

# LATIN AMERICAN LUDOLOGY

## Why We Should Take Video Games Seriously (and When We Shouldn't)

Phillip Penix-Tadsen  
University of Delaware

*Abstract: This research report explores critical and methodological approaches to game studies, or ludology, contextualizing them within the field of Latin American cultural studies. It provides evidence of the growing influence of video games and explains major ludological concepts such as simulation and remediation, providing the theoretical and critical background necessary for the development of research on games and their cultural impact in the region. The report goes on to offer a preliminary taxonomy of Latin American cultural simulations in video games, thoroughly discussing examples of existing portrayals as well as laying the groundwork for further critical inquiry in this burgeoning field of study.*

In the fall of 2010, a blockbuster portrayal of Latin American culture achieved a remarkable milestone: it racked up the most profitable premiere ever recorded—that is, not just the highest-grossing opening for a movie, but for any media product in history—eclipsing the opening-day profits of every film, music album, and book ever produced. More accurately, its release did not just eclipse those records; it obliterated them. Up to that point, the most successful film premiere ever had garnered \$239 million in its first week; the behemoth of 2010, set partially in Cuba, reached 5.6 million consumers and grossed \$360 million—on its first day (Box Office Mojo 2011; Schreier 2010; Baker 2010). After the release its profits continued to soar, generating \$650 million in its first five days and clearing \$1 billion in sales after just six weeks on the market, contributing to an industry that took in an astronomical \$67 billion over the course of the year (Makuch 2010; Reisinger 2010; Weber 2011). The numbers, however, only scratch the surface of this story's significance.

With regard to Latin American studies, an equivalently astounding fact is that research in our field has largely turned a blind eye not only to this particular production but also to the entire medium in which it was developed—the blockbuster in question was, as is obvious by now, a video game. *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, whose opening mission orders the player to assassinate Fidel Castro on virtually rendered Cuban soil during the Bay of Pigs Invasion, signals a turn in media

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consumption and the coming-of-age of a medium that is delivering portrayals of Latin American culture to a broader global audience than ever before. It is one of dozens of such representations that are shaping the way people around the world conceive of the region and its inhabitants (see the appendix). What does it mean to have Latin America not just visually or textually represented but also experientially simulated for an audience of millions? What are the implications of the portrayals being developed, and what kinds of lessons are they teaching about the region's cultures? How can we study such products in a way that takes into account the complexity and uniqueness of the medium without being beholden to prejudices against it? How have video-game simulations already affected Latin American culture, and what potentialities do they represent for the future? In the remainder of this research report, I begin to answer these questions by outlining ways of applying the developing research tools of game studies—otherwise known as ludology (Frasca 1999)—to research on Latin American culture, endeavoring to pave the way for the elaboration of a particularly Latin American ludology.<sup>1</sup>

#### RECOGNIZING NEGLECTED MEDIA

The crossover between media studies and Latin American studies has been articulated from several perspectives in recent years, ranging from explorations of Latin American cultural representation in film to works making the case for investigating noncanonical forms of cultural production, as does Christine Folch's (2008) research note on racial representation in pre-Revolution Cuban cookbooks published in this journal. Numerous such projects have carried Latin American cultural studies beyond the realm of literary analysis, such as Jesús Martín Barbero's (1987) and Ana M. López's (1995) analyses of the impact of *telenovelas* on culture and daily life throughout the region, Gastón A. Alzate's (2002) analysis of contemporary cabaret theater in Mexico, Diana Taylor's (2003) exploration of Latin American performance and the development of cultural memory, and Rubén Gallo's (2005) historical contextualization of the role of radio broadcasting in producing Mexican modernity. A fundamental question among those pursuing research in these alternative media is how they generate meaning for their consumers, and specifically how they can mediate historical and cultural discourse. With regard to the role of video games in the elaboration of historical consciousness, Gerard Greenfield (2004, n.p.) inquired several years ago, "Which is more influential in making history in the minds of a younger generation: learning through a computer game played endlessly for hours over several days or weeks (or for days without a break as the gaming culture now entails), or through a school history textbook?" Given the implied answer to that question, how might a deeper exploration of games contribute to the understanding of what has become a funda-

1. Further debates surrounding ludology are discussed herein, but it should be noted that there remains a degree of variation in how the term *ludology* is used. The purist perspective insists that it denotes only the study of diegetic aspects inherent to games in and of themselves, whereas the cultural studies view also examines the societal impact of phenomena surrounding games.

mental form of education—or “edutainment”—on the subject of Latin American culture?

