. In video games, this means that the game's rules, goals, and player choices are designed to simulate real-world systems or scenarios, allowing players to experience and engage with underlying ideas or issues.

their constraints, players internalize the game's message, as the rules themselves become tools of persuasion that guide the player's understanding of the simulated world.

Immersion in video games allows players to deeply connect with the game world, making them feel as if they are truly part of the narrative. This is particularly crucial in games that center on rich storytelling and cultural elements. Scholars like Gordon Calleja in *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation* argue that immersion is not only about visual or auditory fidelity but also about how players are absorbed into the game's systems and world (Calleja 66). This is particularly important in games that reflect cultural narratives, as the players' engagement with the mechanics and the storyline directly shapes how they experience and internalize the cultural content. For instance, *Grim Fandango* (1998), offers a powerful example of immersion through cultural integration. Set in the Land of the Dead, inspired by Mexican *Día de los Muertos* traditions, the game merges its mechanics with its unique narrative world. Players control Manny Calavera, a travel agent for the recently deceased, as he uncovers a conspiracy in the afterlife. The game's setting is culturally specific with references to Mexican folklore and visual motifs like marigolds, sugar skulls, and *papel picado*,⁴⁷ creating an immersive environment where players feel as though they are moving through a culturally significant world.

The narrative and mechanics of the game are intertwined with the representation of the afterlife, adding layers of meaning to the player's experience. For example, players navigate

⁴⁷ Sugar skulls, or *calaveras de azúcar*, are brightly decorated edible or decorative skulls made from sugar, traditionally used to honor deceased loved ones during *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead). They symbolize the sweetness of life and serve as offerings to the spirits of the dead, blending joy and remembrance in a uniquely Mexican way. *Papel picado*, or "perforated paper," is a traditional Mexican craft of cutting intricate designs into colorful tissue paper, often used to decorate altars and streets during celebrations. It represents the fragility and beauty of life, as its delicate patterns are both vibrant and fleeting.

Manny Calavera through a richly stylized Land of the Dead, where the rules of the game are closely tied to the cultural motifs of *Día de los Muertos*. Manny's role as a travel agent for souls mirrors real-world beliefs about guiding the dead to their final resting place, blending the narrative with mechanics such as solving puzzles and uncovering clues that reflect the spiritual journey. The mechanics, such as navigating through marigold-filled pathways or interacting with skeletal characters influenced by traditional *calacas* (*skeletons*), reinforce the narrative themes of life, death, and redemption. These elements create a seamless interplay between what the player does and what the game represents, immersing them in a world that is not only visually inspired by Mexican folklore but also mechanically and thematically rooted in it. By aligning the gameplay with the cultural context of the narrative, *Grim Fandango* transforms the player's journey into an experience that is both entertaining and deeply resonant, offering a meaningful exploration of life, death, and cultural tradition.

In *Guacamelee!*, the concept of immersion is further explored through the game's reliance on Mexican cultural references. According to Clara Fernández-Vara in *Introduction to Game Analysis*, the use of culturally relevant symbols, such as *lucha libre* and *Día de los Muertos*, serves not just as background but as core gameplay mechanics that make players interact with the narrative (Fernandez-Vara 110). The game draws heavily from Mexican folklore, incorporating elements into both its visual design and gameplay mechanics. This integration of cultural references into the mechanics allows players to experience a part of Mexican culture in a dynamic, engaging way. The immersive experience goes beyond visual aesthetics, as the mechanics themselves, from fighting techniques to power-ups, reflect the cultural context of the game. The exaggerated, colorful world keeps players deeply connected to both the narrative and the action as they explore a land between the living and the dead.

In both examples, immersion works because the rules of the game—whether it's combat, exploration, or puzzle-solving—are consistent with the story's setting. These games provide opportunities for the player to explore and experience the cultural depth of the environments they are navigating. The mechanics work in tandem with the narrative to create a cohesive experience, drawing players into the world and making them active participants in the story. Just as in theater, where the stage design, lighting, and dialogue must all work together to maintain the illusion for the audience, video games must harmonize gameplay mechanics and narrative to sustain immersion.

Another example can be seen in *Red Dead Redemption 2*, where emotional immersion is heightened through complex characters and narrative depth. Players feel connected to the protagonist, Arthur Morgan, as they navigate the moral complexities of his life. The game's mechanics, such as choosing whether to help strangers or engage in criminal activities, contribute to this immersive experience. As Arthur interacts with various characters, including Mexican NPCs (Non Playable Characters)⁴⁸ such as Javier Escuella and others in the game's missions, players encounter depictions of Mexican culture, and the historical tensions present at the U.S.-Mexico border during the late 19th century. These characters, who range from outlaws to revolutionary figures, present diverse experiences of Mexican identity, albeit through the game's Western genre lens. Calleja's incorporation theory would explain that players not only observe Arthur's journey but feel as if they are part of it, directly influencing the game's world

⁴⁸ An NPC, or Non-Player Character, refers to characters in video games that are not controlled by the player but instead are part of the game's environment and interact with the player's character. NPCs often provide quests, share dialogue, or help advance the storyline, and they are typically governed by the game's code. In many games, NPCs contribute to the immersive experience by offering depth to the world and helping players feel more connected to the game's narrative.

and outcomes. These interactions, especially with Mexican NPCs, open up opportunities to reflect on themes of loyalty, survival, colonialism, and cultural tensions, conveyed through both narrative and game systems. By engaging with these characters, the game allows players to navigate a broader socio-political landscape, which deepens the emotional immersion and challenges players to think critically about the portrayal of border cultures and identities.

Incorporation also applies to how games simulate systems of power or control, as seen in strategy games like *Civilization VI*. Players are tasked with managing entire nations, making decisions that affect the economy, politics, and culture. Calleja's theory helps us understand that players don't just play *Civilization VI*; they inhabit the role of a world leader. The player's immersion in the strategic systems allows them to feel responsible for the rise or fall of civilizations, creating a powerful connection between the player and the game's procedural rhetoric. The game's persuasive power, which may involve reflections on historical progress, imperialism, or governance, is enhanced because the player feels deeply incorporated into the decision-making processes that shape the virtual world.

Calleja's *Incorporation Theory* offers a vital lens for understanding how players immerse themselves in video games, where they do not just "enter" the game world but integrate its mechanics and systems into their lived experiences. This process of incorporation extends beyond mere immersion, as players bring the meanings, narratives, and rules of the game into their personal understanding of the world. In this way, video games operate as semiotic domains—dynamic systems where signs, symbols, and rules interact to form deeper cultural and social meanings (Calleja 84). These domains are not passive reflections of culture; rather, they

are spaces where players actively engage with and influence cultural discourses through gameplay.

2.5 Chapter Conclusion

In Latin America, the kinds of interaction that takes place in semiotic domains are crucial, if video games are to function as spaces for negotiating local and global identities. These games allow players to engage with complex socio-political issues, historical events, and regional identities not by observing them, but by interacting with them. Through immersion, players become participants in these semiotic domains, integrating their personal experiences with the cultural and political symbols represented in the game world. This ability to engage directly with these cultural systems distinguishes video games as a unique medium for creating and transforming meaning. For players, video games offer not just a virtual space to navigate but also a cultural experience where local symbols, narratives, and values are embedded within the gameplay. This active engagement with the game allows players to interact with cultural signifiers, whether through language, imagery, or themes of resistance, struggle, and resilience that resonate within the region.

Ultimately, video games have the potential to become powerful tools for cultural expression and critique, offering players immersive and interactive ways to engage with the complexities of identity, history, and resistance. By harnessing the power of procedural rhetoric—where systems and mechanics communicate meaning—and rich narrative design, games can transcend their role as mere entertainment to reflect and challenge social, political, and historical realities. Games like *Grim Fandango* and *Guacamelee!* demonstrate how cultural representation, when done thoughtfully, can create spaces where folklore, tradition, and identity

are celebrated. At the same time, titles like *Call of Juarez: The Cartel* or *Mercenaries 2* reveal the risks of oversimplifying or exoticizing Latin America, reducing its vibrant histories and struggles to shallow backdrops of chaos and violence. These contrasting examples illustrate both the potential and the responsibility that game developers hold when portraying real-world cultures and issues.

In addition, video games provide unique opportunities for players to explore regional histories and contemporary socio-political challenges through interaction and agency. Unlike passive media, games invite players to make decisions, experience consequences, and reflect on the systems they engage with. Whether simulating cycles of violence, as in *September 12*, or immersing players in cultural traditions through mechanics, games create powerful experiential narratives that provoke critical thinking and emotional resonance. This interactivity allows players to embody perspectives that might otherwise remain abstract, fostering deeper understanding of themes such as colonialism, power dynamics, and the enduring struggles for justice and equality in Latin America.

This chapter highlights the growing role of video games as cultural artifacts—dynamic works that reflect the values, tensions, and aspirations of the societies in which they are created. By amplifying voices and stories often overlooked in global entertainment, games have the potential to contribute to ongoing dialogues about representation, power, and agency. They challenge players not only to engage with these issues but also to question their own roles within larger cultural systems. As Latin American settings, narratives, and aesthetics continue to influence the gaming industry, video games stand poised to shape conversations about identity,

resistance, and resilience, offering a window into both the struggles and the beauty of the region's history and contemporary realities.

CHAPTER 3

REIMAGINING PERFORMANCE AND PLAY IN VIRTUAL WORLDS

3.1 Performance and Space: From Traditional Stages to Virtual Worlds

In its broadest sense, performance is an act of expression where individuals or groups use their bodies, voices, movements, and even material objects to convey meaning within a specific space or context. Richard Schechner, a foundational figure in performance studies, defines performance as “twice-behaved behavior,” meaning that it consists of repeated, rehearsed, or culturally ingrained actions that acquire significance through their enactment (Schechner 1). This framing expands performance beyond the traditional theater, recognizing it in rituals, social behaviors, political protests, and even daily routines, where people enact roles shaped by cultural and historical contexts.

Building on this, performance not only takes place within space but actively transforms it. Spaces are not static containers, but social constructs shaped by lived experiences and power dynamics. Performance challenges these constructs, turning physical and digital environments into dynamic arenas where identity, memory, and power are negotiated. This interplay between performance and space is deeply rooted in cultural traditions, where environments carry specific symbolic weight, from public squares used for protests to sacred sites of ritual. Performance does not simply exist within a pre-defined spatial framework but actively produces and reconfigures space itself, challenging dominant narratives and preserving histories of struggle through symbolic and embodied action. As technology reshapes interactions, spaces of performance have expanded into the digital realm, where identity, memory, and cultural narratives are enacted and

reimagined in innovative ways. In both physical and digital spaces, repeated performances—through movement, dress, speech, and interaction—become tools for constructing and contesting identity over time.

This transformation relies on the activation of space. Space, as Henri Lefebvre argues in *The Production of Space*, is not a static container but a social construct shaped by lived experience and power dynamics. Performance transforms spaces—whether sacred plazas, city streets, or virtual landscapes—into sites of negotiation, resistance, and identity formation. By tracing the evolution of performance and space—from Indigenous rituals to traditional theater to political performances and virtual environments—it becomes evident that performance operates as a dynamic force that reflects and reshapes the world.

In traditional forms of performance—space is not simply a neutral container but an active element in the production of meaning. Theater theorist Peter Brook describes the “bare stage” as a site of infinite potential, where the imagination and presence of the performers activate the space, turning emptiness into a vessel for symbolic and emotional resonance. Yet, this activation relies on intentionality. As Patrice Pavis explains, space functions as a semiotic field, where objects, bodies, and gestures form a dynamic system of signs that encode meaning, narrative, and cultural significance (Pavis 23). *Mise en scène*, or the deliberate arrangement of visual elements in performance, transforms physical environments into interpretive spaces, amplifying how spectators engage with the embodied actions of performers. These spatial and visual choices shape audience perception, reinforcing or subverting intended meanings through the interaction between movement, composition, and theatrical design (Pavis 45).

This interplay between performance and space is not unique to the theater but is deeply rooted in cultural traditions where environments carry specific symbolic weight. In Pre-Colombian Latin American contexts, performance does not merely occupy space but activates it as a living narrative that integrates spiritual, communal, and cosmological meanings through rituals. For example, the Maya used sacred plazas and pyramid-temples as stages for ritualistic dances and dramas. These spaces were designed to align with astronomical cycles, embodying the connection between the heavens and the earth. The performances enacted within them were not solely for spectacle; they affirmed cosmic balance, spiritual continuity, and communal identity. As seen in Maya religious practices, movement, sound, and rhythm were carefully synchronized with the spatial design of the environment, transforming plazas into symbolic landscapes where the divine and the human converged. Space in this context was relational and performative: it was not merely a backdrop but an active medium through which identities, histories, and cosmological order were expressed and reinforced.

This relational understanding of space extends beyond Indigenous traditions into more contemporary Latin American contexts, where performance reactivates and reclaims spaces embedded with histories of colonialism, trauma, and resistance. For example, Mexico City's *Zócalo*, originally constructed atop the ruins of the Aztec capital *Tenochtitlán*, embodies this layered relationship between history, power, and performance. Once a ceremonial center for Indigenous rituals, the *Zócalo* has evolved into a political and cultural stage where public acts—protests, festivals, and commemorations—transform the square into a site of negotiation between past and present. As Diana Taylor argues in *¡Presente!*, public spaces are not passive settings but are activated through embodied performances that challenge silence and erasure. Protests that reclaim the *Zócalo* mirror rituals in their repeated, symbolic actions—chants, processions, and

gestures—that inscribe memory and resistance onto the physical landscape. This embodied engagement gives the *Zócalo* a performative dimension, where collective action reclaims space as a stage for visibility and cultural assertion (Taylor 92).

Similarly, the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* (Mothers of the May Square) in Argentina exemplify how political protest functions as a ritualized performance that transforms public spaces into living archives of memory and resistance. During the military dictatorship, the *Madres* marched in circles around the plaza, holding photographs of their disappeared children. This seemingly simple but highly symbolic act—repeated over weeks, months, and years—became a ritual of mourning and defiance. Taylor describes this embodied action as an example of being *presente*, where the absent bodies of the disappeared children are rendered visible through the symbolic presence of *their mothers* (Taylor 68). The circular movement by the mothers, mimicking the rhythms of ritual processions, transformed the *Plaza de Mayo* into a performative space that defied the regime's attempts at erasure. As a result, the plaza became more than a site of grief; it was reactivated as a space of political resistance and collective memory, where bodies, gestures, and symbols reclaimed visibility in the face of authoritarian silencing.

These examples highlight how rituals and protests function as embodied performances that reclaim and transform public spaces into dynamic fields of meaning. In both the *Zócalo* and *Plaza de Mayo*, we see through Taylor's work how repeated and symbolic acts turn historically and politically charged landscapes into sites of resistance and resilience. These spaces are not merely occupied; they are redefined through performance as living archives of memory, identity, and struggle. Through chants, circular movements, and collective presence, performers inscribe

narratives of defiance onto the physical environment, ensuring that histories of violence, loss, and resilience remain visible and enacted. Taylor's framework reveals how these embodied actions challenge the imposed invisibility of marginalized voices, creating a performative *presente* that bridges memory and activism.

While Taylor's concept of *embodied knowledge* demonstrates how memory is enacted through physical performance—particularly in spaces shaped by histories of erasure—performance's ability to transform space extends beyond the symbolic. Michel Foucault's notion of *heterotopias* provides a critical framework for understanding reclaimed spaces as counter-sites that exist simultaneously inside and outside of societal norms. This framework is particularly relevant to spaces in Latin America where histories of violence, trauma, and erasure are negotiated through performance.

For example, Chile's *Estadio Nacional*, a site marked by its violent history under Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship, embodies this heterotopic quality. In *Of Other Spaces*, Foucault conceptualizes heterotopias as spaces that simultaneously belong to multiple realities, existing outside of conventional spatial and temporal structures (Foucault 24). Unlike ordinary places, heterotopias are layered with meaning, often serving contradictory functions that shift depending on social and historical contexts. The stadium exemplifies this duality: originally a site of communal gathering, national pride, and athletic celebration, it was violently transformed into a space of surveillance, imprisonment, and state terror under the regime. This repurposing did not erase its original function but instead forced it to exist in two realities at once—as both a symbol of national unity and an instrument of authoritarian control.

In the decades that followed, the stadium's function shifted once again, but its past remained embedded in its structure. Through commemorative performances, artistic installations, and public ceremonies, the site has been reimagined as a space of mourning and memory, where historical trauma is confronted rather than erased. These acts do not simply reclaim the stadium for its original purpose; rather, they transform it into a living heterotopia, where the past and present are inseparable, and where resistance is staged through the very act of remembering. The Estadio Nacional, then, is not merely a stadium but a space where multiple, often conflicting histories collide, reinforcing Foucault's idea that heterotopias are spaces of contestation, negotiation, and the re-inscription of meaning.

Similarly, public squares and monuments across Latin America are continually activated as heterotopias through ritualized performances and political acts. Mexico City's *Zócalo*, previously discussed as a layered site of power and performance, exemplifies this ongoing transformation, where space is never static but constantly reshaped through occupation and movement. Lefebvre's theory of the production of space reveals how the *Zócalo* is shaped by competing forces: as an official civic space, it is carefully planned and controlled by the state, yet as a site of public gathering, it becomes subject to lived spatial practices that redefine its meaning (39). Protesters reclaim the square through their presence, using chants, banners, and movement to inscribe their narratives onto the space itself, an act that directly contests its conceived space as dictated by urban planners and political authorities (Lefebvre 42).

Gay McAuley's concept of relational space further clarifies how these performances do more than symbolically contest authority; they actively transform the *Zócalo* into a site of negotiation and resistance through embodied actions. Space, in McAuley's terms, does not exist

as a fixed entity but is continuously shaped through interaction (McAuley 15). In this way, Lefebvre's lived space overlaps with McAuley's relational space—the presence of bodies in protest physically alters how the *Zócalo* functions, not just as a metaphor for resistance but as a space where power is materially challenged. Each performance, from mass mobilizations to silent vigils, redefines the space's identity, reinforcing how public squares are not merely architectural fixtures but dynamic, contested arenas where history is continuously rewritten (McAuley 27).

By linking Taylor's concept of embodied knowledge, Foucault's heterotopias, McAuley's relational space, and Lefebvre's production of space, it becomes clear that performance does not simply exist within a pre-defined spatial framework but actively produces and reconfigures space itself. Lefebvre's theory reveals that space is not neutral; rather, it is shaped by power structures, social interactions, and historical memory. Performance, then, can become a means of inscribing lived experience onto landscapes marked by trauma or oppression, transforming them into sites of resistance and resilience. This transformation aligns with Foucault's heterotopias, where space carries multiple, often contradictory meanings, and with McAuley's relational space, where the act of performance generates new spatial relationships between performers, spectators, and the environment. Taylor's embodied knowledge further reinforces this process, demonstrating how historical memory is activated through the body, allowing struggles of the past to persist in the present. Through these frameworks, performance emerges not only as an act of expression but as a force that reshapes space itself, challenging dominant narratives and ensuring that histories of struggle remain visible through symbolic and embodied action.

The dynamic interplay between performance and space, explored in traditional rituals, protests, and reclaimed sites, does not end with physical environments. As technology reshapes the ways people interact, spaces of performance have expanded into the digital realm. While public squares, monuments, and sacred sites have long been stages for embodied acts of resistance and cultural memory, the rise of digital media has created new terrains of performance where identity, memory, and meaning are enacted in innovative ways.

The evolution of performance into digital spaces highlights how identity and expression are continuously reshaped through mediated interactions. Judith Butler's concept of performativity provides a useful framework for understanding this shift, as she argues that identity is not an inherent or fixed state but is continually constructed and reinforced through repeated acts—gestures, behaviors, and interactions—that are shaped by societal norms and expectations. In physical environments, these repeated performances—how individuals move, dress, speak, and interact—signal and construct identity over time. In virtual spaces, this process is extended and transformed as bodies are replaced by avatars and other digital proxies, which act as performative tools through which individuals negotiate presence, identity, and agency.

Avatars function as constructed selves, reflecting the user's identity through deliberate customization, gestures, and actions. These digital bodies, much like physical ones, perform identity through repetition—logging in, navigating spaces, interacting with others, and participating in shared virtual worlds. This iterative process, central to Butler's theory, highlights how digital identity remains relational: it exists in dialogue with the broader cultural, technological, and social norms embedded in virtual platforms. For instance, players in online games or virtual environments often adopt avatars that both reflect and challenge aspects of their

physical identity. By selecting an avatar's appearance, gender, or behavior, users actively construct and perform their digital identities, negotiating how they are perceived and how they engage with the virtual world's constraints and possibilities.

This iterative process allows them to extend, experiment with, or even subvert aspects of their physical identity, revealing the fluidity between self-expression and social expectation in digital spaces. Through repeated actions—navigating environments, interacting with others, and reinforcing chosen traits over time—users shape and reshape their virtual selves, much like identity is continuously performed in the physical world. These performances are not purely individual but are embedded within the broader cultural, technological, and social norms that define the digital landscape, illustrating how identity remains relational, even in virtual spaces.

However, Butler's framework also reveals how these performances are not free from existing systems of power. Just as physical spaces are shaped by historical and social inequalities, virtual environments carry embedded cultural assumptions and biases that shape the performances within them. For example, marginalized players in online gaming communities may encounter stereotyping, exclusion, or erasure that reflect real-world inequalities, reinforcing dominant narratives of race, gender, and identity.⁴⁹ Yet, digital spaces also create opportunities for subversion and resistance. By performing alternative identities or reclaiming visibility through avatars and digital actions, users disrupt the expectations encoded within virtual

⁴⁹ Kishonna Gray's study, *Deviant Bodies, Stigmatized Identities, and Racist Acts: Examining the Experiences of African-American Gamers in Xbox Live*, explores how Black gamers face racial stereotyping and exclusion in online spaces. Similarly, research on gender and gaming highlights the marginalization of women, LGBTQIA+ players, and people of color in digital gaming environments, reinforcing real-world inequalities.

environments. In doing so, they expose the constructed nature of norms and carve out new spaces for self-expression and representation.

The performativity of identity in digital environments reflects the same iterative logic as in physical spaces: it is enacted, repeated, and negotiated over time. Yet virtual spaces, with their fluid boundaries and mediated forms, amplify the performative potential of identity, allowing for experimentation, resistance, and visibility that often challenge normative structures. Avatars become more than representations; they are performative acts themselves, activating digital landscapes as dynamic stages for identity formation, negotiation, and transformation.

However, these identity performances do not occur in isolation. Virtual spaces are shaped by larger global flows of technology, narratives, and cultural representations that mediate how meaning is constructed and disseminated. Arjun Appadurai's concept of *mediascapes* refers to the global flow of information, images, and narratives through mass media and digital platforms, shaping how people perceive the world beyond their immediate surroundings (Appadurai 35). These mediated landscapes construct imagined realities, influencing identity, culture, and political engagement across borders. In the context of virtual spaces, *mediascapes* create terrains where cultural narratives and resistance are negotiated, often reflecting histories of migration, displacement, and transnational interaction. Appadurai's framework highlights how digital environments are not detached from material histories but are shaped by the global circulation of media, reinforcing and reconfiguring cultural identities in the process.

The conceptualization of space explored earlier—whether through Indigenous relational frameworks, where rituals activate sacred landscapes or Western spatial theories, where performance reclaims contested ground—does not disappear in digital environments. Instead,

virtual spaces extend these traditions, offering new terrains where performance is crucial for enacting and negotiating cultural, historical, and political meaning. Much like rituals were used to inscribe memory onto physical plazas or protests transformed public squares into arenas of resistance, digital platforms and games activate virtual spaces as relational sites of storytelling, identity formation, and cultural assertion.

This continuity is evident in the relational dynamics of virtual environments, where the spatial interactions between users, avatars, and digital landscapes activate space as a site of performance and meaning-making. McAuley's concept of *relational space* reinforces —whether physical or virtual—space is not passive but is brought to life through movement, interaction, and presence. In multiplayer video games, these relational performances mirror the dynamics seen in traditional spaces like stages or plazas, where bodies and audiences negotiate identity and meaning. Here, the actions of avatars through symbolic gestures, collaborative storytelling, or territorial navigation extend these relational dynamics into digital terrains, transforming them into interactive sites of cultural production. Just as protests and rituals inscribe memory and resistance onto reclaimed spaces, digital interactions in virtual worlds enable users to challenge dominant narratives, reimagine identities, and construct new communal meanings through shared performance.

The transition to virtual spaces demonstrates that performance—rooted in embodiment, repetition, and relationality—remains a dynamic and adaptive practice. Digital platforms amplify the possibilities for performance, enabling individuals and communities to activate virtual terrains as sites of memory, resistance, and identity construction. Whether through avatars, digital protests, or interactive narratives, these performances ensure that the relational and

transformative power of space persists, transcending physical boundaries to engage with global audiences.

Furthermore, video games, like traditional performances, use space to reflect power dynamics and social structures. The design of digital landscapes often mirrors real-world architectural or cultural environments, where space becomes imbued with layers of political and cultural significance. These virtual spaces allow players to engage in performances of identity, resistance, or complicity, similar to how actors or ritual participants navigate symbolic spaces in traditional settings. As Katie Hite argues, digital and memorialized spaces often function as arenas of political tension, where histories, identities, and power relations are negotiated and contested (Hite 25). Video game environments become sites where players navigate systems of control, subversion, and representation.

This performative relationship with space goes beyond reflecting power; in video games, spatial design actively shapes narrative and player experience, transforming virtual environments into critical components of storytelling and interaction. Media scholar Henry Jenkins describes this as *narrative architecture*, where the spatial design of a game influences how players navigate and interpret its story (150). Such interaction recalls the role of symbolic and physical space in traditional performances, where a stage or ritual site directs movement and meaning. By shaping the player's engagement, virtual spaces become interactive terrains where narrative emerges not just through plot but through the interplay between space, action, and participant.

However, virtual spaces do not exist without tension. Just as physical spaces are shaped by systems of power, digital environments often reproduce inequalities tied to race, gender, and access to technology. Marginalized communities in Latin America face challenges of

representation and inclusion in global digital spaces dominated by Western cultural norms. Yet, these same platforms also provide opportunities for resistance and reclamation. By occupying digital spaces, sharing untold stories, and engaging with virtual environments as dynamic arenas of performance, creators and players assert their identities, challenge global hegemonies, and transform virtual landscapes into sites of cultural resilience.

3.2 Performance as a Cultural and Political Force in Latin America

In Latin America, performance has long been a vital tool for expressing cultural identity, memory, and political resistance. From indigenous rituals and traditional dances to contemporary street theater and public protests, the region embraces performance as a powerful medium to preserve heritage, respond to socio-political realities, and engage with and preserve collective memory. In Latin America, performance is often inseparable from the spaces it occupies—public squares, streets, and sacred sites become stages for enacting history, resistance, and community.

In ancient times, many indigenous cultures in Latin America used performance in their religious and social rituals to connect with their deities, honor ancestors, and mark important communal events. The significance of space in these rituals was profound, often taking place in sacred landscapes or temples that held symbolic meaning for the community. For instance, the *Danza de los Voladores* (Dance of the Flyers), performed by Totonac communities in Mexico, continues to serve as both a spiritual offering and a demonstration of cultural endurance. Participants climb a towering pole and spin downward, symbolizing harmony with the earth and sky. Similarly, in Guatemala, the *Rabinal Achí*, a Pre-Colombian Maya dance-drama, is performed annually to preserve narratives of historical conflict and identity. Recognized as a

UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, this performance combines intricate choreography and storytelling to reenact struggles between competing dynasties.

In Bolivia, the Oruro Carnival highlights how indigenous traditions fuse with colonial histories to reclaim space and identity. The festival's centerpiece, the *Diablada* (Dance of the Devils), blends Andean religious symbolism with Christian iconography, with dancers using masks and dance to represent resistance against oppression. Further south, the Hain Ceremony of the Selk'nam people of Tierra del Fuego—though disrupted by colonial violence—survives in oral history and is being revived through reenactments, representing rites of passage and the embodiment of mythological spirits within their sacred landscapes. These traditions have persisted in many forms, as indigenous groups across Latin America continue to use performance to resist cultural erasure and assert their histories. Through these embodied acts, performance becomes not only a vessel for cultural preservation but also a means of reclaiming space and challenging the forces of post-colonial modernity.

In the context of more recent history, performance has played a central role in political movements and resistance against oppression throughout Latin America. In the mid-20th century, the theater served as a prominent medium for expressing dissent, rallying communities, and transforming public spaces into arenas of cultural and political resistance. This section focuses on *El Teatro Campesino*, *Teatro Aleph*, and Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* due to their direct engagement with marginalized communities, their influence on later performance practices, and their use of public space as a site of intervention.

El Teatro Campesino blurred the boundaries between performance and activism, laying the groundwork for theater as a participatory and accessible political tool. Founded in 1965 by

Luis Valdez as part of the United Farm Workers movement in California. Performing directly in the fields for farmworkers, the group staged *Actos*—short, satirical plays that exposed exploitative labor practices, celebrated worker resilience, and called for collective action. Works like *Las Dos Caras del Patroncito* (The Two Faces of the Boss) critiqued the hypocrisy of landowners while centering the voices of the marginalized. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, similar experiments with theater as resistance emerged across Latin America in response to rising authoritarian regimes.

In Chile, *Teatro Aleph*, founded by Óscar Castro, used absurdist and surrealist techniques to critique societal injustices and censorship under Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship. Performances like *Los Caminos de Don Floridor* (The Paths of Don Floridor) blended fantasy and satire to challenge authoritarian narratives while offering audiences a sense of solidarity and creative defiance. After Castro's imprisonment and subsequent exile, *Teatro Aleph* brought its politically charged performances to international audiences, transforming its work into a transnational act of resistance. In the 1970s and 1980s, as right-wing military dictatorships tightened their grip across Latin America, Augusto Boal revolutionized theater through his development of the Theatre of the Oppressed in Brazil. Rooted in Marxist ideals, Boal's work turned theater into a "rehearsal for revolution" (Boal 141), where oppressed communities could reclaim their voices and agency. Boal introduced the concept of the *spect-actor*, dissolving the line between audience and performer and transforming spectators into active participants in shaping the narrative. This method was particularly revolutionary under Brazil's military dictatorship, where Boal's performances turned streets, factories, and community spaces into sites of defiance. By inviting audiences to intervene in and reshape theatrical scenarios, Boal's

approach not only exposed systems of oppression but also equipped communities to envision and enact alternative realities.

Parallel to Boal's revolutionary work, Eugenio Barba expanded the boundaries of theater with his "Third Theater" concept, emerging in the 1970s as a response to institutionalized and commercialized theater. Working with the *Odin Teatret*, Barba emphasized the use of nontraditional spaces and community-centered practices to create raw, physical, and intimately connected theater to its audiences.⁵⁰ Barba's approach to space as a relational, transformative medium resonated with the struggles of marginalized communities, influencing popular theater movements across Latin America.

Building on this legacy, María José Contreras Lorenzini explores how performances in public spaces can symbolically "re-map" areas, challenging power structures and reconfiguring them as sites of memory, protest, and community. Her work highlights the enduring influence of mid-century revolutionary theater while offering new ways to think about performance's ability to reclaim physical and symbolic landscapes (Contreras Lorenzini 46). This idea of mapping through performance transforms urban spaces into expressions of resistance, where past injustices and present struggles intersect. In her piece *Aquí* (Here), Contreras Lorenzini physically stages performances at sites where Chilean citizens were disappeared or left to die after being tortured by the Pinochet government. These locations, once crime scenes of extreme

⁵⁰ *Odin Teatret*: Founded in 1964 in Oslo, Norway, by Italian director Eugenio Barba, *Odin Teatret* is an experimental theater ensemble that explores the physicality of performance and the use of nontraditional spaces. Relocating to Holstebro, Denmark, in 1966, the group became a cornerstone of the Third Theater movement, which emphasized theater outside mainstream institutions and focused on intercultural exchange. Known for its workshops, performances, and research, *Odin Teatret* highlights the actor's body and presence as central to creating transformative, community-centered performances.

violence, were witnessed by everyday passersby, documented by emergency responders, yet never formally prosecuted or acknowledged. By using her own body to reenact and mark these spaces, she forces an embodied confrontation with erased histories, making the past's brutality inescapable in the present. Her performances disrupt the silence surrounding these sites, transforming them into spaces of collective reckoning.

The concept of *performance mapping* is particularly useful for understanding how public performances reimagine and reclaim urban spaces as sites of political engagement. In this framework, performance is not simply symbolic—it becomes an active spatial intervention that challenges dominant narratives associated with specific locations. By staging performances in spaces marked by repression or violence, artists and activists reclaim these areas, giving them new significance as spaces of collective memory and resistance.

This act of remapping not only reclaims physical spaces but also reconfigures how the past is remembered, transforming locations of historical trauma into platforms for healing and social change. While Contreras Lorenzini's work highlights the role of individual artists in reactivating these spaces, broader performance movements demonstrate how collective action can inscribe public memory onto the landscape. Many of these performances occur in sites of deep historical significance, where bodily presence becomes a means of resisting erasure and reclaiming narratives suppressed by official histories. In Chile, for instance, performances staged in locations tied to the atrocities of the Pinochet dictatorship function as acts of memory recovery, ensuring that these spaces are not reduced to passive memorials but remain sites of active engagement. Through movement, spatial occupation, and symbolic gestures, performers interact with the physical environment to reintroduce silenced histories and challenge the

perception of these spaces as neutral or forgotten. These embodied interventions make visible the contested nature of historical memory, reinforcing performance as a tool for public reckoning and collective reflection.

These performances reclaim public spaces as living archives, embedding narratives of trauma and resistance into the urban fabric while encouraging spectators to engage with the unresolved legacies of political violence. Additionally, the bodily presence of the performer serves as a crucial element in this re-mapping process. The body becomes a living map, physically embodying both personal and collective histories. As performers move through contested spaces, their actions speak to the ongoing dialogue between past and present, drawing attention to historical injustices while also asserting contemporary forms of resistance. This performative engagement disrupts the passivity associated with traditional memorials, replacing it with active confrontation and reflection.

By transforming public space through performance, these acts challenge the official narratives often imposed by the state and offer alternative ways of remembering and healing. These performances not only engage with memory but also reshape the space itself, turning it into a platform for imagining new possibilities for the future. Latin American performance also extends beyond political protest to embrace cultural and historical reclamation, serving as a crucial means for communities to reconnect with their pasts and challenge the dominant narratives imposed by colonialism, dictatorship, and state power. In regions deeply affected by colonial legacies and authoritarian regimes, public performance has become a way to engage with historical memory in ways that go beyond traditional mediums such as textbooks or museums. Instead, these performances are actively situated in and transform public spaces—such

as monuments, government buildings, and sites of state violence—into living arenas for reinterpreting history, giving voice to marginalized communities, and creating new possibilities for collective healing.

Performance in these contexts does not just acknowledge the past but seeks to interrogate it. In many cases, official histories tend to gloss over or erase the violence of colonialism, military regimes, and the suppression of indigenous and marginalized voices. Public performances staged in front of monuments to colonial figures, military leaders, or symbols of state authority serve as acts of defiance, actively contesting these sanitized or one-sided versions of history. As performance theorist Diana Taylor has argued, these acts bring *the archive* and *the repertoire* into conversation, blending recorded history with embodied practices that carry the weight of lived experience and memory (34). By performing in these highly charged spaces, artists and activists force spectators to confront uncomfortable truths about the past and to reconsider the official narratives that have been accepted as history.

These charged spaces are where performance becomes a powerful tool for cultural reclamation. In places where indigenous traditions or local histories were suppressed by colonial powers, performance can reintroduce these cultural elements into the public sphere, allowing contemporary audiences to reconnect with their roots. Performances that blend traditional practices—such as indigenous dances, rituals, and storytelling—with modern elements reassert the presence of these cultures in a space that has historically worked to erase them. Néstor García Canclini emphasizes that Latin American performances often blur the lines between the traditional and contemporary, using public spaces as platforms to disrupt hegemonic structures and reimagine the meaning of history (25). These performances do not merely reenact historical

moments but actively rewrite them, using both modern artistic expression and ancient cultural traditions to critique and reshape the way history is understood and remembered.

In Latin America, it is essential to recognize how the body plays a key role in conveying messages, both personal and political. Through movement, gesture, and physical presence, the human body becomes a vehicle for expressing identity, resistance, and cultural memory. This form of embodied performance is particularly powerful in contexts where words alone may be insufficient—whether due to the depth of emotion or the absence of a shared language between performer and audience. When linguistic barriers exist, meaning is conveyed through bodily rhythms, facial expressions, and symbolic gestures, creating a form of communication that transcends spoken words. The inherent physicality of performance allows for a direct and visceral engagement, transforming the body into both a site of meaning-making and a bridge between different cultural and linguistic communities. As it moves through individual and collective spaces, embodied performance not only conveys experience but actively reshapes how meaning is created, shared, and understood.

In embodied performances, the body serves as both a vehicle for delivering a message and a canvas that reflects lived experiences. The body holds this capacity for expressing multivalence and it becomes evident in dances that revive ancient traditions, ritual ceremonies that maintain ancestral connections, and modern protest performances that challenge contemporary injustices. The body becomes a site of resilience, power, and storytelling, carrying layers of history and identity. However, these performances also intersect with oppressive narratives rooted in colonialism, patriarchy, homophobia, xenophobia, and ableism, which have historically sought to regulate and dehumanize marginalized bodies.

This interplay positions the body as a contested space—both vulnerable to systemic exploitation and capable of resisting it. Latin American artists and performers have critically engaged with these complexities, employing the body as a focal point to subvert dominant systems of power. For example, the works of Mexican performance artist Lorena Wolffer explicitly address gender-based violence, using her own body as a site to critique and document the lived realities of feminicide. In *Mientras Dormíamos (While We Slept)*, Wolffer covered her body with text detailing violent acts against women, transforming herself into a living monument to victims of feminicide in Ciudad Juárez,⁵¹ while forcing audiences to bear witness to the pervasiveness of such violence. Similarly, Indigenous performers across the Andes integrate rituals and dances to reclaim their cultural sovereignty, directly challenging narratives of erasure. Through these practices, embodied performances transform the body into a powerful medium for social critique, cultural preservation, and reimagining of justice.

Art historian Andrea Giunta examines how Latin American artists from the 1960s onward employed the body to challenge repressive regimes and propose alternative understandings of identity. In *The Political Body: Stories on Art, Feminism, and Emancipation in Latin America*, Giunta highlights the symbolic strategies artists used to resist dictatorships, combat racism, and dismantle systemic marginalization. However, these acts of resistance exist alongside and often respond to oppressive narratives imposed on bodies—rooted in colonial histories, patriarchal

⁵¹ Ciudad Juárez, a border city in Mexico, has gained international attention due to the high number of femicides (gender-based murders of women) that have occurred there since the 1990s. The city's unique socioeconomic conditions, including its role as a hub for maquiladoras (foreign-owned factories), along with systemic impunity, poverty, and gender inequality, have contributed to the alarming rates of violence against women. Wolffer's work specifically addresses these ongoing tragedies, using performance art to bring visibility to the issue and honor the memory of the victims.

frameworks, and state control. During the military dictatorships of the 20th century in countries like Argentina, Chile, and Brazil, bodies were sites of both resilience and vulnerability, marked by violence, silencing, and erasure. By using their own bodies as mediums, artists not only confronted these systems of oppression but also reframed vulnerability as a source of strength, turning performance into an act of defiance, testimony, and collective empowerment.

Recently, the Chilean feminist collective *LasTesis* gained global recognition for their performance *Un violador en tu camino (A Rapist in Your Path)*, which critiques systemic patriarchal violence. First performed in 2019 in Santiago, Chile, the piece directly addresses the complicity of state institutions, police, and judicial systems in perpetuating gender-based violence. In the performance, participants wear blindfolds, stand in formation, and chant in unison while performing synchronized movements. The lyrics explicitly challenge the narrative that victims are to blame for gender-based violence, instead pointing to systemic failures with the repeated phrase, “The rapist is you.” The blindfolds symbolize the vulnerability of survivors, and the way justice often remains blind to their suffering, while their synchronized stomping, gestures, and pointing outward serve as both an accusation and an assertion of power. Performed in public spaces such as city streets and government buildings, the piece forces audiences to confront the realities of patriarchal violence and the ways in which institutions perpetuate impunity.

By blindfolding themselves and chanting synchronized lyrics in public spaces, the performers reclaim bodies and spaces often shaped by misogynistic and patriarchal narratives. This performance embodies the complex duality of the body: while it is a target of systemic violence, it also becomes a site of collective defiance and healing. The global replication of the

performance emphasizes the shared and transnational nature of these struggles, highlighting how the body can simultaneously reflect trauma and resilience across cultural and geographic boundaries.

In addition, the works of individual artists such as Ana Mendieta and Lygia Clark reflect the tensions between oppression and agency within the body. Mendieta's *Siluetas* series, which imprints her body's silhouette onto natural landscapes, evokes a longing for belonging in the face of displacement while confronting the erasure of cultural and personal identity imposed by exile. The act of embedding her form into the earth symbolizes a reclamation of space, yet also gestures toward the alienation produced by forced migration. At the same time, this projection onto the land captures the duality of Mendieta's experience—it conveys both a yearning for permanence and the reality of transience. While her silhouette appears fused with the earth, suggesting unity and belonging, its impermanence also reinforces the permeability of identity, shaped by displacement and the passing of time. The layering of her form onto the landscape underscores this tension, fixed onto the terrain yet inevitably fading, much like the fragile connections between exile, home, and self.

Similarly, Lygia Clark's participatory performances use the body to explore its role within systems of connection and control. Her *relational objects*, which required participants to physically engage with tactile materials, foregrounded the boundaries between bodies and institutions, highlighting both the capacity for collective action and the ways structures can confine bodily autonomy. These works often consisted of wearable or interactive sculptures, such as *Máscaras Sensoriais* (*Sensorial Masks*), which covered the wearer's face with obstructive elements like mirrors or breathing tubes, altering their perception and engagement

with the world around them. Another example, *Baba Antropofágica* (*Anthropophagic Slobber*), involved participants manipulating long elastic strands of viscous material, creating a collective sensory experience that blurred the separation between individual and group. By requiring direct bodily participation, Clark's work disrupts the traditional passive role of the audience, transforming them into active agents within the performance. Through these immersive encounters, she explores how bodies exist within social and institutional frameworks, exposing the tensions between autonomy, interdependence, and control.

These examples collectively demonstrate variety and complexity found in embodied performance in Latin America. The body is a contested terrain, shaped by oppressive systems like colonialism, patriarchy, and xenophobia while simultaneously it serves as a powerful medium for resistance and transformation. Whether confronting state violence, reclaiming cultural memory, or resisting systemic sexism, embodied performances reveal the dual nature of the body: an organic site where trauma and empowerment coexist and reshape each other, and where histories of oppression can be reimagined and enacted through living narratives of resilience and agency.

Embodied performance can blur the distinction between performer and audience, fostering interaction and collective participation. This is particularly evident in flash mobs or impromptu street theater, where passersby are drawn into the performance, turning spectatorship into a communal experience. The intent behind such performances is to create a shared moment where the body's presence enlivens the space, breaking down barriers and fostering a sense of unity or resistance. In these instances, the body speaks for itself, making visible the emotions and struggles that transcend verbal expression. This form of performance also draws attention to the

vulnerability and strength of the body, often within the context of political unrest or social inequality.

In politically charged contexts, embodied performance is especially powerful in exposing the ways in which bodies are controlled, marginalized, and silenced by oppressive systems. Vulnerable and targeted bodies—those shaped by patriarchy, colonialism, or systemic injustice—become potent symbols of defiance when they collectively occupy space. The act of synchronizing movements, voices, and presence transforms personal experiences of oppression into a shared declaration of agency. Such performances challenge the narratives imposed by societal and institutional systems, forcing audiences to confront the physical and emotional weight of systemic violence. This dynamic interplay between visibility and power highlights how embodied performance shifts the perception of vulnerability: what is often seen as weakness becomes a source of collective strength and rebellion.