The analogy of film studies, a once-marginalized subfield that has since firmly established itself within the contemporary academy, helps illustrate the importance of researching video games, and of researching them now. If film, in Fredric Jameson’s (1990) now-classic assertion, functions as a cognitive map capable of shaping the viewer’s comprehension of the cultural and sociopolitical factors put into play by a given cinematic work, then games fundamentally transform that cerebral cartography by providing an immersive experience that viscerally embeds its participants in the narrative encounter, thus requiring the development of unique critical tools and analytical approaches. Furthermore, because games belong to “the broader context of neglected media,” that is, cultural products that “exhibit strong popular appeal and economic relevance, contrasted by a lack of cultural prestige and scientific coverage” (Reichmuth and Werning 2006, 47), their study requires intellectual advocacy and the commitment of publishers willing to take risks, much as those circulating research on cinema did decades ago. The first representations of Latin America in video games have existed for more than a quarter century, and they have set in place an increasingly varied and rich legacy of cultural simulation since. The time to examine their impact and implications has arrived.

As the data above indicate, video games are not just rising to prominence among different forms of cultural production; they have already begun to outpace all other forms of media in terms of their profits and scope of influence. Jesper Juul (2010, 152) has noted that “video games are fast becoming games *for everyone*,”<sup>2</sup> and statistical evidence demonstrates that this is more than the hyperbolic rhetoric of a gaming advocate. The investment report “The Video Game Industry: An \$18 Billion Entertainment Juggernaut” (SeekingAlpha.com 2008) offers quantitative data to drive home Juul’s point regarding the growing popularity that is transforming gaming and its audience, helping illustrate that games are no longer just child’s play, if ever they were: 68 percent of households in the United States play video games, the average game buyer is thirty-eight years old, the fastest-growing demographic is gamers of age fifty and older, 40 percent of all gamers are female, and there are more adult women playing games (30 percent of all gamers) than there are boys younger than seventeen years old (23 percent). In light of these developments, game studies has begun to establish its place within academic discourse in recent years, with publishers like MIT Press and Routledge putting out dozens of book-length studies on the subject. Up to now, however, research has focused largely on player demographics and the technological implications of the medium, more often than not dealing specifically with computer-based games rather than the more popular and profitable titles distributed for game consoles like Sony’s PlayStation 3 and Microsoft’s Xbox 360 (Taylor 2007). Moreover, in game studies “the relative absence of feminist, political economic, queer, and other theories of culture is striking” (Boellstorff 2006, 31), making it clear that the study of cultural simulation in games remains an underdeveloped and essential area for critical inquiry.

2. Unless otherwise noted, emphasis in all citations is original.

The video-game industry in Latin America, meanwhile, has generally upheld traditional market dynamics, meaning that while games have frequently been manufactured in maquiladoras spanning Mexico and Central America, few titles have ever been designed, produced, or developed in the region (Lugo, Sampson, and Lossada 2002). However, this, too, is beginning to change. Federico Beyer, director for the Mexico-based game developer Slang, puts it plainly: “We are living through a wave that all of us should be riding” (*Motor de Juegos* 2011, n.p.).<sup>3</sup> Beyer, an advocate for the growth of game development in the region, further elaborates:

There’s a very important opportunity there which we are approaching as pioneers. . . . You will see titles that deliver Latin authenticity—culturally relevant content for the Hispanic community. But we also intend to deliver this content for the rest of the world, because they don’t know it yet. They don’t know [Julio] Cortázar’s books, or other authors from Latin America. It’s really rich. There’s a huge opportunity for us to bring that into the video game business and transcend borders in many different ways. (Sheffield 2010, n.p.)

Will Beyer and his ilk be the new harbingers of Latin American culture for the global masses? The question has already been answered in the affirmative. What remains for Latin Americanists to ask, then, is how the types of games being produced can be effectively analyzed, and what lessons they can teach about the representation and understanding of culture.