Performance can function not just as a critique of oppression but as a reclamation of space and voice. By engaging audiences—whether physically present or connected through global media—performances hold the power to transcend individual acts and become communal statements that amplify shared struggles. The act of embodying both vulnerability and resistance within the same performance highlights visceral examples of how the human form can bear the weight of systemic oppression while reclaiming agency through collective expression. Embodied performance, therefore, uses the flexibility and multivalent human form to simultaneously reclaim visibility, mark space as contested, and assert the right to presence and voice.

Conversely, the body also registers bias and vulnerability. This duality inherent in the body and

its actions is what facilitates the transformation of spaces of marginalization into arenas of visibility, solidarity, and resistance.

3.3 Embodied Performance in Video Games: The Body as a Medium of Resistance and Presence

Performance, with its emphasis on the body's role in shaping space and meaning, offers a compelling framework for understanding how physical and virtual worlds are navigated and transformed. As we turn to the study of video games, it becomes evident that these digital spaces offer similar opportunities for embodied performance. Just as performers in traditional settings use their bodies to reshape physical space and communicate powerful messages, players in video games engage with virtual environments, using avatars as extensions of themselves to interact with digital worlds. The principles of embodied performance can help us explore how video games create interactive narratives that allow players to inhabit roles, express identities, and challenge power structures—making the study of performance essential to understanding the deeper cultural and social significance of gaming.

Video games are an evolving and immersive form of performance, where space and the player's engagement with virtual environments play a crucial role in creating rich, interactive narratives. Unlike passive media, video games invite players to inhabit digital worlds through avatars, creating a dynamic interaction between the player's actions and the game's environment. Much like the performances referenced earlier, where the body communicates resilience, vulnerability, or resistance in real-world settings, avatars in the virtual world serve as extensions of the player's identity, allowing them to shape and navigate the game world through meaningful interactions.

In video games, avatars act as *proxies of action*, translating player intent into movements and decisions that resonate within the game space (Crogan 45).⁵² This interaction mirrors the way traditional performers use their physical presence to convey complex ideas. In both contexts, the player or performer's body—whether real or digital—exercises a pivotal role in the creation of meaning, using the environment as an active element in the storytelling process. By moving through and interacting with virtual worlds, players experience a form of expression and agency that can parallel, challenge, or subvert societal norms. However, the player's performance is not one-sided. A key aspect of video games as an embodied performance is the feedback loop between the player and the game world.

As the player navigates the digital space and makes choices, the game world shifts in response, altering its environment, narrative, or difficulty. However, this interaction is not free from external influences. The design of the game—including its mechanics, limitations, and narrative structures—is shaped by the biases and intentions of its programmers, embedding societal and cultural frameworks into the play experience. While these biases can reinforce stereotypes and restrict player agency, they also have a more subtle impact. Rather than allowing unrestricted freedom, the game space quietly directs players toward particular choices, reinforcing structures of control even within an environment that appears interactive and open-ended.

⁵² In video games, *proxies of action* refer to avatars or characters that act as extensions of the player, translating the player's intentions, movements, and choices into the game's digital environment. These avatars serve as a bridge between the player and the virtual world, enabling players to interact with the game space, make decisions, and engage with the narrative. In the game, the avatars embody the player's agency and identity allowing them to perform actions and experience consequences in the game world as if they were physically present.

In video games, much like in theater, semiotics plays a critical role in shaping how meaning is conveyed and interpreted. Games use visual, auditory, and interactive signs—such as symbols, colors, and narrative cues—to communicate with players. These elements serve as a semiotic system that guides player perception and decision-making within the virtual world. For instance, the color red might signify danger, prompting players to proceed with caution, or the placement of objects and obstacles may subtly direct movement through the game space. According to Keir Elam's *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, every element in a performance can function as a sign, influencing interpretation and response. Similarly, in video games, the design of these signs reflects the intentions and biases of game developers, shaped by the cultural and societal frameworks in which they work. This parallels traditional theater, where directors embed cultural signs to reflect or critique societal norms, albeit in a more fixed medium.

Spectator theory also provides valuable insights into the interactive nature of video games. In theater, spectators are active interpreters of meaning, and their reactions can influence the perception of a performance. As Jacques Rancière explores in *The Emancipated Spectator*, audience members do not passively absorb meaning but actively construct it through their own interpretations and lived experiences (12). In video games, players assume a dual role as both performers and spectators. They not only navigate game worlds but also interpret the signs embedded within them, making choices that shape the game's narrative and outcomes. This dynamic creates a feedback loop where player actions elicit responses from the game, enhancing immersion and agency.

However, the scope of this agency is often limited by the boundaries set within the game's design. While players feel they are actively shaping the experience, their choices are

constrained by the semiotic and structural framework programmed into the game, which may reinforce or challenge societal norms depending on its design. This tension between perceived agency and programmed constraints is examined in Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux's *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames*, which argues that players engage with games beyond traditional gameplay, blurring the lines between performance, spectatorship, and play (56).

By considering these perspectives, we can better understand how video games, like theater, construct meaning through both participation and observation. The player is not merely a performer navigating a digital space but also a spectator interpreting the game's coded structures, limitations, and ideological frameworks. Just as theatrical audiences shape performance through their reception and interpretation, video game players engage in an ongoing negotiation between agency and control, creating meaning within the constraints of the game world.

If single-player games position players as both performers and spectators within a programmed environment, multiplayer and online games complicate this relationship by adding a live, social dimension where every player becomes both an actor and an audience member in a shared performance. In multiplayer games, players often engage in collective or competitive performances, where they must navigate social interactions, cooperate with others, or engage in direct conflict with other players. The performance here goes beyond the interaction between the player and the game; it extends to the social sphere, as each player's actions affect others within the game world. These shared spaces mirror real-world social dynamics, where players not only perform their roles but also react to and influence the performances of others. This dynamic strongly parallels the principles of improvisational theater, where participants create in-the-

moment responses based on each other's actions and choices, shaping the outcome collaboratively.

For example, Keith Johnstone's *Theatresports* emphasizes spontaneity and interaction, where improvisers build scenes by responding to verbal or physical cues from their fellow performers, much like players in a multiplayer game adapt to the changing strategies of their teammates and opponents. In *Theatresports*, performers are given prompts or unexpected challenges, requiring them to make quick decisions that influence the direction of the performance. Similarly, in multiplayer games, players must respond dynamically to ever-changing conditions, adjusting their actions based on both the immediate game environment and the behavior of other players. In both cases, the outcome is not predetermined but rather emerges through the ongoing interactions between participants, reinforcing the idea that both multiplayer gaming and improvisational theater function as spaces of collective, unscripted performance.

This interaction introduces a communal aspect to performance, blurring the lines between performer and audience, as players simultaneously play, watch, and respond to one another. Just as improvisational and devised theater require a heightened awareness of others' contributions, multiplayer games foster similar qualities, encouraging players to engage in a constant cycle of action and reaction. Multiplayer games thus create a space where embodied performance becomes a collective act, reflecting the intricate interplay of creativity, strategy, and identity formation, much like the evolving narratives in ensemble-based theatrical productions.

In addition to the social and collaborative dynamics of multiplayer games, the mechanics of the game itself—its rules, controls, and limitations—play a central role in shaping the player's performance. These mechanics act as the framework within which players perform, guiding their

actions and setting the boundaries for what can and cannot be done within the game world. Much like the physical limitations of a stage or a ritual space dictate the performer's movements, the mechanics of a game impose certain constraints or freedoms that dictate how the player can interact with the digital environment. Game mechanics, then, are not just functional—they are integral to the player's experience of performance. The manner in which players engage with these mechanics, whether by mastering them or subverting them, becomes part of their performance, influencing how they express identity, agency, and resistance within the virtual world.

Embodied performance in video games also taps into the emotional and psychological engagement of the player. Katherine Isbister describes video games as *empathy engines*, where players experience ethical dilemmas, emotional stakes, and moral decisions through their virtual bodies (23). This form of interaction deepens the player's connection to the game's narrative, much like a performer connects with an audience by bringing emotional and physical presence to the stage. The immediacy of these interactions, where players must react to challenges in real-time, draws parallels with the concept of *liveness* in performance studies (Auslander 33), where the presence of the performer (or player) heightens the impact of the narrative. As players navigate digital worlds, they also perform roles that allow them to explore identity, agency, and resistance. Jesper Juul notes that video games present unique opportunities for players to make decisions that shape the game's outcome, offering a form of agency that extends beyond traditional scripted performances (45). Each decision within the game space becomes an expression of self, a choice that reflects personal values and perspectives. In this way, video games are not just entertainment; they serve as platforms for exploring identity through complex

themes such as power or inequality, as well as reactions like social resistance through the player's interactions with the game environment.

The relationship between the player, avatar, and game space blurs the boundaries between reality and the virtual world. Espen Aarseth highlights that video games allow players to actively shape the narrative through their actions, making the game world an interactive space for experimenting with identity and agency (237). As players engage with these virtual environments, they often confront obstacles and scenarios that parallel real-world social and political issues. The virtual body becomes a vessel for expressing power, vulnerability, or resistance, mirroring the ways in which physical performers engage with their surroundings to critique or challenge societal structures. Building on Augusto Boal's framework, which positions performance as a space for practicing strategies of resistance, video games extend this opportunity into the virtual realm. Players take on the role of *spectators* (8), using their avatars to rehearse responses to systemic oppression, subvert power dynamics, or assert agency within the game world.

By embodying digital characters, players can navigate complex themes in ways that are both personal and reflective of broader social narratives. These performances—whether in pursuit of goals within the game or as deliberate subversions of the game's rules—become opportunities to critique or reinforce power dynamics. Just as Boal's participants use theater to test and challenge societal systems, players in virtual spaces transform the game environment into a platform for exploring resistance, identity, and transformation. Video games, much like theater or protest performance, offer a stage for engaging with larger cultural and political ideas, giving players the opportunity to express themselves through their decisions and interactions

within the game. These performances—whether in pursuit of goals within the game or as deliberate subversions of the game’s rules—allow players to critique or reinforce power dynamics, just as performers do in traditional spaces. Video games, much like theater or protest performances, offer a stage for engaging with larger cultural and political ideas, giving players the opportunity to express themselves through their actions within the game.

Video games provide a compelling platform for interactive performance, where players navigate digital worlds, express identities, and engage with complex social narratives through avatars. The interaction between the player, the avatar, and the game space mirrors the dynamics of traditional performance, where the body’s movements and decisions create meaning within the space it inhabits. By incorporating the mechanics of the game, the feedback loop between the player and the game, and the multiplayer interactions, video games become rich environments for exploring identity, agency, and resistance through embodied performance.

3.4 Reclaiming the *Malvinas* Through Gameplay: History, Identity, and Embodied Performance in *Malvinas 2032*

An excellent example of how video games provide a platform for players to embody political and historical resistance can be found in the Argentine game *Malvinas 2032*. The game reflects Argentina's long-standing territorial claim to the islands. For historical context, the Falklands War, known as the *Guerra de las Malvinas* in Argentina, was a ten-week conflict in 1982 between Argentina and the United Kingdom over control of the Falkland Islands (referred to as *Islas Malvinas* by Argentina). The islands have been under British rule since 1833. For Argentina, the *Islas Malvinas* represent not only a territorial dispute, but they are also a symbol of resistance against historical imperialism and the enduring unresolved legacy of colonial

domination. In April 1982 Argentine forces invaded the Falklands and asserted their sovereignty over the islands. The British government quickly responded with a naval task force, and after intense land, sea, and air battles, the British reclaimed the islands by mid-June. The war resulted in over 900 deaths, with significant losses on both sides and left a lasting mark on Argentina's national identity and memory. The *Islas Malvinas* remain a powerful if vexed symbol in Argentina connecting issues of sovereignty, colonial legacies, and national pride.

The Falklands War remains a deeply contested chapter in Argentina's history, marked by internal divisions over its justification, execution, and legacy. While some Argentines view the war as a necessary assertion of sovereignty over the islands, others criticize it as a reckless and unnecessary conflict, driven by the then-military regime's desperation to distract from mounting domestic crises.⁵³ For many, the war symbolizes a tragic loss of life and a cynical political maneuver by a dictatorship seeking to bolster its crumbling legitimacy. The immediate aftermath of the war revealed sharp fractures in public opinion. The regime's failure to reclaim the islands undermined its credibility leaving many Argentines to feel betrayed by what they saw as a poorly planned and executed campaign that resulted in the high rates of casualties and wounded

⁵³ The military junta ruled Argentina from 1976 to 1983, following a coup that ousted President Isabel Perón. Led initially by Jorge Rafael Videla (1976–1981), and later by Roberto Viola (1981) and Leopoldo Galtieri (1981–1982), the regime implemented a campaign of state terrorism known as the *Dirty War*, during which thousands of suspected political dissidents were forcibly disappeared, tortured, and murdered. The dictatorship also pursued neoliberal economic policies, leading to severe inflation, foreign debt accumulation, and economic instability. By 1982, public discontent with the regime's repression and economic failures had intensified, prompting Galtieri to launch the Falklands War in an attempt to rally nationalistic support and deflect attention from the regime's domestic crises. The war ended in Argentina's defeat, further discrediting the junta and accelerating its collapse, culminating in the return to democracy in 1983.

veterans. The loss not only exposed the incompetence of the military government but also heightened public awareness of the regime's broader abuses, contributing to its collapse in 1983.

However, the narrative surrounding the war remains far from unified. For some, particularly within nationalist circles, the conflict is remembered as a heroic attempt to reclaim rightful territory, with the Malvinas issue continuing to serve as a rallying point for sovereignty and anti-colonial resistance. Public demonstrations and cultural works often evoke the war's symbolic significance, with large-scale rallies in cities like Ushuaia and Rosario featuring speeches by former soldiers, nationalist groups, and government representatives calling for the islands' return.

On April 2, the annual *Día del Veterano y de los Caídos en la Guerra de Malvinas* (Veterans and Fallen Soldiers Day) is marked by ceremonies at the *Monumento a los Caídos en Malvinas* (Monument of the Fallen in the Falklands War) in Buenos Aires, where Veterans and political figures reaffirm Argentina's sovereignty claims. Similarly, protests outside the British embassy, such as those seen on the 30th anniversary of the war in 2012, reflect the continued intensity of nationalist sentiment, with demonstrators chanting patriotic slogans and demanding the islands' return. These public acts of remembrance and resistance reinforce the Malvinas issue as a central symbol of national identity, framing it as part of a broader struggle against historical imperialism.

At the same time, other segments of the population, particularly survivors and their families, focus on the human cost of the conflict. Many veterans have expressed feelings of abandonment and neglect by the Argentine state, criticizing the lack of support and recognition they received after the war. The war is seen by some as a source of pride and by others as a

preventable tragedy that exploited both the military and civilian population for political gain. These diverse interpretations illustrate how the Falklands War continues to evoke strong and often conflicting emotions within Argentina. For some, it remains a symbol of unresolved colonial struggles and national pride; for others, it stands as a painful reminder of lives lost and the manipulative tactics of a brutal regime.

The Malvinas issue endures as both a unifying symbol of sovereignty and a divisive point of reflection, forcing Argentines to grapple with the complexities of their history and identity, and this ambivalence is explored in the dystopian video game. *Malvinas 2032*. In this futuristic video game developed in Argentina the conflict over the Falkland Islands is reimaged to take place decades into the future. The game envisions a technologically advanced battlefield where Argentina has once again sought to reclaim the islands, but this time in a high-tech war scenario. The game places players in the role of an Argentine soldier engaged in a struggle to retake the islands from a colonial power.

Malvinas 2032 operates not just as a military shooter, but as a piece of interactive media that delves into questions of historical memory to explore national identity and the ongoing resistance to colonialism. The game's purpose extends beyond that of providing entertainment; it invites players to engage with a speculative future of the *Malvinas* conflict while reflecting on Argentina's historical and emotional attachment to the islands. By doing so, *Malvinas 2032* allows players to inhabit a virtual body in a conflict that is deeply tied to Argentina's patriotism and sense of collective memory. Through its narrative, missions, and gameplay mechanics, the game functions as an embodied performance, allowing players to engage with facets of national identity and historical trauma within a digital space.

The significance of *Malvinas 2032* lies in its ability to fuse interactive gaming with political discourse. According to media scholar Miguel Sicart, video games often serve as powerful ethical spaces where players can engage and experiment with moral dilemmas and political conflicts (45). In the case of *Malvinas 2032*, the game provides a platform for Argentine players to parse their country's unresolved territorial claims while also grappling with the complexities of historical memory.

The game does not merely present a speculative, futuristic vision of continued resistance; it invites players to interrogate versions of history for accuracy and identify whose narratives are privileged over others. This venue for exploring historical information is particularly significant given the manipulation by Argentina's dictatorship of public sentiment during the war, through the use of propaganda to frame the conflict as a unifying national cause while obscuring its own failures with the economy and human rights. By engaging with the game's narrative, players are prompted to reflect on how memory is constructed and contested, highlighting the tension between national pride and historical accuracy. In this way, *Malvinas 2032* transcends the typical military shooter genre, becoming a narrative and interactive virtual tool for exploring the socio-political ramifications of colonialism, territorial disputes, and historical truth, as well as the very real cost to human lives.

Beyond these themes, the game's speculative future offers players a unique opportunity to question and imagine alternate scenarios that challenge official historical accounts. Another significant theoretical lens through which *Malvinas 2032* can be viewed is Espen Aarseth's concept of *cybertexts*. Aarseth argues that in interactive media, players play an active role in shaping the narrative through their actions (38). In *Malvinas 2032*, the player's choices, such as

how they engage with missions and strategies, directly impact the progression of the story, reinforcing the game's deeper themes of national sovereignty, identity, and historical trauma. By engaging with missions that reinterpret Argentina's territorial claims and the global political landscape, players are encouraged to speculate on "what could have been" and critique the constructed nature of historical narratives.

This process not only deepens the game's engagement with nationalism, imperialism, and the legacy of colonialism but also invites players to explore the malleability of history through their actions, transforming the narrative into an evolving, embodied critique of historical memory. In this sense, the game resonates with Boal's notion of the "rehearsal for reality," not in the sense of direct intervention but in how it invites players to inhabit alternative historical outcomes imaginatively. While Boal's theater actively engages participants in rehearsing political change, *Malvinas 2032* functions more as a speculative space, where the act of play fosters reflection on how historical narratives are constructed and contested.

The game also taps into what cultural theorist Astrid Erll refers to as *cultural memory*, which encompasses how societies remember historical events and how these memories shape collective identities (10). In *Malvinas 2032*, the past is not merely a backdrop but is continually invoked through the game's missions and narrative. The islands, long contested between Argentina and the United Kingdom, are rendered as a physical battlefield and a symbolic site of memory. Additionally, the game allows players to explore the unresolved psychological and emotional impact of the original war on Argentina. Through its futuristic lens, *Malvinas 2032* offers a commentary on the idea that conflicts over sovereignty and identity are never truly resolved but continue to echo across generations. This aligns with media scholar Eef Masson's

argument that interactive media can act as platforms for *performative remembering*, where the act of playing becomes a way to embody and interact with cultural memories (Masson 114). In this case, the player's actions in *Malvinas 2032* can be seen as a form of performative remembering, where they are invited to engage with the unresolved legacies of the 1982 conflict while imagining new ways to assert Argentine sovereignty.

The gameplay in *Malvinas 2032*—where players navigate through the islands, engage in combat, and make strategic decisions—adds a significant layer to the game's function as an *embodied performance*. In *Malvinas 2032*, the player's avatar—a futuristic Argentine soldier—becomes an extension of the player's body, translating real-world movements, decisions, and emotions into actions within the virtual space. This concept of embodiment is essential for understanding how the game operates, much like real-world performances where individuals use their bodies to challenge narratives or reclaim spaces. The player's engagement with the avatar allows them to experience emotional and ethical dilemmas through the virtual body. By embodying an Argentine soldier, players take on a politically charged role where their actions—whether engaging in combat, defending locations, or navigating strategic choices—are imbued with broader significance.⁵⁴ It isn't just about tactical victories; it's about grappling with questions of national identity, pride, and loss. This mirrors the real-world performance of resistance, where presence and action assert political and cultural claims.

⁵⁴ This concept of embodying politically and emotionally charged roles resonates with Lola Arias' *Campo Minado (Minefield)*, a performance piece that brings together British and Argentine veterans of the Falklands War. In the performance, veterans take on each other's memories, stepping into one another's shoes to share deeply personal perspectives of the conflict. Similar to the player's role in *Malvinas 2032*, *Campo Minado* explores how embodiment—whether in a virtual or live setting—can serve as a means to navigate memory, identity, and the ethics of war.

A core element of *Malvinas 2032* is its connection between player actions and the political context of the game. Each battle and strategic decision within the game echoes Argentina's enduring claim to the Falkland Islands and carries the historical memory of the 1982 Falklands War. The avatar, as a digital representative of Argentina's will to reclaim the islands, allows the player to experience the ongoing political struggle in a symbolic space. The act of moving through and reclaiming virtual territory mirrors how protests or movements in physical spaces reclaim historically significant or contested areas. Compounding the emotional intensity of the game is the fact that Argentine weapons, even in this dystopian future, remain far inferior to those of their enemies.

This technological disparity forces players to confront the strategic limitations imposed by such inferiority, closely mirroring Argentina's real-world experience during the Falklands War, when they fought against the superior military might of the British forces. During the 1982 conflict, the British military deployed advanced weaponry, including Harrier jump jets, Vulcan bombers, and Type 42 destroyers, which far outmatched Argentina's aging fleet and limited airpower. While the Argentine forces had Exocet missiles that posed a significant threat, their overall naval and air capabilities were insufficient to counter the British task force, which was bolstered by sophisticated technology and decades of military experience. The lack of technological parity meant that Argentina's strategies often relied on ingenuity and resilience rather than overwhelming force. This historical reality is reflected in *Malvinas 2032*, where players must navigate the challenges of asymmetrical warfare, facing a technologically superior adversary and relying on creativity, tactical foresight, and adaptability to survive and achieve their objectives.

In this sense, the game is not just about winning battles; it's about surviving and asserting one's will in the face of overwhelming adversity. Each success becomes more significant because it is achieved despite inferior resources, mirroring Argentina's long-standing fight to maintain its territorial claims in the face of greater powers. However, this struggle is not without its complexities. Within Argentina, the Falkland/Malvinas War remains a deeply divisive topic. While some view it as a noble attempt to assert sovereignty over the *Islas Malvinas*, others see it as a politically motivated conflict orchestrated by a failing military regime. For the soldiers who fought, the experience was often marked by a sense of abandonment, with many reporting inadequate training, poor equipment, and harsh conditions that compounded the physical and psychological toll of the war, including post-traumatic disorders. On the British side, the conflict was seen by many as a defense of territorial integrity and the rights of the Falkland Islanders, who overwhelmingly identified as British. British soldiers, though part of a better-equipped and trained military force, faced their own challenges, including harsh weather conditions, logistical constraints, the emotional strain of fighting a war thousands of miles from home, and post-war trauma.

This duality—between the symbolic significance of the conflict and the human cost borne by its participants—is echoed in *Malvinas 2032*. As players embody their avatars, they grapple not only with tactical challenges but also with the weight of a struggle that is as much about survival and adaptation as it is about political assertion. The game's emphasis on resourcefulness and perseverance in the face of overwhelming odds invites players to reflect on the broader complexities of war and global foreign policy, including the capacity to inspire both unity and division, resilience and trauma, across both sides of a contested history.

The game's portrayal of technological inferiority is a powerful metaphor for Argentina's broader struggle for autonomy and recognition. The player's combat exposure reflects the vulnerability of a nation that has historically had to navigate a global landscape dominated by stronger military and political forces. However, this external struggle is mirrored by internal domination, as the Falklands War unfolded under the control of a military, religious, and civic dictatorship that suppressed dissent and manipulated public sentiment. The regime's authoritarian grip in Argentina, including censorship, torture, disappearances, and propaganda, shaped the national narrative around the war, framing it as a unifying cause while tamping down protest and masking its own abuses and failures. In this context, the game's depiction of vulnerability and resistance takes on added significance, as it invites players to consider not only Argentina's external battles but also the internal forces that violently shaped its history and identity during this turbulent period.

When the game begins, the player is confronted with a map cloaked in darkness, symbolizing the unknowns and unresolved aspects of Argentina's colonial past and territorial disputes.⁵⁵ in *Malvinas 2032* serves as a striking metaphor for Argentina's complex and unfinished journey toward reclaiming the *Malvinas* and asserting its sovereignty. Through acts of discovery, the game's mechanics show that understanding and reclaiming national identity are gradual processes, achieved not through immediate victories but through a persistent and deliberate effort to claim territory and unearth the hidden layers of history. In this sense, the dark

⁵⁵ The *dark map mechanic* is a game design feature where parts of the game map are initially obscured or hidden from the player, often represented as dark or shadowed areas. As players explore, these concealed sections gradually become visible, revealing new terrain, resources, or challenges. This mechanic introduces a sense of discovery and uncertainty, encouraging exploration while heightening suspense and immersion, as players uncover and engage with previously unknown parts of the game world.

map mirrors the obscured nature of territorial conflict itself in which each side envisions itself as the only stakeholder. As players uncover more of the map, they are not only expanding their knowledge of the terrain but are also embodying the nation's quest for sovereignty. Each newly revealed section represents a symbolic victory in a larger, long-standing struggle, demonstrating that national identity and territorial control are claimed/contested with each step in both physical and symbolic space. The recruitment mechanic introduces another dimension to this exploration. As players traverse the newly revealed areas, they can recruit small factions of Argentine warriors to aid in their fight. These factions embody the dispersed pockets of resistance and solidarity that are essential to any movement for autonomy, much like in real-world political struggles where grassroots efforts play a critical role in larger national causes. However, the potential to lose these factions in battle adds a layer of emotional and strategic weight to the player's choices.

The game's setting in a post-dictatorship future, juxtaposing the remnants of Argentina's historical struggles for sovereignty against the speculative possibility of a new era of autonomy, highlights a sense of precarity. The post-dictatorship context invites reflection on the enduring legacies of authoritarian rule and the scars of the past. By situating progress within a futuristic yet historically aware narrative, the game challenges players to think about the continuities and ruptures between historical memory and imagined futures, emphasizing that the quest for sovereignty is not only physical but also temporal and that progress is fragile.

This recruitment system is not just about adding numbers to the player's forces; it symbolizes the collective nature of national struggles. The player begins with a single avatar, but as they gather more allies, they begin to represent not just an individual fighting for a cause but a

growing collective movement. However, the precariousness of these alliances reinforces the idea that even when progress is made, it can be reversed. The player's responsibility to keep their faction alive highlights the delicate balance between advancing the cause and managing the risk of failure. Losing these allies is not just a tactical setback but also a symbolic loss, reminding players that national sovereignty is not easily won and must be defended continuously against larger, better-equipped forces. From the perspective of *embodied performance*, this recruitment mechanic deepens the player's engagement with the game's narrative. The player's avatar is no longer just a lone figure navigating unknown terrain; they are now leading a fragile coalition of warriors whose survival depends on careful planning, strategic thinking, emotional resilience, and collective action. This dynamic requires the player to perform a leadership role, where every decision—whether to push forward or retreat, to take risks or conserve resources—impacts the outcome not only for themselves but for the larger movement they represent.

The pressure to protect their faction adds a psychological dimension to the embodied experience, where the player's sense of responsibility becomes a form of performance in and of itself. The emotional stakes are heightened as the player must grapple with the potential for loss at every turn, mirroring the real-world challenges of uniting fragmented groups under a common cause. The idea that sovereignty and understanding are achieved gradually is reinforced through the game's careful balancing of exploration and recruitment. The player must take calculated risks to expand their influence and protect their allies, much like a nation must strategically navigate both external threats and internal cohesion in its quest for autonomy. The player's experience of recruiting factions and uncovering territory becomes an embodied performance of Argentina's historical struggle. The avatar's progress through the game world mirrors the

nation's progress through history, with each inch of land reclaimed and each ally won representing small but crucial victories in a larger, ongoing battle.

Ultimately, *Malvinas 2032* uses these mechanics to transform the player's experience into more than just a tactical challenge. The dark map and recruitment elements engage players on both an intellectual and emotional level, forcing them to grapple with the uncertainties and complexities of territorial conflict. As the player moves through the game, they perform the role of a leader who must not only navigate a hostile environment but also unite fragmented groups under a common goal. This delicate balancing act reflects the real-world difficulties of nation-building, where every decision can have far-reaching consequences. Through these mechanics, *Malvinas 2032* offers a profound exploration of Argentina's historical journey, turning each moment of gameplay into a symbolic performance of persistence, survival, and the ongoing fight for sovereignty.

3.5 The Symbolic Nature of Players' Physical Actions in Virtual Reality (VR)

The immersive power of virtual reality (VR) lies in its ability to turn physical player actions into meaningful experiences that resonate with cultural and historical narratives. Unlike traditional video games, where actions are limited to button presses or joystick movements, VR engages the player's body in a more direct, symbolic manner. This active physical participation can have a deeper meaning, especially when the game's setting is tied to culturally or historically significant spaces, allowing for a unique intersection of gameplay and cultural exploration. For instance, when players traverse ancient ruins or participate in historically substantial moments, their movements become more than just mechanical progress through the game—they transform

into a form of virtual *performance* that allows the participant to physically engage with cultural heritage and history in a simulated environment.

In VR environments, players' physical actions are mapped directly onto the virtual world, transforming interaction into an embodied performance that deepens the relationship between performer and space. Actions such as walking through a reconstructed Mayan temple or navigating a historical battlefield become not merely movements but deeply performative acts that engage with cultural memory. This process recalls Ana Mendieta's *Silueta* series, where her body's imprint onto the landscape functioned as both a gesture of belonging and an acknowledgment of displacement. In her work, the silhouette left behind became a visual and conceptual record of her presence, blurring the line between permanence and impermanence. Similarly, in VR, the player's actions leave traces within the digital space—not in the form of physical marks but through an evolving, interactive relationship between body, environment, and memory.

Just as Mendieta's interventions in the landscape created a dialogue between absence and presence, VR environments transform the player's movement into a spatial imprint, reinforcing the notion that digital worlds are not just representations but sites of embodied interaction. Performance scholar Philip Auslander's concept of the virtual body encapsulates this phenomenon, where the player's movements within the digital world hold significance both in the virtual space and as extensions of their physical presence (5). This dynamic reflects a critical evolution of the semiotic relationships previously explored. In VR, the player's embodied actions—such as picking up artifacts or reenacting revolutionary events—become signifiers that actively reshape the symbolic and narrative fabric of the virtual environment.

Unlike more static forms of media, VR reconfigures the traditional roles of performer and spectator, offering a heightened sense of interactivity. The symbolic spaces players traverse are not just sites of interpretation but arenas of co-creation. Every action taken by the player, decodes existing meaning and generates new layers of significance, turning the virtual world into a malleable stage where the boundaries between performance, narrative, and participation blur. By integrating the player's body into the semiotic system of the game, VR environments transform physical gestures into acts of meaning-making, allowing for an immersive exploration of historical and cultural narratives.

Butler's theory of performativity offers a rich framework we can use as a frame for understanding the symbolic depth of players' physical actions in virtual reality (VR) environments. According to Butler, performativity is not merely about "acting" in the sense of theater or imitation, but about how physical acts constitute identity and meaning within broader social, cultural, and political contexts. In this sense, performativity is deeply entwined with power structures, norms, and the ongoing construction of reality. Within VR, Butler's framework becomes especially useful because it allows us to examine how the physical engagement of players—through motion-tracking and embodied interaction—transcends mere play and becomes a re-enactment of cultural narratives and identity formation (2).

In VR, players are not simply controlling characters on a screen; they are embodying avatars that move and interact within a virtual space, mirroring both Auslander's and Butler's ideas that actions in space are constitutive of identity. This means that the player's actions, such as picking up objects, walking through historically significant locations, or engaging with characters, are not just functional—they carry layered meanings related to the environment's

cultural, historical, and physical/territorial significance. Just as Butler argues that gender, for example, is performed through repeated, culturally coded actions that establish identity within a given social context, VR users perform identities by engaging with cultural or historical narratives embedded in the virtual environment. These acts of performance within VR are imbued with the same potential to reinforce or challenge social norms, historical, and even patriotic narratives.

When a player in VR re-enacts historical moments or engages with historically and politically charged spaces, such as walking through the ruins of an ancient indigenous civilization or taking part in a revolutionary battle, their movements are not neutral. They are laden with the weight of the narrative and the history they evoke. This is where Butler's theory intersects with the potential of VR: the player's body becomes a medium through which they engage in symbolic acts that reinterpret or reclaim historical and cultural narratives and spaces. For example, consider a VR experience where a player navigates an environment modeled after pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. As the player walks through the virtual landscape, they may come across sacred temples or ceremonial sites. The player's physical actions—such as bowing before a digital representation of a deity or performing a ritual task—are not simply functional movements to progress the game; they are performative acts that engage with the religious, cultural, and historical significance of the space, which can hold the potential for transformative world-making as well as negative appropriation.

While Butler's theory of performativity emphasizes how identity is constructed through repeated acts, it does not fully account for how these acts are shaped and reinforced within larger social structures. Identity performance is not just an individual process; it is embedded in cultural

memory and collective practices that extend beyond the present moment. Repeated actions—whether linguistic, gestural, or ritualistic—draw upon historical precedents and social frameworks that give them meaning. Maurice Halbwachs’s concept of collective memory enriches Butler’s framework by demonstrating how identity is not only performed but also socially sustained and transmitted across generations. Halbwachs argues that memory is never purely individual but instead emerges through shared practices, institutions, and communal narratives that define what is remembered and how it is reenacted (22-28). In this sense, individual performances—such as gender expression, national identity, or cultural traditions—are not enacted in isolation but rather within a system of memory that dictates which performances are recognized, valued, or dismissed by the broader collective. What is remembered, and how it is performed, is not merely a matter of personal agency but of historically ingrained structures that shape social belonging and identity formation.

In VR environments, players’ movements—such as navigating historical spaces or reenacting cultural rituals—are not isolated but resonate within collective narratives, aligning with Halbwachs’s assertion that memory is inherently social. The digital spaces in which players engage are not merely passive containers for historical information but active arenas where memory is rehearsed, reshaped, and embodied. Just as cultural memory evolves through communal participation, VR allows users to experience and reinterpret historical and cultural narratives in interactive ways, reinforcing the link between identity, performance, and memory. Because VR relies on embodied engagement, the player does not simply observe history but moves within it, making decisions that blur the line between individual agency and inherited historical structures.

The connection between action, environment, and historical context in VR mirrors the way cultural memory is maintained and reshaped through embodied social practices in the real world. Ann Rigney's exploration of cultural memory highlights how media serve as active agents in the preservation and reinterpretation of historical narratives. Rigney argues that cultural memory is not static but is continually mediated through cultural artifacts, performances, and media representations that shape how history is remembered and reimagined over time (Rigney 10). In VR, this mediation is amplified, as players' embodied performances transform digital spaces into living archives where historical and cultural context is not merely preserved but actively reshaped through interaction. In VR, players' embodied performances transform digital spaces into living archives where historical and cultural context is not merely preserved but actively reshaped through interaction.

VR presents a unique site where the two dimensions of memory (personal and collective) converge, as individual players navigate historically inspired narratives while simultaneously contributing to a larger, shared interpretation of history. Jeffrey K. Olick's distinction between collected memory and collective memory provides a crucial framework for understanding how VR complicates the relationship between individual agency and shared historical narratives. While collected memory refers to the aggregation of personal, individual recollections, collective memory is shaped through social structures, institutions, and cultural practices that preserve and transmit the past (Olick 45). Unlike traditional media, where historical narratives are often static and unidirectional, VR allows players to embody history—making choices, engaging in rituals, and moving through digitally reconstructed spaces that shape their personal experience of the past. However, these experiences are never purely individual; rather, they occur within the pre-

constructed frameworks of collective memory, which dictate which histories are represented, how they are framed, and what perspectives are privileged.

This tension between individual engagement and collective historical structures directly intersects with Butler's theory of performativity. Butler argues that identity is not an inherent or stable trait but is constructed through repeated acts that reinforce social norms and power structures (Butler 12). In the context of VR, this performative process takes on a new dimension, as players enact identities, historical roles, and social dynamics within the constraints of a pre-designed virtual world. The choices available to a player—whether they participate in resistance, reinforce dominant ideologies, or navigate historical conflicts—are never neutral but are shaped by the broader structures of cultural memory embedded in the game's design. This means that VR does not simply allow for historical reenactment; it actively constructs and reinforces historical meaning through performance. The player, much like the historical subject, does not exist outside of history but is always positioned within it, shaped by the frameworks of memory and social norms that define the narratives they engage with.

Olick's concept of collective memory helps illuminate the stakes of these performative acts within VR. Since collective memory is a socially mediated process, VR becomes a site where certain historical narratives are reified while others remain absent. What is remembered, what is erased, and what is reinterpreted all depend on the structural forces that determine how history is framed within the virtual space (Olick 56). While the embodied experience of VR gives the illusion of agency and discovery, players are ultimately participating in a carefully curated version of history—one that reflects the broader cultural and political interests of its creators. The performativity of history in VR, then, is not just a question of interaction but of

ideological construction, where memory is actively shaped and reinforced through digital embodiment.

Through the interplay of Butler's performativity and Olick's collective memory, VR emerges as a complex site for historical engagement. While it offers players the ability to experience history through embodied action, this experience is always shaped by larger collective narratives that dictate how history is framed, whose stories are told, and what performances are validated. Rather than serving as a neutral medium, VR operates within ideological structures that define cultural memory, influencing how the past is reconstructed and reinterpreted. This dynamic becomes even more significant when considering regions where histories of colonialism, displacement, and resistance have long been contested. The ways in which VR can mediate these narratives, particularly in cultural contexts shaped by historical struggle, raise important questions about its potential as a tool for memory, identity, and resistance.

For Latin America, where histories of colonialism, genocide, cultural resistance, and indigenous identity are woven into the very fabric of the region's social and political landscape, virtual reality (VR) offers a groundbreaking opportunity to engage with these complex narratives in an immersive and participatory way. The region's historical memory is marked by both resilience and trauma, and VR provides a medium that goes beyond passive consumption of history and culture. It invites users to actively participate in re-enacting, preserving, and reflecting on significant events and processes, fostering a deeper connection to these narratives. Scholars such as Henry Jenkins have emphasized the importance of participatory culture, in

which audiences engage with media not as mere consumers but as active participants who influence and contribute to cultural narratives (Jenkins 8).

In the context of Latin America, VR could facilitate such active participation by allowing players to step into the roles of historical figures or groups central to the region's past, such as indigenous leaders, revolutionary fighters, or even those who endured the genocidal violence of colonial and post-colonial regimes. Through these immersive performances, VR can illuminate histories that are often marginalized or simplified, enabling players to experience the complexities of identity, resistance, and survival within Latin America's rich and turbulent past.

This form of immersive experience goes beyond typical historical or cultural education by enabling users to physically *re-map* and *re-live* key moments in history. For example, a VR game that allows players to take part in battles of Latin American independence would enable them to learn about historical events and *experience* the intensity, stakes, and emotions associated with these moments. In doing so, VR becomes a tool for cultural activism, offering a platform through which narratives that challenge dominant colonial or Eurocentric histories can be amplified. Indigenous struggles, for example, can be brought to the forefront, allowing players to experience the worldview and resistance efforts of Indigenous communities against colonial powers. This immersive form of storytelling can be instrumental in shifting perspectives and fostering empathy by giving players, both from inside and outside of Latin America, a chance to physically inhabit roles that might otherwise be inaccessible in traditional media formats.

Moreover, the ability of VR to create a *visceral* connection with historical and cultural narratives makes these experiences more emotionally impactful and memorable. Traditional

methods of cultural preservation, such as textbooks, documentaries, or even museums, often provide a more detached engagement with history. However, in VR, the sensory immersion and real-time interaction can make the experience of past events far more immediate and profound. This sensory and emotional engagement is crucial, especially when dealing with histories of trauma, such as colonization, exploitation, and genocide. For instance, a VR experience focusing on the Spanish conquest could evoke the devastation faced by Indigenous populations, while also allowing for the re-imagination of indigenous resistance and survival, potentially fostering a deeper understanding of the socio-political conditions that shaped Latin America's present.

Beyond historical re-enactments, VR also has the capacity to preserve indigenous cultures that are at risk of being forgotten. Virtual environments can be designed to showcase traditional rituals, languages, and cultural practices, offering users the opportunity to engage with living traditions that might otherwise be inaccessible or marginalized in the broader media landscape. Indigenous communities in Latin America, whose cultural practices have often been sidelined by mainstream narratives, can use VR as a tool for cultural preservation and education, ensuring that future generations—both within and outside their communities—have access to these rich, nuanced traditions. This process of cultural reclamation through VR aligns with broader movements in Latin American media to challenge the ways history has been told and to assert new narratives that better reflect the diversity and complexity of the region. For example, while traditional historical accounts often focus on the colonial powers and their narratives of conquest, VR can offer a space to tell the stories of those who resisted colonization and who continue to fight for cultural survival. In doing so, VR becomes a vehicle for both cultural preservation and for challenging entrenched historical narratives, making it a powerful tool for education, activism, and cultural diplomacy.

However, the use of VR in this context is not without its challenges. Critics argue that translating cultural practices and rituals into virtual environments risks commodifying and trivializing them, reducing deeply spiritual or communal experiences to mere gameplay mechanics or aesthetic attractions. For Indigenous communities, whose cultural practices are often inseparable from the land, social dynamics, and oral traditions, the act of transferring these practices into a virtual format can strip them of their contextual depth and cultural resonance. This disconnection may lead to the creation of sanitized or oversimplified representations that cater to external audiences rather than reflecting the lived realities and sacred meanings of the practices themselves. Moreover, these representations, when detached from their communities, may unintentionally reinforce stereotypes, perpetuating a view of indigenous cultures as static, exotic, or relics of the past.

Another significant concern is the potential for cultural appropriation and exploitation. When developers or designers who are not part of the indigenous culture take on the task of creating VR experiences, there is a risk that they will impose external interpretations or prioritize marketability over cultural accuracy. This dynamic can replicate the very systems of colonialism and cultural erasure that VR projects often aim to counteract. For example, without direct involvement from the communities being represented, a VR experience showcasing a sacred ritual could become a form of cultural voyeurism, where users consume these practices without understanding their significance or contributing to their preservation in a meaningful way. The financial profits generated by such VR projects may also rarely benefit the communities whose cultures they represent, further compounding concerns of exploitation.

Additionally, the very nature of VR as a medium presents inherent challenges to cultural representation. While VR offers unparalleled immersion, it cannot fully replicate the embodied, communal, and often intergenerational aspects of many indigenous practices. The physical presence of participants, the tactile elements of the rituals, and the emotional and spiritual connections that are deeply rooted in place and community cannot easily be transferred to a digital space. This limitation raises questions about whether VR can ever truly serve as a faithful medium for cultural preservation or whether it will always be a partial and mediated representation, subject to the biases and constraints of technology.

To navigate these challenges, it is essential for VR projects to involve indigenous communities as equal partners in the creation process. Co-creation ensures that the narratives, aesthetics, and intentions of the VR experience align with the community's values and goals. By placing control in the hands of those being represented, VR has the potential to amplify marginalized voices and create respectful, educational, and impactful experiences. Without such collaboration, however, VR risks perpetuating the very marginalization and misrepresentation it seeks to address, turning sacred traditions into entertainment and undermining the integrity of the cultures it seeks to preserve.

The *Ixtli* Virtual Reality Laboratory at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) demonstrates how VR technology can transform interactions with historical and cultural narratives. Its virtual reconstruction of Teotihuacan allows users to explore reconstructed spaces with a level of detail that evokes the lived experiences and rituals of ancient Mesoamerican civilizations. By navigating environments like the Avenue of the Dead or ceremonial plazas, users engage with a digital space that reactivates cultural memory, bridging

the divide between academic knowledge and experiential learning. This act of reanimating historically significant sites positions VR as a medium that not only preserves heritage but invites meaningful reflection on the social and spiritual dimensions of these spaces.

What sets *Ixtli*'s work apart is its rigorous approach to cultural authenticity. These reconstructions are built in collaboration with archaeologists, historians, and cultural experts, ensuring their fidelity to historical knowledge while honoring the cultural significance of the spaces they recreate. Unlike entertainment-driven VR that may prioritize spectacle, *Ixtli*'s projects emphasize respect for the narratives they depict, offering a model for how VR can contribute to cultural preservation without succumbing to the pitfalls of commodification or oversimplification. This method provides valuable insight into how gaming environments could similarly balance interactivity with cultural sensitivity, creating digital experiences that engage players in meaningful acts of exploration and remembrance.

However, this potential is not without its complexities. Critics argue that even well-intentioned projects like *Ixtli*'s face the risk of detaching cultural narratives from their contexts. Transforming ceremonial and sacred spaces into digital landscapes, for example, may reduce their significance to mere aesthetics, creating a sanitized or abstracted version of cultural heritage that erases its deeper meanings. Additionally, while the immersive nature of VR fosters engagement, it can also blur the line between respectful representation and commodification, particularly when these environments are consumed as media products by individuals outside of the cultures they depict. These tensions raise important questions about the ethics of digitizing heritage and whether such representations genuinely honor the cultures they aim to preserve.

Despite these challenges, Ixtli's work highlights how careful collaboration with cultural stakeholders can mitigate many of these risks. By involving indigenous voices and prioritizing the educational value of these projects, Ixtli provides a framework for ethical representation that could inform future gaming applications. The lessons from Ixtli's approach remind us that VR, while powerful, is not inherently neutral. Its potential to preserve and celebrate cultural narratives is matched by the responsibility to ensure that these narratives are not stripped of their authenticity or used for exploitative purposes.

In essence, VR has the potential to transform the way Latin America's rich cultural and historical heritage is engaged with on a global stage. By allowing users to not only witness but also *perform* key moments in Latin American history—whether that be the resistance of Indigenous communities, the revolutionary actions of historical figures, or the daily life of cultures at risk of disappearing—VR can elevate these narratives, making them accessible, engaging, and emotionally resonant. This intersection of technology, history, and cultural preservation offers Latin American developers a unique opportunity to create immersive, impactful experiences that push beyond the traditional boundaries of gaming and media, creating a new frontier for cultural reflection and education.

3.6 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has accentuated the enduring significance of performance—both physical and digital—in expressing cultural identity, memory, and resistance. Grounded in the concept of space as an active participant in meaning-making, performance transforms environments into sites of cultural negotiation and storytelling. Whether it is the physical landscapes of Latin America—public squares, sacred sites, and plazas—or the virtual terrains of video games and

VR, space plays a dynamic role in shaping how narratives are embodied and conveyed.

Performance, deeply tied to the interplay between body and space, becomes a medium through which individuals and communities assert agency, confront historical legacies, and engage with collective memories.

In Latin America, where histories of colonialism, resistance, and cultural reclamation are deeply rooted, performance has long been a means to challenge dominant structures and reimagine identity. Indigenous rituals, street theater, and public demonstrations transform spaces into stages for political and historical expression. The body, as the vehicle for these performances, occupies and reclaims space, embedding it with layers of meaning that resist erasure. These acts of embodiment highlight how space—whether ceremonial, political, or everyday—is never neutral but is continuously inscribed with power and memory through performance. The parallels between traditional performances and digital environments reveal the transformative power of embodied interaction. In gaming, avatars allow players to inhabit virtual worlds in ways that mirror the performative acts of protest, ritual, and theater. Here, space again transcends its role as a backdrop, becoming a medium that fosters interaction, self-expression, and agency. Game mechanics and design provide players with opportunities to explore themes of identity, power, and resistance, echoing the cultural and political stakes of traditional performance. Virtual spaces, like physical ones, are activated through the actions of their participants, making them dynamic stages for storytelling and reflection.

As virtual reality continues to evolve, its capacity to allow players to reimagine historical narratives and cultural identities expands exponentially. VR environments can recreate historical moments or amplify marginalized voices, turning the player's body into an active participant in

the re-telling of history. The immersive potential of VR enables users to interact with spaces and narratives in profoundly embodied ways, offering not just a representation of history but an experience of it. This re-engagement with space through VR bridges the gap between past and present, allowing for both the preservation of cultural heritage and the creation of new, inclusive narratives. Whether through traditional rituals or digital avatars, performance endures as a vital form of expression, reshaping space and meaning. It enables individuals and communities to challenge dominant narratives and engage with collective memories, fostering a sense of agency and resilience. By transforming spaces—physical or virtual—into sites of negotiation and possibility, performance continues to inspire reflection, resistance, and transformation.

CHAPTER 4

REPRESENTATION AND RESISTANCE IN LATIN AMERICAN VIDEO GAMES

4.1 Dismantling Cultural Clichés

As video games emerge as an influential medium of cultural storytelling, the industry's engagement with Latin America reflects both opportunity and challenge. Developers are drawn to the region's vivid landscapes, layered histories, and rich mythologies, positioning it as a dynamic setting for immersive narratives. However, this fascination often veers into problematic territory, reproducing harmful stereotypes of violence, chaos, or exotic allure. While the digital medium has the potential to explore the depth and breadth of Latin American identities, it often reduces them to mere aesthetics for global consumption—a process Lisa Nakamura terms “aesthetic decontextualization,” where cultural elements are stripped of their contexts to cater to outsider fantasies (Nakamura 110). Through an analysis of *Far Cry 6*, *Turista Fronterizo*, and *Tropico 6*, this chapter unpacks the possibilities and limitations of branching narratives in addressing representation and misrepresentation. Games can either reinforce existing power dynamics or dismantle them, highlighting the stakes of storytelling in a medium that bridges art, commerce, and culture.

The question of authenticity looms large in these digital portrayals. Games set in Latin America frequently focus on the visual and atmospheric elements of the region—its tropical landscapes, vibrant festivals, and ancient ruins—while neglecting the intricate socio-political realities that define its countries and cultures. Authentic representation requires moving beyond surface-level aesthetics to capture the diversity, contradictions, and the lived experiences of

people. Each country in Latin America offers a unique cultural and historical trajectory, and any attempt to generalize this diversity risks perpetuating reductionist narratives. As Mary Beltrán observes, such oversimplifications diminish the breadth of Latin American identities, erasing nuances to appeal to global audiences (Beltrán 142). The stakes are not merely artistic but political, as such portrayals influence how the region is understood and how others engage with it on a global stage, echoing Arjun Appadurai's argument that globalized media representations often dislocate cultural identities, reducing them to consumable fragments (Appadurai 47).

This chapter interrogates how video games navigate the interplay between representation, identity, and systemic power, focusing on works that both challenge and perpetuate cultural clichés. While mainstream titles like *Far Cry 6* offer the promise of political engagement, their reliance on spectacle and formulaic storytelling often flattens the complexities they aim to explore. Soraya Murray, in her analysis of the visual politics of video games, notes how titles like *Far Cry 6* tend to emphasize “the exotic and the violent” to frame regions like Latin America in ways that appeal to Western thrill-seekers but dehumanize their subjects (Murray 177). By contrast, independent projects such as *Turista Fronterizo* foreground systemic critique, immersing players in a more complex portrayal of the socio-economic and cultural tensions of the U.S.-Mexico border. Similarly, *Tropico 6* employs satire to dismantle colonial hierarchies and postcolonial contradictions, placing the player in morally ambiguous scenarios that reflect the knotty entanglements of governance and dependency. These examples highlight the medium's dual potential: to reinforce simplistic narratives or to foster deeper cultural understanding.

The broader implications of these portrayals extend beyond the gaming sphere. Representations in global media shape how Latin America is perceived externally and experienced internally, often distorting its identities for external audiences. Such distortions create feedback loops, where external commodification influences local perceptions of heritage and culture. James C. Scott, in *Seeing Like a State*, argues that simplified representations obscure the diversity and agency of communities, fostering a stylized image that marginalizes authentic voices (60). For video games to serve as a tool for cultural critique rather than complicity with stereotypes, they must embrace frameworks that amplify the many voices and perspectives of those they portray. This chapter argues that video games are uniquely positioned to disrupt these cycles, employing interactive storytelling to foster empathy, challenge stereotypes, and celebrate cultural specificity.

4.2 The Power of Choice in Narrative Gaming

Storytelling has always been a foundational tool for understanding identity, culture, and societal dynamics. Traditional narratives often follow linear structures, guiding audiences through tightly controlled plots that unfold in a preordained sequence. This approach ensures cohesion and clarity but also could have the effect of limiting interpretation and audience participation. Listeners or readers might experience less freedom in their interactions with the art form through prescribed sequences, closed structures, and highly didactic endings. The varying degrees of freedom experienced by readers and listeners of stories continues to evolve over time as narrative structures transform and are influenced by cultural and political factors. For instance, tight constraints on narrative structures began to erode during the Enlightenment, a period that spanned the 17th and 18th centuries that emphasized an intellectual approach based on individual

agency and rationality, influencing storytelling traditions first in Europe and then globally, extending to Latin America. By the 19th century, as independence movements reshaped Latin American societies, authors and artists in the region began challenging traditional colonial forms of storytelling, integrating local perspectives and oral traditions to assert autochthonous cultural identity. Modernist movements later expanded these innovations, particularly in the early 20th century, when Latin American writers and artists began experimenting with fragmented narratives, non-linear timelines, and multi-perspective structures to reflect the region's hybrid cultural realities. These experiments paved the way for the avant-garde works of the mid-20th century, including the influence of Magical Realism and other uniquely Latin American literary forms like *lo real maravilloso* (Marvelous Real), which emphasized the interplay of myth, history, and personal agency, and were set specifically in Latin American contexts. This evolution set the stage for interactive storytelling, where audience agency becomes central. By the late 20th century, participatory forms of media such as interactive theater and emerging technologies in gaming began building on these traditions, allowing audiences to shape a narrative's trajectory, further blending the boundaries between creator and participant in ways that remain integral to Latin American storytelling practices today.

Storytelling has always been integral to cultural expression in Latin America, flourishing across diverse forms that reflect the region's rich histories and social complexities.

Mesoamerican codices, for instance, exemplify a unique blend of artistry and narrative, using symbols and imagery to convey intricate accounts of cosmology and history. Similarly, pre-Columbian textiles and pottery often embedded tales of lineage and ritual, turning everyday objects into vessels of memory and storytelling. During the colonial period, storytelling adapted to new contexts, with religious murals and altarpieces translating Christian teachings into visual

narratives that were used to indoctrinate Indigenous and mestizo communities. This blending of traditions extended to music and performance, where forms like Mexican *corridos* and Argentine *payadas* carried the stories of revolutions, resilience, and communal struggles. *Corridos* are narrative ballads, often rooted in rural communities, that recount tales of social justice, political resistance, or personal heroism. *Payadas*, by contrast, are a form of improvised sung poetry, often performed in duels between two *payadores*, where themes of identity, struggle, and community take center stage. These mediums, interconnected through a vexed colonial past preserve identity and foster collective memory, while also reflecting the imposition of foreign influences and dogma, and they highlight how storytelling in Latin America transcends any single form, offering dynamic avenues for cultural transmission that reflect resilience, struggle, and hybrid cultural practices.

The evolution of non-linear storytelling has further expanded narrative possibilities, embracing fragmented timelines, multiple perspectives, and interwoven plots in the post-modern and post-post-modern eras. This new approach encourages audiences to reinterpret and engage with narratives more actively, stepping beyond the confines of traditional beginnings, middles, and ends. Stories structured around divergent paths and choice-driven outcomes represent a culmination of this evolution. These frameworks empower audiences to shape the plot, engaging critically with their decisions and navigating the resulting consequences. Incorporating diverse viewpoints further enriches the experience, offering insight into the interconnectedness of individual actions and the broader narrative world.

To contextualize this evolution within a critical framework, Indigenous storytelling practices across Latin America offer a compelling contrast to linear Western models of time and

narrative. Walter Benjamin's ideas on history and storytelling further illuminate the significance of non-linear narratives, particularly in the context of Latin America. In *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Benjamin critiques historicism for its linear and deterministic view of progress, which often justifies the violence and oppression of marginalized groups in the name of development. He argues instead for a "constellation" approach to history, where past and present converge in a way that disrupts the continuity of time (Benjamin 261). Benjamin's approach is helpful in considering the fragmented timelines of non-linear storytelling and thinking about how they resist the teleological impulses of traditional narratives. In Latin American contexts, such storytelling allows for the simultaneous presentation of pre-Columbian, colonial, and contemporary realities, creating a "constellation" of histories that challenge dominant narratives and foreground the agency of subaltern voices.

These narrative forms gain particular relevance in the Latin American context when considering how non-linear storytelling critiques and reclaims history. Walter Mignolo's concept of "coloniality of power" underscores how colonial structures imposed linear historical frameworks to marginalize Indigenous and Afro-descendant epistemologies, presenting colonial history as a singular trajectory of "progress" (Mignolo 160). Non-linear storytelling, then, can be viewed as a mode of resistance, reintroducing marginalized temporalities and voices into the narrative. For example, fragmented timelines allow for the simultaneous presentation of pre-Columbian histories, colonial violence, and contemporary struggles, challenging the erasure and homogenization often inherent in Eurocentric narratives of Latin America.

The importance of these techniques is not merely artistic but profoundly political. Realist storytelling, dominant in the 19th century, sought to provide coherence and structure, often

reflecting the ideologies of nation-building projects that aimed to unify diverse populations under singular identities. While realism sometimes served as a tool for social critique, exposing injustices such as those faced by Indigenous and working-class communities, its linear frameworks often failed to account for a fair and balanced approach to accurately reflecting the lived experiences of all its populations and the social structures controlling and influencing their experiences in Latin America. Non-linear storytelling, by contrast, disrupts these frameworks, offering fragmented and polyphonic narratives that reflect the region's heterogeneity and contradictions. This multivalent approach aligns with the broader struggles of subaltern communities as they work to assert their agency and reshape the dominant linear historical narratives imposed by colonial and postcolonial powers.

In addition, the role of performance in Indigenous traditions provides another layer of complexity to non-linear storytelling. Storytelling in many Indigenous cultures was not confined to a single medium or moment but was an ongoing and communal act, often involving rituals, dances, and songs. The performative aspect of storytelling underscores its relational and interactive nature, where meaning is co-created between the storyteller and the audience. In this way, non-linear storytelling transcends the boundaries of written or recorded narratives, embodying a lived and communal process that resists the individualism and closure of Western narrative forms.

The persistence of oral traditions in Latin America parallels broader global intellectual movements that questioned traditional notions of time, space, and causality. As non-linear storytelling evolved soon after World War I, it was influenced by these currents, particularly in the works of Walter Benjamin. Writing in the 1930s, a period marked by the rise of fascism,

mass industrialization, and the increasing dominance of print culture, Benjamin was deeply concerned with how modernity altered storytelling practices. In his essay *The Storyteller*, he contrasts oral storytelling traditions, which rely on collective experience and cyclical time, with the isolating tendencies of modern, linear narratives (87). His critique of the diminishing role of communal storytelling resonates strongly in Latin America, where oral traditions have historically played a crucial role in preserving Indigenous and Afro-descendant histories. The shift from collective oral traditions to written, linear narratives—often imposed through colonial and national literary frameworks—mirrors the broader struggle over historical memory in the region. In response, Latin American writers and artists have employed non-linear storytelling as a means of resisting dominant historical narratives, reclaiming fragmented histories, and foregrounding marginalized voices. This resistance can be seen in the experimental structures of modernist and postmodernist Latin American literature, as well as in oral and performance traditions that continue to challenge the linear constraints of Western narrative forms.

Building on the fragmented and dynamic frameworks of non-linear storytelling and Benjamin's concepts, I see these methods as placing emphasis on choice, consequence, and diverse perspectives, transforming narrative experiences into profoundly collaborative processes. By engaging audiences in decision-making, they mirror the complexities of real-life ethical dilemmas, conflicting motivations, and the cascading impact of individual actions on collective outcomes. This participatory dimension not only enhances the immediacy and engagement of storytelling but also reinforces its potential as a powerful tool for fostering empathy, critical thinking, and cultural understanding. In these narrative structures, the audience is no longer a passive observer but an active co-creator, navigating stories that challenge their assumptions and

invite them to grapple with the interconnectedness of individual agency and broader social systems.

Structures that allow for audience-driven plot progression and multi-perspective narratives redefine the storytelling experience. Moving beyond the constraints of linear progression, these techniques allow audiences to engage with stories in deeply personal and dynamic ways. By placing agency in participants' hands, narrative paths diverge based on their choices, while shifting viewpoints invite them to explore events through diverse angles, adding layers of complexity and depth. These strategies have become foundational in the evolution of storytelling within digital and interactive media, particularly in video games, where player agency and emergent narratives reshape traditional narrative conventions. Unlike fixed, preordained storylines, interactive digital narratives use branching pathways, decision-based progression, and adaptive storytelling to create fluid, evolving plots. These elements mirror non-linear storytelling structures by resisting singular interpretations and allowing for multiple trajectories based on participant engagement. The interplay between player choice and narrative consequence deepens immersion, making the audience an integral part of the storytelling process rather than passive consumers of a predetermined plot.

Technological advancements have further expanded these possibilities, integrating artificial intelligence, procedural generation, and interactive environments that respond dynamically to user input. This evolution enhances not only storytelling's flexibility but also its ability to engage with complex social and ethical dilemmas in ways that traditional media cannot. By breaking away from fixed timelines and single-perspective narratives, these techniques create stories that feel immediate, personal, and reflective of the interconnected

nature of human experience. In this way, interactive storytelling extends the foundations of non-linear narrative structures, transforming them into a dynamic space where audience agency reshapes the meaning and trajectory of the story itself.

A defining feature of these adaptive narratives is their ability to grant participants control over a story's direction. Unlike traditional storytelling, where plots unfold along a predetermined path, these frameworks empower participants to shape the progression, resulting in multiple potential outcomes. This dynamic encourages participants to transition from passive observers to active contributors, blurring the boundaries between creation and reception. By inviting audiences to take an active role, adaptive narratives provide not only engagement but also the capacity for meaningful decision-making that shapes the story's trajectory.

This structure fosters a profound sense of ownership and investment for audiences reading, listening, and interacting with stories. Karen Schrier, in *Knowledge Games: How Playing Games Can Solve Problems, Create Insight, and Make Change*, highlights how such narratives allow participants to “engage with complex problems within the narrative context, facilitating reflective decision-making and a sense of personal agency” (Schrier 152). This reflective engagement transforms adaptive narratives into more than entertainment; they become spaces for exploring complex systems, ethical dilemmas, and the consequences of choice. By participating in these frameworks, audiences confront conflicting motivations and the ripple effects of their decisions, mirroring the intricacies of real-life decision-making.

Moreover, I argue that video games that employ adaptive narratives hold the potential to reject linearity, coherence, and fixed hierarchies just as modern art did in response to industrialization and global upheavals. Adaptive video game narratives can challenge the idea of

fixed authorial control, decentralizing storytelling and inviting collaborative creation. This shift demands that participants critically engage with the narrative's ethical and structural complexities, fostering not only empathy but also a sense of responsibility for outcomes. Through this process, video games reflect the evolving social and cultural landscapes in which they are produced, becoming both mirrors and catalysts for change.

The revolutionary potential of adaptive narratives lies in their ability to invite participants to explore systems of power, resistance, and morality. The act of playing becomes more than entertainment; it transforms into an active critique of societal norms and an opportunity to imagine alternatives. When participants shape narratives by choosing among multiple outcomes, they engage directly with complex ideas about agency, accountability, and the implications of action. This engagement challenges the boundaries of traditional storytelling, democratizing the process and creating opportunities for new forms of understanding. By placing participants in positions of narrative control, adaptive frameworks reject passive consumption and insist on active participation and critical reflection. These narratives challenge traditional notions of storytelling as fixed or hierarchical, instead emphasizing collaboration and multiplicity. Through their structure, they inspire shifts in how we perceive and engage with art, offering a platform not only for storytelling but also for fostering critical thinking, cultural understanding, and revolutionary imagination.

Interactive structures encourage critical thinking by requiring participants to weigh the consequences of their choices. Each decision presents dilemmas—ethical or strategic—that challenge short-term desires and place them against long-term implications. These decisions ripple through the narrative, influencing immediate events along with the overarching themes

and the resolution of conflicts. The unpredictability of these outcomes mirrors real-life decision-making, where choices often lead to both predictable and unforeseen results. This complexity strengthens the emotional connection between participants and the story and enhances the game's authenticity and relatability. While these narratives emphasize choice, multiple perspectives expand storytelling by presenting the same narrative world through different viewpoints. This approach enables audiences to experience the story from diverse angles, enriching their understanding of its themes and conflicts. Each perspective introduces unique biases, motivations, and experiences, offering a more layered and interconnected narrative.

By stepping into the lives of multiple characters, participants are encouraged to confront assumptions and biases, enriching their engagement with broader themes. Mia Consalvo, in *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames*, explains that such narrative devices allow participants to “engage with ethical and social questions by inhabiting diverse roles, each framing the world through distinct lenses” (Consalvo 89). This method is particularly effective in stories that explore moral ambiguity or societal tensions as it challenges audiences to empathize with characters whose experiences may differ significantly from their own. For instance, narratives that alternate between characters with conflicting goals use multiple perspectives to highlight the intricacies of human motivation and consequence. Each viewpoint adds to the overarching story, revealing how individual actions and decisions intersect within a shared world. This approach builds suspense while fostering an appreciation for the complexities of human behavior, interconnectedness, and intersectionality.

These storytelling methods provide paths for empathy and critical thinking by placing participants in situations where their choices carry tangible consequences. Jane McGonigal in

Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World, notes that “decision-making within branching narratives encourages empathy, as participants must think about how their choices affect the story and the lives of others in the narrative” (172). By engaging with ethical complexities, participants experience the emotional weight of their decisions, fostering a sense of responsibility for their outcomes.

Shifting perspectives enhance this moral engagement by requiring participants to navigate differing viewpoints shaped by unique cultural, social, or personal contexts. Christopher Paul, in *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games: Why Gaming Culture is the Worst*, argues that “shifting perspectives in narratives allows participants to experience different social and ethical landscapes, encountering challenges and emotions from a range of human experiences” (Paul 67). This design invites participants to empathize with characters whose struggles or motivations may initially seem unfamiliar or even opposed to their own. By exploring these diverse perspectives, audiences gain a richer understanding of the complexities of identity, culture, and the interconnectedness of individual choices. This engagement transforms storytelling into an active process of ethical exploration and social reflection.

One of the most compelling aspects of these storytelling techniques is their capacity to transform narratives into collaborative experiences. While creators establish the narrative framework, participants invest in their individual journeys through their choices, creating a sense of shared authorship, as participants’ decisions directly influence the story’s progression and resolution. This collaborative nature also enhances the *replayability* of narratives, encouraging

participants to revisit the story and explore alternate paths or perspectives.⁵⁶ By choosing different roles or decisions, audiences can uncover new facets of the narrative, deepening their appreciation for its complexity. This *replayability* reinforces the idea that storytelling can be a dynamic, participatory process rather than a fixed experience with a singular outcome.

As storytelling continues to evolve, these choice-driven and multi-perspective techniques are poised to become even more sophisticated. Advances in artificial intelligence and procedural generation could enable unprecedented variability, allowing for a near-infinite number of narrative paths and character perspectives. These developments hold the potential to make storytelling one of the most dynamic and inclusive forms of creative expression, capable of representing a wide range of voices and experiences. Moreover, the educational and social potential of these narrative mechanics cannot be overstated. By incorporating branching choices and diverse perspectives, stories can teach empathy, problem-solving, and ethical decision-making, providing participants with valuable skills that extend beyond the narrative. These techniques invite audiences to grapple with, revisit, and practice dealing with complex moral and social challenges, fostering a deeper understanding of real-world issues and encouraging critical thinking.

⁵⁶ Replayability in video games refers to the capacity of a game to remain engaging and worth revisiting after completion. This is often achieved through features like multiple endings, branching narratives, procedural generation, and "New Game Plus" modes that introduce new challenges or content. Replayability also stems from collectibles, alternative playstyles, or varied difficulty levels that incentivize exploration and mastery. Additionally, multiplayer modes, live-service events, and open-world designs enhance longevity by offering dynamic or evolving experiences. Together, these elements ensure a game's ability to sustain player interest and provide value beyond an initial playthrough.

These evolving methods have redefined the boundaries of storytelling, offering participants a level of agency and immersion that transcends traditional forms. By allowing audiences to shape the story through their choices and experience it through diverse viewpoints, these frameworks create deeply personal and dynamic experiences through hands-on learning and practice. As the medium continues to grow, these narrative tools will undoubtedly shape the future of storytelling, transforming it into a dynamic, inclusive, and transformative art form.

4.3 Beyond the Border, Navigating Identity and Inequality in *Turista Fronterizo*

In interactive media, particularly games, the capacity to embody different roles offers participants a unique way to explore complex social realities. *Turista Fronterizo*, co-designed by Coco Fusco, activist Ricardo Dominguez, exemplifies the potential of branching narratives and multiple perspectives. Drawing on frameworks from Fusco work in *Only Skin Deep*, a study on photography and the influence of skin types, the game critiques the commodification and reduction of marginalized identities in mainstream representations while immersing players in the nuanced dynamics of life along the U.S.-Mexico border.⁵⁷ Through its mechanics and character arcs, *Turista Fronterizo* disrupts simplistic portrayals of the borderlands, transforming the space into a lens for examining privilege, resilience, and systemic oppression.

⁵⁷ *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self* is a landmark anthology edited by Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis. It critically examines the ways race, identity, and representation have been constructed and commodified in American visual culture, from photography to media depictions. The work highlights how marginalized communities have often been framed through reductive or exoticized lenses, perpetuating stereotypes and stripping identities of their complexity. In the context of *Turista Fronterizo*, this framework is crucial for understanding the game's critique of visual and narrative commodification, as it builds on the anthology's arguments to explore similar dynamics in interactive media.

The U.S.-Mexico border has often been portrayed as a stark binary: a divide between order and chaos, prosperity and poverty, or legality and criminality. These depictions, reinforced by both media and political discourse, erase the lived realities of individuals who inhabit or traverse the region. In *Only Skin Deep*, Fusco critiques such depictions as forms of aesthetic reductionism, stripping away context to produce consumable images that cater to external audiences. As a counter to this oversimplification, Gloria Anzaldúa's seminal work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* redefines the border as not merely a geographic or political divide but as a fluid, liminal space where hybrid identities and cultures emerge.

Anzaldúa's concept of the borderland embraces the contradictions and dualities of life at the margins, offering a framework for understanding the complexities of belonging, resilience, and cultural negotiation. Drawing on this perspective, *Turista Fronterizo* resists reductionist binaries by centering branching narratives and multiple perspectives, which invite players to engage with the intricacies of identity, power, and inequality. Players step into the roles of characters who embody diverse social positions, each with unique privileges and struggles. Through this design, the game challenges participants to grapple with structural inequalities while reflecting on their positionality, echoing Anzaldúa's vision of the border as a space of both conflict and creativity.

At the heart of *Turista Fronterizo* is its ability to illuminate how systemic forces shape individual experiences at the border. The board's symbolic wall, dividing spaces into "Dreams" and "Nightmares," highlights the duality of the border as a site of opportunity and hardship. For characters like *La Todóloga*, the border represents an unrelenting series of barriers—both material and systemic—that demand resilience and sacrifice. As a "jack-of-all-trades," her

narrative emphasizes the precariousness of informal labor, where crossing the border for work entails bureaucratic delays, economic strain, and discrimination. Spaces like “Border Wait” force players embodying her role to confront the financial and emotional toll of navigating these systemic obstacles. This design mirrors real-world disparities in which marginalized individuals face heightened challenges accessing even basic resources like healthcare or education.

In stark contrast, *El Junior* glides through these same border spaces, his wealth insulating him from the structural hardships faced by others. Spaces like “Exchange Rate,” where currency can be easily converted to maximize financial gain, symbolize how systems that oppress the vulnerable simultaneously reward those with privilege. The ease with which *El Junior* maneuvers through these systems exemplifies Judith Butler's notion of precarity, where structural inequalities render some lives perpetually vulnerable while granting others stability and access (Butler 27). This disparity is not accidental but a reflection of deeply entrenched systems that sustain privilege by marginalizing others.

Kathleen Stewart’s concept of “ordinary affects” further illuminates these dynamics, emphasizing how seemingly mundane interactions—like navigating a border crossing or exchanging currency—are embedded with political and economic significance. The juxtaposition of *La Todóloga*’s and *El Junior*’s experiences transforms these interactions into sites of critique, revealing the subtle yet pervasive ways privilege and precarity are reproduced in everyday life (Stewart 13). By engaging players in these contrasting roles, *Turista Fronterizo* compels them to confront their own positionality within these systems, fostering critical reflection on the structures that uphold inequality.

Fusco's framework from *Only Skin Deep* strengthens this critique by addressing the commodification of marginalized identities. In many portrayals, the borderlands are reduced to aestheticized backdrops, stripping them of their political and social complexities. *Turista Fronterizo* resists this tendency by grounding its narrative in the lived realities of the U.S.-Mexico border. The game does not merely depict the border as a geographical divide but as a contested space where privilege and precarity intersect, shaped by broader systems of power and exploitation (Fusco, *Only Skin Deep* 35). In this light, *Turista Fronterizo* succeeds in elevating the border from a passive setting to an active participant in its narrative. The struggles of *La Todóloga* and the advantages of *El Junior* are not isolated experiences but manifestations of systemic structures that prioritize the stability and comfort of a privileged few over the resilience and sacrifice of the many. By immersing players in these lived realities, the game fosters empathy and critical engagement, challenging them to question the systems that sustain such disparities.

Through its nuanced portrayal of privilege and precarity, *Turista Fronterizo* sets a standard for how interactive media can engage with complex socio-political realities. By centering the experiences of marginalized individuals and revealing the systemic forces at play, the game not only critiques existing inequalities but also invites players to envision a more just and equitable world.

The game's branching narratives deepen this critique by requiring players to engage with ethical dilemmas that shape their character's trajectory. Unlike linear storytelling, which offers predetermined outcomes, *Turista Fronterizo* gives players agency to navigate decisions that reflect structural realities. For example, *La Gringa Activista* faces choices that highlight the

limitations of performative advocacy. While her intentions are genuine, her outsider perspective often results in actions that, while symbolic, fail to address the systemic roots of inequality. Players stepping into her role must confront the tension between good intentions and meaningful impact, as spaces like “Save the Water” and the *Centro de Información para Trabajadoras y Trabajadores A.C.* (Center for Information for Workers, Civil Association) “CITTAC” emphasize the importance of centering local voices in social justice efforts.⁵⁸ This engagement aligns with Fusco’s critique of superficial allyship, where advocacy for marginalized communities risks perpetuating the very hierarchies it seeks to dismantle if it remains disconnected from the lived realities of those communities.

El Gringo Poderoso, a wealthy American investor in the game, further exposes the dynamics of privilege and exploitation at the border. His journey illustrates how global capitalism commodifies border life, prioritizing profit over a community’s well-being. Spaces like *Plástico* and *Medtronic* critique the role of multinational corporations in perpetuating economic disparities, as industries exploit low-cost labor without addressing the inequities that sustain such exploitation. For players inhabiting his character, the game reveals the entrenched hierarchies that enable wealth and power to flourish at the expense of marginalized groups. This critique resonates with *Only Skin Deep*’s analysis of how economic and cultural systems construct hierarchies that perpetuate inequality.

⁵⁸ CITTAC is a grassroots organization based in Tijuana, Mexico, that focuses on advocating for workers’ rights, particularly those employed in *maquiladoras*. The center provides education, resources, and legal support to workers facing issues such as unfair labor practices, unsafe working conditions and exploitation.

Spaces like *Plástico* and *Medtronic* are more than sites of labor; they are affective landscapes where workers experience the intersection of global economic power and local vulnerability. Kathleen Stewart's insights into precarity deepen this analysis by emphasizing how the lived dimensions of inequality manifest in mundane yet destabilizing ways. Stewart's concept of "ordinary affects" identifies these conditions as "intensities" that embed themselves in daily life, shaping how individuals navigate and internalize the forces that constrain them (Stewart 3). While *El Gringo Poderoso* effortlessly exploits these structures to expand his wealth and influence, the game juxtaposes his privilege with the precarity endured by workers in these industries, illustrating how privilege and marginalization are co-produced in shared spaces of interdependence. This juxtaposition embodies Stewart's observation that precarity is not merely an economic condition but a deeply affective state, marked by uncertainty and constant negotiation of one's place within systems of power.

By weaving these affective dimensions into its narrative, the game situates exploitation as both a structural and lived phenomenon. Through *El Gringo Poderoso*'s perspective, players are compelled to critically engage with the entrenched hierarchies that sustain global capitalism, illuminating the material and emotional toll these systems exact on those they marginalize. This tension between privilege and precarity accentuates the game's broader critique of how global economic networks shape both individual and collective emotional realities and physical spaces. The interplay of these characters highlights the interconnectedness of privilege and oppression, encouraging players to think critically about the structural forces shaping the borderlands and the experiences of those that inhabit those spaces and/or move within them. The game's branching mechanics challenge participants to consider how their decisions—shaped by the privileges or limitations of their character—impact not only their journey but the broader narrative

framework, which functions like a microcosm for exploring real-world power systems. This dynamic interaction transforms *Turista Fronterizo* into a participatory critique of the systemic inequalities embedded in border life. By requiring players to navigate these layered realities, the game cultivates empathy and critical awareness, fostering a deeper understanding of the border as a contested space of resilience and structural inequity.

Through its interactive design, *Turista Fronterizo* also critiques the randomness and precarity that define life at the border. Mechanics like the *Lotería* square reflect the arbitrary nature of policies and enforcement, which often leave individuals vulnerable to forces beyond their control. This randomness serves as a metaphor for the unpredictability of border realities, where systemic inequities disproportionately impact marginalized groups. Yet the game resists framing these challenges as isolated or incidental, instead it emphasizes their roots in broader structural hierarchies. This perspective aligns with the game's use of branching narratives, which highlight the cascading consequences of individual choices within a system that often constrains them.

Ultimately, players of *Turista Fronterizo* come away with a deeper appreciation for the complexity of border life and the structural forces that sustain inequality. By embodying characters with differing levels of privilege and agency, participants are encouraged to reflect on their positionality and assumptions about border dynamics. The game's interactive nature fosters a sense of responsibility, challenging players to consider how hierarchies shape not only the experiences of others but their understanding of livelihood based on privilege and oppression. *Turista Fronterizo*'s innovation lies in its ability to use branching narratives and multiple perspectives as tools for critique and empathy. Players navigate a world where decisions carry

weight, where privilege insulates some while exposing others to violence, and where borders are not just physical divisions but social constructions of power and inequality. Through its immersive design and critical engagement with themes of identity, privilege, precarity, and systemic critique, the game exemplifies the potential of interactive storytelling to challenge dominant ideologies rooted in social and economic class systems and inspire meaningful reflection. By integrating the framework of *Only Skin Deep*, *Turista Fronterizo* transcends traditional representations of the borderlands, offering players a transformative experience that reimagines the possibilities of storytelling as a tool for social change.

4.4 The Spectacle of Power: A Legacy of Postcolonial Critique

The enduring legacy of colonialism continues to shape the social, political, and economic landscapes of Latin America and the Caribbean. Colonial hierarchies established by European interventionism persist, influencing contemporary social structures and creating a complex matrix of dependency and marginalization. Two significant works, Colombian playwright Enrique Buenaventura's *Historia de una bala de plata* and the satirical video game *Tropico 6*, exemplify how traditional and modern media can critically examine postcolonial realities. Through their exploration of themes such as authoritarianism, social hierarchies, and cultural identity, both works highlight the lasting effects of colonialism, inviting audiences to reflect on the contradictions of power and the resilience of postcolonial societies. Each work uses its unique medium to reveal how colonial legacies persist in institutions and mindsets, and both challenge audiences to consider whether true justice and independence are attainable.

Enrique Buenaventura, a prominent figure in Latin American theater known for his commitment to using art as a platform for social critique, exposed the inequities embedded in

Colombian society and gave voice to marginalized communities. Born in Cali, Colombia, Buenaventura was one of the pioneering figures in "collective creation"—a collaborative approach to theater that incorporates diverse perspectives into the narrative. His plays, shaped by Colombia's complex social and political environment, reflected systemic injustices that have historically oppressed Afro-Colombian, Indigenous, and mestizo populations. *Historia de una bala de plata* (*History of a Silver Bullet*) (1980), one of his most influential works, examines the power structures within Colombia's justice system, revealing how colonial-era racial and class biases continue to influence modern perceptions of justice.

The play unfolds against the backdrop of Haiti's tumultuous post-revolutionary period, delving into themes of colonial exploitation, social stratification, and the cyclical nature of power. The play is a Brechtian allegory that examines the construction of race and identity through the lens of a fractured and colonized society. It employs archetypal characters—Cristóbal Jones, the titular "puppet ruler," and his manipulators, such as the American Merchant Smith, the Abate (a Machiavellian priest), and the Mulatto General Galofi—to symbolize the dynamics of colonial control and internalized oppression. Central to the play is the myth surrounding Cristóbal Jones, who is portrayed as a hero capable of uniting factions against colonial powers but is ultimately undermined by the very structures of power he seeks to challenge. The legend that he can only be killed by a silver bullet serves as a potent metaphor for the mystification of leadership and the fragility of revolutionary ideals. This narrative device illustrates how colonial hierarchies construct and dismantle heroes as a means for maintaining their dominance.

The setting—a Caribbean Island that is both a specific and universal symbol of colonial exploitation—highlights Buenaventura's critique of global capitalism and its impact on postcolonial societies. The interplay of characters, from the corrupt elites to the oppressed masses, mirrors the socioeconomic dynamics that continue to define Latin America. Through its didactic structure and use of collective creation, the play invites audiences to interrogate the systemic inequities that perpetuate cycles of dependency and marginalization.

Jill Kunheim, in her analysis of the play, notes that Buenaventura's use of archetypal characters serves to universalize the themes of colonialism and resistance. She argues that the play's Brechtian elements—such as its episodic structure and direct address to the audience—are designed to provoke critical reflection rather than emotional identification (Kunheim 22). For instance, the American Merchant's manipulation of Jones exemplifies the insidious nature of neocolonial exploitation, wherein economic and cultural systems work in tandem to subjugate local populations (Kunheim 45). Similarly, the Abate's dual role as a spiritual and political agent underscores the complicity of religious institutions in colonial enterprises.

Moreover, Kunheim emphasizes the play's exploration of "institutionalized invisibility,"⁵⁹ a concept that describes how colonial systems render marginalized groups both hyper-visible as objects of exploitation and invisible as agents of change. This duality is embodied in characters like the Cimarrón King Yofre, whose leadership is both celebrated and undermined within the colonial framework. The play's climax, wherein Yofre kills Jones, serves

⁵⁹ Institutionalized invisibility refers to the systemic erasure of marginalized groups within social, political, and economic institutions. It manifests through exclusionary policies and practices that normalize their absence from power, representation, and public discourse, perpetuating inequality and reinforcing social hierarchies.

as a poignant commentary on the fragility of alliances forged under oppressive systems. The staging incorporates symbolic elements, such as the silver bullet, to underscore the constructed nature of power and identity. The use of collective improvisation in the play's development aligns with Buenaventura's commitment to creating theatre that reflects the lived realities of its audience.

Historia de una bala de plata ultimately challenges its viewers to confront the enduring legacies of colonialism and the complexities of resistance. By blending historical narrative with allegorical critique, Buenaventura offers a nuanced exploration of power dynamics that transcends its immediate context, making it a timeless work of political theatre. The nuanced critique of neocolonial dynamics in *Historia de una bala de plata*—through its allegorical characters, layered conflicts, and the embodied experiences of oppression—offers a striking lens for examining the systemic constraints faced by postcolonial societies. Buenaventura's play dissects the tensions between external exploitation and internal complicity, highlighting how colonial hierarchies persist through the collaboration of local elites and the subjugation of marginalized communities. These dynamics resonate profoundly when juxtaposed with the interactive mechanics and narrative framework of *Tropico 6*.

In *Tropico 6*, players take on the role of *El Presidente*, a satirical embodiment of the authoritarian leader tasked with governing a fictional Caribbean Island. The game echoes many of the structural inequalities and moral compromises explored in Buenaventura's work, and also takes place in a similar setting. While *Historia de una bala de plata* reveals the complicity of figures like *General Mandinga* and *Madame La Fiera de la Montaigne* in maintaining the colonial order, *Tropico 6* places players in the precarious position of navigating those same

tensions. Players must manage the island's economy, balancing the demands of foreign superpowers with the needs of local citizens. The decisions players make often reinforce or resist the very hierarchies Buenaventura critiques, demonstrating how postcolonial leaders face significant constraints in asserting autonomy within global systems of power.

The parallels extend to the economic dependencies depicted in both works. In *Historia de una bala de plata*, the *American Merchant* exemplifies how external actors exploit local resources and labor for profit, perpetuating inequities under the guise of development or trade. Similarly, *Tropico 6* confronts players with the reality of an export-driven economy reliant on monoculture plantations, tourism, and foreign aid. These industries may boost the island's GDP, but they come at the cost of local sustainability and independence. Players must decide whether to prioritize short-term economic gains—often dictated by the interests of global powers—or invest in long-term policies that empower local communities, even at the risk of political instability. The ethical dilemmas embedded in these choices mirror the broader critique of economic exploitation articulated in Buenaventura's play.

Additionally, both works foreground the role of leadership in perpetuating or resisting systemic inequalities. In *Historia de una bala de plata*, figures like *General Mandinga* represent local collaborators who maintain their positions of power by aligning with external interests, betraying the very communities they are meant to serve. This betrayal reflects the dual pressures of external domination and internal corruption that define neocolonial governance. In *Tropico 6*, *El Presidente* embodies this ambivalence, as players can choose to enact policies that either align with foreign powers to secure aid and stability or prioritize the needs of the island's citizens, often at great personal or political risk. The game's satirical tone highlights the absurdity of these

compromises, challenging players to critically engage with the structural forces that limit genuine autonomy and self-determination.

The satirical elements of *Tropico 6* also find an echo in Buenaventura's theatrical techniques. While *Historia de una bala de plata* employs allegorical characters and exaggerated scenarios to critique colonial and neocolonial hierarchies, *Tropico 6* uses humor and caricature to expose the contradictions of authoritarian governance. Characters like *Penúltimo*, *El Presidente's* overly loyal advisor, mirror the performative nature of figures like Madame La Fiera de la Montaigne, whose exaggerated personas mask their complicity in systemic exploitation. *Penúltimo's* exaggerated servility and relentless sycophancy make him appear as little more than comic relief, yet his role within the dictatorship is far more consequential. As *El Presidente's* trusted right-hand man, he actively upholds authoritarian power through misdirection, transforming brutal policies into absurd spectacle. His constant declarations of unwavering loyalty—delivered in grand, overwrought speeches—recast repression as benevolence, deflecting any serious critique of the regime. Rather than presenting dictatorship as cruel or oppressive, he frames it as the result of *El Presidente's* genius, making even the most egregious abuses seem like necessary quirks of great leadership. Through this exaggerated adulation, *Penúltimo* not only enables tyranny but also conditions the people to accept oppression as a natural state, turning political subjugation into an act of patriotic devotion. His foolishness, however, is part of his power: by acting as a harmless buffoon, he distances himself from accountability, ensuring that his role in reinforcing despotism remains unquestioned.

Madame La Fiera de la Montaigne, in a different way, also wields theatricality as a tool to reinforce power. Her exaggerated persona, grandiose mannerisms, and self-important

declarations serve to obscure deeper structures of control, making oppression appear as an inevitable or even justified order. Whether through aristocratic spectacle, moral posturing, or overt dramatization, her presence shifts focus away from systemic violence and toward performance, reinforcing hierarchies while appearing detached from their direct enforcement. Both characters demonstrate how theatricality can function as misdirection, disguising the mechanisms of control through exaggerated loyalty, spectacle, or distraction. By embedding systemic oppression within performance, they make authority seem natural, inevitable, or even humorous, ensuring that power remains unchallenged.

Furthermore, both works emphasize the lived experiences of marginalized communities as central to their critiques. In *Historia de una bala de plata*, the *Cimarrones* embody resistance against the intersecting forces of racial, economic, and cultural oppression. Their struggles highlight the human cost of systemic exploitation, grounding Buenaventura's critique in the everyday realities of those who bear the brunt of colonial and neocolonial violence. *Tropico 6* similarly incorporates the voices and perspectives of the island's citizens, though these are filtered through the player's decisions. Protests, strikes, and public opinion act as mechanisms through which the game reflects the consequences of governance, illustrating how policy choices impact the lives of ordinary people. This dynamic engagement forces players to confront the ripple effects of their actions, much like Buenaventura's play demands its audience grapple with the moral and social implications of complicity and resistance.

Ultimately, both *Historia de una bala de plata* and *Tropico 6* explore the complexities of power, privilege, and exploitation in postcolonial contexts. While Buenaventura's play uses the medium of theater to stage a critique of neocolonial dynamics, *Tropico 6* leverages the

interactive nature of video games to immerse players in the ethical dilemmas and structural constraints of leadership. By juxtaposing these works, we gain a richer understanding of how storytelling—whether theatrical or interactive—can illuminate the enduring legacies of colonialism and the ongoing struggles for autonomy and justice in postcolonial societies.

4.5 Colonial Dynamics in Player Choices: How *Far Cry 6* Missed the Mark Unconsciously

Storytelling is a central mechanism for how societies navigate complex histories, communicate power dynamics, and envision futures. In the digital age, video games have emerged as a particularly compelling medium for storytelling, uniquely suited to immerse audiences in the socio-political systems that shape their worlds. Unlike traditional media, video games demand interaction, allowing players to embody characters, make decisions, and directly influence the trajectory of a narrative. This participatory element makes video games an ideal platform for exploring complex issues such as oppression, revolution, and exploitation. By centering the player's experience and agency, video games allow users to navigate the consequences of systemic inequities, reflecting on power structures that resonate with real-world struggles.

Ubisoft's *Far Cry 6* exemplifies the potential—and challenges—of using interactive media to explore oppression and revolution. Set on the fictional Caribbean Island of Yara, the game places players in the role of Dani Rojas, a guerrilla fighter aiming to overthrow the authoritarian regime of Anton Castillo. Castillo's dictatorship is sustained by the exploitation of *viviro*, a cancer-curing crop cultivated through forced labor and environmental degradation. Drawing on the aesthetics and histories of real-world revolutions, the game aspires to critique neocolonial exploitation, authoritarianism, and the forces that sustain these regimes. However, as

an AAA game, *Far Cry 6* must also balance these ambitious themes with the demands of commercial success, often diluting its depth in favor of action, spectacle, and accessibility.⁶⁰ The narrative of *viviro* draws clear parallels to real-world controversies surrounding multinational agricultural corporations such as Monsanto, which have been accused of exploiting Latin American land, labor, and resources for profit while disregarding the environmental and social consequences. The introduction of *viviro* as a central plot device mirrors the political tensions and ethical dilemmas tied to industrialized agriculture and its intersection with authoritarian control.⁶¹

Central to *Far Cry 6*'s design is its emphasis on player agency, inviting users to participate in a revolutionary struggle. Through branching narratives and open-world exploration, the game promises players control over how the story unfolds and how Dani Rojas approaches resistance. These mechanics theoretically create opportunities for players to engage with the moral and strategic dilemmas inherent in revolution, allowing them to shape their experience of the narrative. By emphasizing forced labor, environmental degradation, and economic exploitation, the game alludes to the ways in which agricultural industries have historically exploited the Global South. Missions tied to *viviro* not only critique these systems but also challenge players to consider the human and ecological cost of industrialized agriculture.

⁶⁰ A AAA game is a high-budget, high-profile video game produced by major studios with significant financial backing, extensive development resources, and large-scale marketing, similar to blockbuster films in the gaming industry.

⁶¹ Monsanto, now a subsidiary of Bayer, has faced extensive criticism for its practices in Latin America, particularly in countries like Argentina and Brazil. The company has been accused of promoting genetically modified crops and pesticides that have caused significant environmental degradation, health crises, and economic dependency among local farmers. These issues have sparked widespread protests and critiques of how multinational corporations exploit the Global South, often prioritizing profits over the well-being of local populations

The narrative also engages players directly in decisions to confront Castillo's military or rally civilian support for the guerrilla movement, demonstrating how personal choices intersect with larger systems of power. Through these interactive elements, *Far Cry 6* draws parallels between its fictional revolution and the real-world struggles of communities impacted by neocolonial practices.

However, the execution of player agency often falls short of its potential. While branching narratives give the impression of choice, the game's major story beats remain fixed, limiting the impact of player decisions. For instance, players can align with different factions or prioritize specific missions, but these choices rarely alter the overall outcome of the revolution. This constrained agency reflects a broader tension within AAA games, where the desire to offer meaningful interactivity is often at odds with the need to maintain a coherent, mass-market narrative. As a result, *Far Cry 6* risks reducing its revolutionary themes to a series of stylized set pieces, such as dramatic guerrilla raids on military compounds, explosive assassinations of high-ranking officials, and scripted confrontations with the dictator Antón Castillo, offering players the illusion of control without fully exploring the complexities of systemic change.

In addition to branching narratives, *Far Cry 6* incorporates multiple perspectives to enhance its portrayal of revolution. Supporting characters such as Clara Garcia, leader of the guerrilla movement, and *El Tigre*, a Veteran revolutionary, offer diverse viewpoints on resistance, each reflecting different ideological and generational approaches. Clara represents the pragmatic realities of coalition-building, balancing idealism with the compromises required to sustain a movement. *El Tigre's* nostalgic reflections on past revolutions highlight the cyclical nature of resistance and the challenges of maintaining momentum over time.

While these perspectives add depth to the narrative, their development often feels superficial, constrained by the game's emphasis on action and spectacle. Clara's leadership, for instance, hints at the nuanced challenges of navigating internal conflicts within a resistance movement but ultimately fails to explore them in meaningful ways. While she frequently emphasizes unity among the guerrillas and recruits who are individuals with diverse backgrounds and motivations, the game avoids depicting the inevitable tensions and power struggles that would arise for Clara in such a coalition. Her decision-making is presented as largely unilateral, bypassing the messier realities of consensus-building or dissent among members of the resistance. By reducing these characters to archetypes such as Clara's role as the pragmatic leader, the game glosses over the ideological and social dimensions of collective action, leaving players with only a surface-level understanding of the complexities involved in sustaining a revolutionary movement.

Moreover, the absence of civilian perspectives also limits the narrative's scope. While the guerrilla factions represent segments of the fictional Yaran society, the voices of ordinary citizens are largely absent, creating a lack of connection between the revolutionaries and the broader populations they aim to liberate. This omission weakens the game's critique of oppression as it fails to capture the diverse ways individuals or groups of individuals navigate authoritarian regimes and exploitative systems. For example, in real-world contexts, multinational corporations like Bayer and Monsanto have been implicated in practices that disproportionately affect rural populations, including land dispossession, the monopolization of

seeds, and the imposition of costly agricultural technologies that often deepen existing disparities.⁶²

In *Yara*, a more detailed exploration could have shown how ordinary citizens—farmers, laborers, or small business owners—contend with similar forces under Castillo’s regime in this imagined setting. The narrative could have delved into how the exploitation of *viviro* production mirrors the dynamics of real-life agricultural practices, where economic precarity and environmental degradation leave communities with little choice but to comply with corporate or state mandates. Such a perspective would have highlighted the intertwined relationship between authoritarian governance and corporate power, emphasizing that the success or failure of revolutionary movements depends not only on armed factions but also on the engagement and resilience of the broader population. Including these civilian perspectives would enrich the narrative, illustrating the mutual reliance between revolutionary movements and the communities they aim to serve while drawing a sharper critique of the mechanisms that sustain exploitation in authoritarian systems.

Despite its limitations, *Far Cry 6* uses branching narratives to engage players in a participatory critique of power and oppression. The game’s missions often present players with ethical dilemmas that reflect the complexities of revolution, forcing them to confront the

⁶² In real-world contexts, multinational corporations have been implicated in practices that disproportionately affect rural populations, including land dispossession, the monopolization of seeds, and the imposition of costly agricultural technologies that often deepen existing disparities. Sources that discuss these issues include the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food) report "*Land Squeeze*," which examines corporate land grabs and their impact on small farmers; Farm Aid's analysis of corporate power in agriculture, which details how agribusiness monopolies shape food systems to the detriment of rural communities; and We Seed Change's report on farmers' seed systems, which explores how corporate seed monopolization undermines food sovereignty and farmers' rights.

consequences of their choices. For example, certain missions require players to prioritize strategic objectives over humanitarian concerns, raising questions about the moral compromises inherent in resistance. These moments, while limited in their narrative impact, challenge players to reflect on their role within the revolutionary framework and consider the broader implications of their decisions. This dynamic mirrors real-world resistance movements in Latin America, where protests against multinational corporations such as Monsanto have laid bare the intersections of environmental degradation, economic exploitation, and social justice.

In Argentina, for instance, widespread protests have arisen against Monsanto's use of genetically modified crops and glyphosate herbicides, which have been linked to significant environmental damage and public health crises. Towns such as Malvinas Argentina's in the Córdoba province became hotspots for resistance in the 2010s, where activists and residents staged blockades to prevent the construction of a Monsanto plant, citing the harmful impacts of the company's agrochemical products. The protests, which lasted years, drew attention to the corporate exploitation of agricultural economies and the devastating consequences for rural communities.⁶³

In Mexico, resistance to Monsanto has often intersected with the defense of Indigenous maize varieties. Monsanto's attempts to introduce genetically modified corn into the Mexican market have been met with fierce opposition from Indigenous farmers and environmental activists, who argue that such practices threaten biodiversity and cultural traditions tied to maize.

⁶³ Lapegna, Pablo. *Soybeans and Power: Genetically Modified Crops, Environmental Politics, and Social Movements in Argentina*. Oxford University Press, 2016.

Mass protests erupted in 2013 when a Mexican judge suspended Monsanto's permits for genetically modified corn, marking a significant victory for anti-GMO activists.⁶⁴

These real-world examples underline the moral and strategic dilemmas that arise when local communities confront powerful, entrenched interests that prioritize profit over livelihoods and ecological health. Similarly, the illusion of agency in *Far Cry 6* can itself be seen as a critique of power structures. By limiting the impact of player choices, the game mirrors the constraints faced by individuals within oppressive systems, where larger structural forces often overshadow personal agency. This design choice, intentional or not, highlights the difficulty of achieving meaningful change within entrenched hierarchies, challenging players to grapple with the limitations of their actions. Just as activists in Argentina and Mexico confront the realities of corporate and state control, players in *Far Cry 6* must navigate the confines of a system that resists revolutionary change.

As an AAA game, *Far Cry 6* reflects the broader challenges of balancing thematic ambition with the commercial demands of mass-market entertainment. AAA games, by design, prioritize accessibility, spectacle, and player gratification to appeal to the widest possible audience. This often necessitates the simplification of complex themes, transforming nuanced critiques into digestible narratives that align with established genre conventions. For *Far Cry 6*,

⁶⁴ Judge Jaime Eduardo Verdugo J. of the Twelfth Federal District Court for Civil Matters in Mexico City issued an injunction suspending the planting of genetically modified corn in Mexico, citing "the risk of imminent harm to the environment." This decision followed years of advocacy and mass protests by organizations such as Sin Maíz No Hay País ("Without Corn, There Is No Country") and Greenpeace Mexico, which mobilized to highlight the potential dangers of GMO crops. These efforts reflect broader struggles against corporate control of food systems and the defense of food sovereignty in Latin America.

this dynamic manifests in its reliance on action-oriented gameplay and archetypal characters, which, while engaging, limit the depth of its socio-political commentary.

This tension is not unique to *Far Cry 6* but is emblematic of the AAA industry as a whole. Developers working within this framework face significant pressure to deliver games that are not only thematically rich but also commercially viable. As a result, themes like revolution, oppression, and resistance are often framed through the lens of individual heroism and spectacle, reducing structural critiques to stylized aesthetics. While these design choices ensure accessibility and profitability, they risk reinforcing the very dynamics they seek to critique, framing systemic oppression as an isolated evil rather than a product of broader structural forces.

Yet, AAA games also possess unparalleled potential to reach global audiences, sparking conversations about critical issues through interactive storytelling. *Far Cry 6*'s ability to immerse players in the landscapes and struggles of *Yara* demonstrates the medium's capacity to evoke empathy and provoke reflection, even within the constraints of commercial design. By incorporating satire, environmental storytelling, and participatory mechanics, the game offers glimpses of what interactive media can achieve when it balances accessibility with meaningful critique.

Ultimately, *Far Cry 6* exemplifies both the promise and the limitations of AAA games as a platform for socio-political commentary. The game's successes, such as its immersive world-building and moments of thematic resonance, highlight the medium's ability to engage players in complex narratives. However, the reliance on spectacle and archetypes accentuates the challenges of translating revolutionary themes into a format designed for entertainment and mass appeal. To fully realize the potential of interactive storytelling, AAA developers must embrace

the complexity and discomfort that such themes demand, pushing beyond the constraints of spectacle to deliver narratives that challenge and transform.

4.6 The Curious Case of *Mulaka* and How an Indie Studio Set the Tone

Representations of Indigenous peoples are often shaped to serve a range of purposes—sometimes as symbols of resistance and resilience, at other times as relics of a distant, romanticized past as well as victims. These portrayals often blur into reductive narratives that obscure the complex ways in which Indigenous communities continue to evolve, blending tradition with contemporary realities. By framing them as either timeless symbols or exotic curiosities, such depictions overlook the lived experiences, cultural fluidity, and agency of Indigenous peoples in shaping their own identities in an ever-changing world. Moreover, these narratives frequently fail to acknowledge the environmental challenges Indigenous communities face, including displacement from ancestral lands, pollution of natural resources, and the encroachment of industrial development. *Mulaka* by Lienzo Studios stands out as a groundbreaking example of how video games can counter these tendencies by authentically representing Indigenous cultures through collaboration, respect, and innovative storytelling.

Mulaka centers its narrative on the character *Sukurúame*, a Tarahumara (*Rarámuri*) shaman whose journey to restore balance to his land reflects the intricate connection between cultural identity and environmental stewardship. Rather than reducing environmental struggles to a commodified crisis devoid of cultural context, the game interweaves these challenges with the spiritual and communal frameworks of the *Rarámuri*. By collaborating with *Rarámuri* cultural representatives, the developers ensured that ecological themes are not abstracted or oversimplified but are instead deeply rooted in Indigenous cosmologies and practices.

Through *Sukurúame*'s interactions with mythological beings and the natural world, *Mulaka* transforms environmental degradation into a culturally grounded narrative of resistance and resilience. He battles corrupted beings like the *Ganoko*, a giant from Tarahumara mythology whose presence signals imbalance in nature, and the *Rusíwari*, malevolent creatures that consume souls, reflecting the spiritual and environmental decay affecting the land.⁶⁵ Additionally, *Sukurúame* receives blessings from demigods, granting him transformative abilities that allow him to purify tainted landscapes and restore harmony. These encounters reinforce the *Rarámuri* worldview, where environmental struggles are inseparable from spiritual balance, positioning the act of healing the land as an assertion of cultural identity and resistance.

This approach challenges colonial narratives of exoticism and environmental essentialism by presenting the *Rarámuri* not as passive victims of ecological harm but as active participants navigating and addressing these challenges on their own terms. *Mulaka* thus reclaims agency for Indigenous communities, demonstrating how their evolving identities and ecological knowledge counter both reductive representations and the commodification of environmental crises.

Lienzo Studios embraced the approach effectively working with *Tarahumara* historians, storytellers, and cultural advocates to ensure the game accurately reflected their cultural values and traditions. This process extended beyond tokenistic consultation; mythological elements like

⁶⁵ *Ganoko* are giant beings from *Rarámuri* mythology who once lived alongside humans in the mountains of Chihuahua, assisting in agriculture before conflicts led to their downfall. *Rusíwari* are mythological entities described as soul-eating rocks, symbolizing spiritual challenges and corruption in *Rarámuri* lore.

*Cipactli*⁶⁶ and the Bat God⁶⁷ were included only after extensive discussions about their significance within *Tarahumara* cosmology. These elements do more than enrich the game's narrative—they actively frame the gameplay as a journey of restoring harmony, mirroring the Tarahumara worldview where balance between humanity, nature, and the spiritual realm is paramount. For example, *Cipactli*, a serpent-like creature associated with the creation myth, is not just a mythical foe but a symbol of the delicate interconnectedness between creation and destruction, requiring players to approach such encounters with a mindset of restoration rather than dominance. Similarly, the Bat God represents the nocturnal forces of guidance and protection, emphasizing themes of resilience and interdependence, as *Sukurúame*'s path is guided by both spiritual allies and the natural world.

These mythological elements are not mere visual flourishes or challenges for the sake of gameplay mechanics; instead, they are woven into the player's journey to reinforce the *Tarahumara* ethos. *Sukurúame*'s interactions with these beings demand more than combat—they compel the player to think critically about harmony, justice, and the consequences of imbalance, thus translating the Tarahumara understanding of spirituality into actionable game dynamics. The inclusion of these figures also resists the commodification of Indigenous myths by rooting their representation in cultural context, encouraging players to engage with the deeper significance of these myths rather than consuming them as exotic symbols. Through these design choices, *Mulaka* transforms the commodified crisis of environmental exploitation into a narrative

⁶⁶ *Cipactli*, in Aztec mythology, is a primordial sea creature described as part crocodile, part fish, and part toad. It played a key role in creation myths, as the gods used its body to form the earth and sky after slaying it.

⁶⁷ In *Tarahumara* mythology, the Bat God is a revered figure symbolizing transformation, fertility, and balance within the natural world. Associated with both life and death, the Bat God often represents a bridge between the spiritual and earthly realms, embodying the cyclical nature of existence.

framework that highlights the *Tarahumara* principles of coexistence and reciprocity, challenging players to internalize these values as they navigate the game's challenges.

This focus on reciprocity is embedded in the game's mechanics. Unlike traditional action-adventure games that emphasize conquest and accumulation, *Mulaka* centers on restoration and harmony. The game's narrative of restoring balance to the land echoes the broader Indigenous struggles across Latin America, where communities have consistently resisted exploitative development projects and advocated for environmental and cultural preservation. For instance, the tensions surrounding development initiatives like Mexico's controversial *Tren Maya* (Mayan Train) project reveal the ongoing conflicts between economic growth and the defense of sacred Indigenous lands.⁶⁸ While the project is marketed as a tool for regional connectivity and economic revitalization, it has drawn widespread opposition from Indigenous groups who argue that it threatens biodiversity and disrespects cultural heritage. This struggle reflects broader patterns across the continent, where Indigenous communities often bear the brunt of state-sponsored development projects designed without their input. *Mulaka* offers a counterpoint to these trends by emphasizing the *Tarahumara* philosophy of coexistence with nature, portraying land as a living entity with intrinsic value rather than a resource to be exploited.

The challenge of balancing economic development with Indigenous environmental philosophies is not unique to Bolivia but extends to other Latin American leaders who have

⁶⁸ The *Tren Maya* is a large-scale infrastructure project in Mexico, initiated under President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, aimed at promoting tourism and economic development in the Yucatán Peninsula. The project involves constructing a 1,500-kilometer railway connecting major archaeological sites, tourist destinations, and local communities.

sought to integrate Indigenous worldviews into national policy. In Bolivia, Evo Morales' incorporation of Indigenous philosophies, such as *buen vivir* (living well), into national policy marked a historic recognition of Indigenous perspectives on sustainability. Yet, this progress was often undercut by Bolivia's reliance on extractive industries, which placed economic imperatives at odds with cultural and environmental stewardship. A similar tension exists in Mexico under Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), whose administration has framed economic initiatives as efforts to uplift marginalized communities while continuing large-scale infrastructure projects that threaten Indigenous lands. Robin Wall Kimmerer's concept of reciprocity, as outlined in *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013), provides a framework to understand these contradictions. Kimmerer emphasizes how respecting the interconnectedness of ecological and cultural systems fosters sustainability and resilience—principles that both Morales and AMLO have invoked in their policies, even as their governments struggle to reconcile economic growth with Indigenous and environmental concerns.

Language further reinforces the game's decolonial framework. By incorporating spoken *Tarahumara* into key moments, the developers emphasize the importance of preserving Indigenous linguistic traditions. Simpson argues that language carries knowledge systems inseparable from their cultural contexts (Simpson 69). Through its use of the *Tarahumara* language, the game disrupts the dominance of Western linguistic frameworks, offering players an authentic engagement with the culture it represents.

While *Mulaka* excels in cultural representation, it also provides a commentary on the broader challenges within the gaming industry. Mainstream AAA games often prioritize profitability over cultural depth, resulting in works that commodify Indigenous cultures for

aesthetic purposes rather than engaging meaningfully with them. However, *Mulaka* demonstrates that authenticity and accessibility can coexist. Its success challenges developers to embrace collaborative and ethical approaches, proving that audiences are eager for narratives rooted in integrity and cultural specificity.

The game also integrates elements of branching narratives, offering players choices that reflect the values of *Rarámuri* cosmology. These decisions, such as resolving mythological conflicts through dialogue or harmony, invite players to face the ethical dilemmas central to the story. Recent movements, such as land restitution initiatives in the Sierra Tarahumara, have gained prominence as *Rarámuri* activists and leaders push back against large-scale mining and logging operations that threaten their environment and way of life. For example, in 2020, *Rarámuri* communities successfully pressured Mexican courts to halt a mining project near the town of Coloradas de la Virgen, citing violations of their land rights and environmental protections. This act of legal resistance mirrors the game's narrative arc, where the protagonist *Sukurúame* confronts destructive forces threatening his land, emphasizing restoration over domination as a means of achieving balance.

Similarly, the Mexican government's *Instituto Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas* (INPI) (The National Institute of Indigenous Nations) has initiated programs aimed at strengthening Indigenous cultural and territorial rights.⁶⁹ The INPI's work with *Rarámuri* communities includes ecological farming projects and bilingual education initiatives, such as the

⁶⁹ The *Instituto Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas* (INPI) is a Mexican government agency established to promote and protect the rights, cultures, and development of the country's Indigenous communities. It implements programs that focus on land restitution, cultural preservation, education, and sustainable development, often working directly with Indigenous leaders and organizations to address historical inequities and contemporary challenges.

Telebachilleratos Comunitarios (Community Tele-High Schools), which integrate *Rarámuri* language and traditions into modern academic curricula. These real-world efforts parallel *Sukurúame*'s journey in *Mulaka*, where the preservation of traditional knowledge is a key theme. For instance, players must solve puzzles and navigate sacred landscapes by invoking ancestral wisdom and understanding the spiritual connections between land and culture. The INPI's focus on blending tradition with innovation finds resonance in the game's mechanics that challenge players to adopt the *Rarámuri* worldview of coexistence and reciprocity to progress. This narrative and mechanical integration highlights how *Mulaka* offers a nuanced exploration of Indigenous resilience, blending cultural authenticity with interactive storytelling that mirrors the ongoing struggles and achievements of *Rarámuri* communities.

The implications of *Mulaka*'s approach extend beyond its narrative and mechanics. The game challenges players to reconsider their assumptions about identity, agency, and humanity's relationship with the environment. It portrays the *Tarahumara* as a dynamic, living culture with values and knowledge systems deeply relevant to contemporary challenges such as environmental sustainability and cultural resilience. As the gaming industry continues to evolve, *Mulaka* serves as a blueprint for how media can approach cultural representation with integrity. Its collaborative development process, decolonial narrative, and commitment to authenticity demonstrate that respectful storytelling is not only possible but essential for fostering empathy and cultural understanding. In an industry often driven by commercial imperatives, its success underscores the value of prioritizing ethical storytelling over profit.

Ultimately, *Mulaka* redefines how Indigenous cultures can be represented in media. By centering *Tarahumara* voices and perspectives, it offers players not only a culturally rich

experience but a transformative engagement with a worldview that challenges colonial frameworks. As players navigate the game world and engage with its ethical dilemmas, they are invited to reflect on their own positionality and the biases that shape their understanding of Indigenous cultures. Through its respectful storytelling and innovative design, *Mulaka* sets a new standard for representation in gaming, proving that collaboration, authenticity, and cultural depth can lead to powerful and transformative experiences.

4.7 Chapter Conclusion

The critical examination of *Mulaka*, *Turista Fronterizo*, *Far Cry 6*, and *Tropico 6* highlights the profound potential of video games to provide mechanisms through which players can act as cultural storytellers. By immersing players in systems of choice, exploration, and consequence, these games enable users to experiment critically with power dynamics, question entrenched stereotypes, and amplify marginalized voices. Rather than dictating static narratives, these games invite players to interpret, interact with, and even challenge the cultural and political frameworks they present, fostering a more participatory approach to storytelling.

Interactive media uniquely engages players by transforming them from passive observers into active participants in narratives. In *Mulaka* and *Turista Fronterizo*, this participatory element is harnessed to immerse players in culturally grounded perspectives that challenge colonial frameworks and stereotypes. These games avoid the reductivist gaze of mainstream media by prioritizing collaboration, cultural specificity, and ethical storytelling. By placing players within ethical and cultural frameworks, these games provide opportunities for reflection, empathy, and critical engagement. The games analyzed prove that when handled with care, video games can serve as transformative tools for cultural education and empowerment.

The development of *Mulaka* stands as a testament to the power of careful collaborative creation. By integrating the voices of Tarahumara cultural representatives at every stage, the game exemplifies a decolonial approach to storytelling. Its narrative, mechanics, and world design reflect Tarahumara cosmology, offering players a window into a worldview centered on balance, reciprocity, and community. This authenticity distinguishes *Mulaka* from games that reduce Indigenous cultures to aesthetic tropes or mystical relics. Instead of framing the Tarahumara as artifacts of the past, the game presents them as a living, dynamic culture whose knowledge systems remain deeply relevant to contemporary issues. This shift in representation disrupts colonial narratives, inviting players to engage with Indigenous values on their own terms.

Similarly, *Turista Fronterizo* uses its interactive mechanics to critique the systemic inequities embedded in the U.S.-Mexico border. By positioning players within the lived realities of diverse characters, the game highlights how privilege and oppression intersect at the border. Its branching narratives and multiple perspectives deepen this critique, offering a nuanced portrayal of how systemic forces shape individual experiences within and outside of the game. For example, players navigating the challenges faced by *La Todóloga* encounter barriers that reflect the systemic discrimination and economic precarity endured by marginalized communities. In contrast, embodying characters like *El Junior* or *El Gringo Poderoso* reveals how wealth and privilege insulate certain individuals from these hardships. This juxtaposition fosters a critical awareness of how systemic hierarchies perpetuate inequality while maintaining the illusion of fairness.

What sets *Turista Fronterizo* apart is its ability to balance cultural critique with player agency. The game invites participants to grapple with the ethical dilemmas of advocacy, labor, and exploitation, challenging them to reflect on their own positionality. By emphasizing the interconnectedness of privilege and oppression, it transforms gameplay into a participatory critique of systemic inequities. This approach aligns with broader movements in decolonial media, which seek to amplify marginalized voices while exposing the structures that silence them.

In contrast, *Far Cry 6* and *Tropico 6* illustrate the challenges of navigating thematic ambition within the constraints of AAA game design. These titles engage with critical issues such as revolution, authoritarianism, and colonial legacies, but their execution often prioritizes spectacle over substance. While *Far Cry 6* offers glimpses of moral complexity through its portrayal of Dani Rojas and the guerrilla movement, its reliance on action-oriented gameplay and archetypal characters limits its depth. The fixed nature of its major story beats undermines the potential of its branching narratives, reducing player agency to the illusion of choice. Similarly, while the game gestures toward systemic critique through its depiction of *viviro* production and environmental degradation, these themes often only serve as backdrops for stylized combat rather than as focal points for meaningful commentary.

Tropico 6, while more successful in its satirical critique of postcolonial governance, also struggles with balancing humor and depth. Its exaggerated scenarios and caricatured characters offer a sharp critique of authoritarianism and dependency but risk oversimplifying the complexities of governance in postcolonial contexts. The game's use of branching narratives and player agency allows participants to explore the ethical compromises of leadership, but these

choices often lack the weight necessary to foster genuine reflection. This limitation reflects a broader tension within AAA games, where the demands of accessibility and marketability often dilute the thematic ambition of their narratives.

Despite these shortcomings, *Far Cry 6* and *Tropico 6* reveal the medium's potential to take on systemic issues on a global scale. Their immersive world-building and participatory mechanics demonstrate how video games can provoke thought and dialogue, even within the constraints of commercial design. However, their reliance on spectacle underscores the need for greater narrative coherence and cultural specificity in AAA game development. To fully realize the potential of interactive storytelling, developers must prioritize authenticity and complexity over formulaic tropes and market-driven conventions.

The question of commodification looms large in the analysis of these games. Too frequently, mainstream media reduces cultural elements to consumable fragments, stripping them of their historical and spiritual significance. This dynamic, evident in the aesthetic decontextualization critiqued by Lisa Nakamura, perpetuates stereotypes while marginalizing authentic voices. By contrast, *Mulaka* and *Turista Fronterizo* exemplify how games can resist this tendency by centering collaborative processes and cultural integrity. These works challenge the gaming industry to move beyond token inclusion, demonstrating that respectful representation requires active partnership with the communities portrayed.

The interplay between player agency and systemic critique is another key theme that emerges from these analyses. Games like *Mulaka* and *Turista Fronterizo* use participatory mechanics to immerse players in alternative worldviews, encouraging them to navigate ethical dilemmas and reflect on their choices. By contrast, *Far Cry 6* and *Tropico 6* highlight the

limitations of player agency within commercial frameworks, where the emphasis on entertainment often overshadows the potential for meaningful engagement. This tension underscores the importance of designing narratives that empower players to engage critically with the systems they navigate, rather than merely offering the illusion of control.

Ultimately, the success of these games lies in their ability to foster empathy, provoke reflection, and challenge dominant narratives. By foregrounding marginalized perspectives, *Mulaka* and *Turista Fronterizo* create spaces for players to engage with cultural authenticity and systemic critique. Their participatory storytelling and collaborative development processes set a new standard for representation in gaming, proving that ethical storytelling can yield both artistic and commercial success. At the same time, the limitations of *Far Cry 6* and *Tropico 6* serve as a reminder of the challenges that come with balancing thematic ambition and marketability. These tensions reflect the evolving landscape of the gaming industry, where the push for authenticity and depth often clashes with the demands of mass-market appeal.

In synthesizing these examples, it becomes clear that video games are uniquely positioned to navigate the intersections of culture, commerce, and critique. The challenge rests in harnessing this potential to create works that not only entertain but also educate, inspire, and transform. Whether through the decolonial narratives of *Mulaka*, the systemic critiques of *Turista Fronterizo*, or the satirical reflections of *Tropico 6*, these games demonstrate that interactive media can be a powerful platform for cultural storytelling. However, as the shortcomings of *Far Cry 6* illustrate, the success of this medium depends on the choices of its creators. By prioritizing authenticity, collaboration, and complexity, developers can push the

boundaries of interactive storytelling, redefining what it means to represent, resist, and reimagine the worlds we inhabit.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

5.1 No Game Over: Why Latin American Stories Must Keep Evolving in Gaming

The future of video games is shaped by technological advancements, cultural responsibility, and ongoing political debates. As a medium, games offer an unparalleled way to engage audiences in complex narratives that bring history, identity, and resistance into interactive spaces. Yet, their portrayal of Latin America often falls short. Too often, the industry reduces the region to exoticized landscapes or perpetuates harmful stereotypes of violence, corruption, or underdevelopment. Addressing these limitations while maximizing the potential of gaming as a storytelling and educational tool requires a commitment from developers, scholars, and players alike.

This conclusion explores how video games engage with history, performance, and cultural resistance. Unlike passive media, games allow players to interact with historical narratives, shaping how memory is constructed and contested. Through mechanics like procedural rhetoric and *replayability*, they can either reinforce or dismantle dominant views of Latin America. Performance plays a key role in this process—not only in the narratives themselves but also in how players embody roles, experience agency, and negotiate systems of power within games.

At the same time, representation in gaming faces strong political resistance. The backlash against diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts, fueled by nationalist and far-right movements, raises urgent concerns about which stories are told, who controls them, and how

power is distributed within the industry. These cultural battles shape not just the content of games but also the opportunities available to Latin American developers, many of whom struggle to access funding, resources, and global platforms.

New technologies are rapidly reshaping this landscape. Virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and cloud gaming offer exciting new ways to engage with culture and history. Yet, without careful oversight, these technologies risk reinforcing existing inequalities rather than creating space for authentic narratives. The challenge is not just about who creates these technologies but also about ensuring that they amplify marginalized voices rather than erase them.

Moving forward, the most pressing question is whether the gaming industry will continue replicating past patterns of exclusion or embrace its potential as a space for resistance, reimagination, and representation. This conclusion examines these challenges in depth, focusing on historical narratives, performance as political engagement, the backlash against inclusivity, the role of emerging technologies, and the structural barriers that shape Latin American game development today.

This project explores the challenges and possibilities of Latin American representation in video games, examining how digital spaces construct, reinforce, or challenge narratives about the region. While video games offer an unparalleled opportunity for immersive storytelling, they often fall into reductive portrayals that exoticize Latin America, emphasizing violence, corruption, and underdevelopment rather than engaging with its historical and cultural complexity. Even as some developers work toward more nuanced representations, mainstream industry trends continue to prioritize spectacle over substance. Understanding these patterns

requires a critical examination of game mechanics, narrative structures, and the broader sociopolitical forces shaping how Latin America is depicted in interactive digital spaces.

To fully examine these complexities, this project is structured to analyze video game representation across game mechanics, performance, and spectacle, while also considering broader industry trends, political resistance, and emerging technologies.

The first chapter establishes a historical foundation for play in Latin America, tracing the role of gaming from Indigenous traditions to the present. It examines how play has functioned as a tool for storytelling, religious expression, and political engagement across different periods, from Mesoamerican ballgames to colonial adaptations and post-independence reinventions. This chapter argues that gaming in Latin America has long been a site of negotiation between cultural preservation and external influence, laying the groundwork for how digital games extend these historical tensions.

The second chapter focuses on procedural rhetoric, reward-based mechanics, and how game systems influence player perception, particularly in relation to Latin America's depiction in action, shooter, and strategy games. Using Ian Bogost's concept of procedural rhetoric, this section explores how rules, mechanics, and objectives create implicit messages about power and agency. This discussion is further extended through operant conditioning theory, which explains how reward structures shape player behavior and reinforce ideological norms. The chapter examines *Mercenaries 2: World in Flames*, *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, *Call of Juarez: The Cartel*, and fighting games that depict Hispanic characters, demonstrating how these titles utilize colonial power fantasies, white savior narratives, and tokenized representation to reinforce Western perspectives of Latin America. The chapter also introduces Gonzalo Frasca's concept of

"serious games" and "games with a purpose," considering how games can be designed to promote critical engagement rather than passive consumption. *Madrid* is used as an example of how games can function as tools for historical memory, encouraging reflection rather than reinforcing stereotypes.

The third chapter shifts focus to performance, resistance, and political movements in Latin America, analyzing how digital spaces serve as extensions of physical protest and theatrical activism. Drawing from Judith Butler and Richard Schechner, the chapter explores the ways performance theory applies to gaming environments, embodiment, and interactive storytelling. It discusses the feminist performance movement *Un violador en tu camino* (A Rapist in Your Path) and *LasTesis* as examples of real-world activism that engage with place, time, and digital dissemination. The chapter also examines *Malvinas 2032*, a game about the Falklands War (Las Malvinas), to illustrate how games create alternative historical narratives that challenge official state memory. This discussion extends into virtual reality as a new frontier for digital performance and historical engagement. The chapter highlights the project *IxTli* from the University of New Mexico, which explores Indigenous storytelling and decolonial knowledge through VR. The section argues that VR has the potential to reshape how history is experienced by placing players inside contested spaces, though this potential depends on who creates and controls these narratives.

The fourth chapter addresses the commodification and spectacle of Latin America in mainstream gaming, showing how the region is often used as a visual and narrative backdrop for Western fantasies of revolution, crime, and exoticism. Using Coco Fusco's work on cultural representation and Enrique Buenaventura's theories of narrative control, this chapter critically

examines *Far Cry 6* and *Turista Fronterizo*, exposing how both games capitalize on Latin American aesthetics while flattening its cultural and political complexities. The discussion then shifts to countering commodification through independent game development, using *Mulaka* as a case study for how Indigenous narratives can be told with authenticity through community collaboration. The chapter argues that independent studios when properly supported, offer a viable model for ethical game development that challenges the industry's history of exploitation.

Beyond digital representation, performance has long served as a site of resistance in Latin America, and its incorporation into video games offers new avenues for political and cultural engagement. From street theater and protests to festival traditions, performance offers avenues to challenge dominant narratives, reclaim public space, and build collective memory. Games, by their interactive nature, have the potential to carry these performative traditions into digital spaces, allowing players to embody historical conflicts, reimagine revolutionary movements, or actively participate in subversive acts. *Turista Fronterizo* engages with the dynamic aspects of gaming by forcing players into roles that highlight economic and racial disparities at the U.S.-Mexico border. Similarly, *Tropico 6* allows players to assume the persona of a postcolonial dictator, satirizing power structures while making the mechanics of authoritarianism explicit through procedural rhetoric. In both cases, performance is not just an aesthetic feature but a mode of critical engagement that forces players to negotiate with history, politics, and power.

The importance of performance extends beyond narrative design; it is also present in the ways players engage with systems of play. Procedural rhetoric—the way game mechanics communicate meaning—allows performance to emerge through scripted events as well as through the choices, restrictions, and interactions imposed by the game itself. *Malvinas 2032*

leverages procedural rhetoric by immersing players in the tensions of war and occupation, making them confront the consequences of political decisions rather than passively consuming a narrative. *Replayability* further reinforces this performative aspect, inviting players to reconsider their actions and challenge the very assumptions that structured their previous playthroughs. In this way, video games do not just depict power struggles; they allow players to enact, resist, and subvert them in real time.

However, these advances in gaming representation exist alongside growing resistance to diversity and inclusivity in the industry. A rising backlash against Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, particularly from far-right movements, threatens to undermine progress in representing marginalized voices.⁷⁰ These groups push for narratives that reinforce colonial and nationalist ideologies, pressuring developers to sanitize or depoliticize their content.

In Latin America, the resurgence of authoritarianism has notably impacted countries such as Brazil, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Bolivia. In Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro's presidency marked a shift towards far-right populism, often invoking traditional values and anti-communist rhetoric to justify policies that threatened democratic norms. Similarly, in El Salvador, President Nayib Bukele has employed "millennial authoritarianism," using social media and public

⁷⁰ The gaming industry's push for diversity and inclusivity has faced backlash from far-right movements and segments of gaming communities. Ubisoft, for example, encountered internal resistance to its DEI initiatives, contributing to delayed game releases and calls for the company's sale. The Gamergate harassment campaign in 2014 exemplified this resistance, targeting women and marginalized groups within the industry. More recently, criticism of "woke" culture in gaming, highlights ongoing opposition to inclusive representation. Additionally, games such as *Concord* faced backlash for their diverse character designs, reflecting the broader cultural tensions surrounding DEI efforts in gaming.

discontent to erode democratic institutions.⁷¹ In Nicaragua, President Daniel Ortega's administration has been accused of suppressing political opposition, restricting press freedom, and manipulating electoral processes to maintain power. Venezuela continues to face international criticism for undermining democratic institutions, limiting political freedoms, and engaging in authoritarian practices, while Bolivia has raised concerns over the erosion of democratic norms and the concentration of power in the executive branch. These political trends place game developers at the center of cultural and political tensions, where creating historically and socially conscious narratives becomes increasingly challenging and contested in environments where authoritarianism seeks to control cultural expression and historical memory.

At the same time, emerging technologies present both opportunities and risks for representation in video games. Virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and cloud gaming hold the potential to deepen cultural immersion, enabling players to experience historical events, indigenous traditions, and political movements in ways that extend beyond passive observation. A VR experience could transport players to a pre-Columbian city, allowing them to witness and participate in indigenous governance structures without the colonial gaze. Similarly, AR technology could transform urban landscapes into interactive historical sites, where players engage with forgotten or erased histories in real time. However, without careful curation and the involvement of local voices, these technologies risk further commodifying Latin American cultures for a global market rather than serving as tools for empowerment and education.

⁷¹ Millennial authoritarianism refers to the use of modern tools such as social media, populist rhetoric, and digital platforms by leaders like Nayib Bukele to consolidate power while appealing to younger generations. Bukele's strategic use of Twitter and public relations has enabled him to bypass traditional democratic checks and balances, weakening judicial independence and silencing opposition.

Cloud gaming and mobile platforms also hold promise for broadening access to culturally rich narratives. In regions like Latin America, where mobile gaming dominates due to accessibility, these platforms provide an avenue for reaching diverse audiences. By reducing barriers to entry, they create opportunities for narratives rooted in local perspectives to gain visibility on a global stage. *Mulaka*, developed in collaboration with the Tarahumara community, exemplifies how intentional collaboration can result in respectful and authentic storytelling that preserves cultural integrity while utilizing modern gaming platforms. However, the democratizing potential of these platforms can only be realized if developers prioritize collaboration with the communities they seek to represent. Without such intentionality, there is a risk that new technologies will simply reinforce existing patterns of aesthetic decontextualization and cultural commodification.

At the same time, video games are redefining how history is understood. Unlike traditional media, they offer interactive and procedural storytelling that immerses players in complex systems of power. This is particularly significant in games that deal with war, colonialism, and resistance, as they require players to actively engage with historical conflicts. *Malvinas 2032*, for instance, forces players to navigate the structures of occupation and war, making them confront the mechanics of political tension rather than just observe it. The way a game structures choice, agency, and consequence can fundamentally alter how players process historical events, making game mechanics as important as narrative in shaping public memory.

The commercial side of the gaming industry also demands further scrutiny. While independent studios have created spaces for more nuanced portrayals of Latin America, mainstream gaming continues to prioritize spectacle over depth. *Far Cry 6* illustrates this

contradiction—although it borrows heavily from Latin American revolutionary aesthetics, its mechanics reduce political struggle to action-heavy gameplay, reinforcing cycles of violence as entertainment. These contradictions highlight the need for more research on how game mechanics—not just visual and narrative representation—determine how a region is perceived.

Game development itself remains a deeply unequal industry. Latin American developers face significant barriers, from limited access to funding and publishing platforms to the overwhelming dominance of Western narratives that dictate industry trends. As a result, even when Latin America is represented in games, the stories are often shaped by external perspectives rather than by creators with lived experience. Without continued research into these economic and structural limitations, discussions on representation remain incomplete.

The expansion of emerging technologies further complicates these dynamics. Augmented reality, virtual reality, and cloud gaming are reshaping how players experience history and culture, raising new questions about who gets to design these immersive experiences and how they frame Latin American identities. If left unchecked, these technologies could further entrench colonial narratives rather than disrupt them. More research is needed to ensure that technological advancements serve as tools for empowerment rather than reinforcing existing power imbalances.

Ultimately, this research must continue not just to critique representation in games but to advocate for meaningful change in how games are created, distributed, and consumed. Video games are no longer just entertainment; they shape historical consciousness, reinforce or challenge systems of power, and influence how people engage with Latin America's past and present. Without ongoing scholarship and industry accountability, the same patterns of erasure,

stereotyping, and oversimplification will persist, limiting the medium's potential as a space for radical storytelling and cultural reclamation.

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