#### SIMULATION AND REMEDIATION: THE LUDOLOGICAL TURN

Researching games requires an approach that is fundamentally distinct from other forms of media studies, even as it overlaps with multiple other critical and theoretical traditions. As Alexander R. Galloway (2006, 2) has succinctly put it, “If photographs are images, and films are moving images, then *video games are actions*.” Because games are experienced through an interactive interface rather than passively observed, their study requires a shift from a strictly narratological perspective to a ludological viewpoint. Gonzalo Frasca (2003, 222) outlined this difference in his foundational texts on the subject, explaining that “unlike traditional media, video games are not just based on representation but on an alternative semiotical structure known as simulation.” The transformation is phenomenological: unlike visually or textually representative media, games are based on interactions that produce an experiential simulation of the cultures and settings they portray, which makes their messages more viscerally impactful for their audience and necessitates a fundamental shift in critical methodology (these implications are further explored in the following section).

Nevertheless, important similarities do exist between video games and other media, which means that the critical tools of related disciplines can be effectively applied to ludology if the differences between these media are not simply swept aside. The debate between narratology and ludology has essentially been resolved for experts in game studies in favor of the latter. Still, although some nonnarra-

3. All translations of quotations originally in Spanish in this research report are my own.

tive genres (e.g., puzzle games) do exist, the gaming realm is not independent of the narrative tradition. As Janet H. Murray (2005, n.p.) has summarized, "At some point in all of these debates, these two commonsensical facts are usually acknowledged: games are not a subset of stories; objects exist that have qualities of both games and stories." Games offer a mixed bag of influences rooted in multiple media and genre traditions, which is a fundamental characteristic of the process of remediation, a term that refers to the way new media "refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media" (Bolter and Grusin 1998, 15). As products of the processes of mediated rearticulation, video games irrevocably share certain characteristics with other media, and the areas in which they overlap offer points of contact with other ways of studying cultural production. Game designers "draw from a rich field of [cultural] topoi and representations that is well established" meaning that the patterns set forth in existing cultural depictions are frequently absorbed into the realm of game design, thus creating "a complex cultural metasign" adapting "familiar motifs from popular literature, art, cinema, or even political discourse" (Reichmuth and Werning 2006, 46). To move forward in the analysis of Latin American cultural simulation in games, then, it is important to recognize the critical traditions already set in place that respond to the multiple forms of cultural representation that precede the medium.

The field of film studies again offers a parallel, insofar as it is the area in which the visual depiction and cultural stereotyping of Latin America have been most thoroughly analyzed to date. Games portray culture through "*stylized simulations*;" developed not just for fidelity to their source domain, but for aesthetic purposes," and moreover, such stylization is "a subjective art that must take into account common perceptions of whatever domain is being simulated" (Juul 2005, 172). Games thus respond to existing notions of culture, serving either to reify or challenge their dominance depending on how such notions are activated in the game realm. For example, the types of "conveniently ahistorical" stereotypes that Charles Ramírez Berg (2002, 17) has analyzed in cinema—*el bandido*, the harlot, the male buffoon, the female clown, the Latin lover, the dark lady, the drug runner, and the inner-city gang member—are frequently reactivated by video-game designers in simulating Latin American culture. Fundamental differences exist in the way players of video games perform and experience these stereotypes, meaning that they have the capacity not only for bolstering negative and simplistic cultural depictions but also for "creating space for the inversion of stereotype, the subversion of gender roles, and the possible transcendence of the binary system" (Hutchinson 2007, 284). Furthermore, video games are inherently distinct "transcoded" products operating not only on this "cultural layer" but also on what Lev Manovich (2001, 46) calls the "computer layer"; that is, they must be understood at their algorithmic roots to fully comprehend their operations and impact.<sup>4</sup> To contextualize these varying elements and functions of cultural simu-

4. In *The Language of New Media*, Manovich (2001, 45–46) explains why "the logic of a computer can be expected to significantly influence the traditional cultural logic of media," noting that "the ways in which the computer models the world, represents data, and allows us to operate on it; the key op-

lation in games, I turn now to an examination of the existing critical approaches to the subject.

#### CULTURE IN GAMES

To date, methodological approaches toward ludological cultural simulations have varied widely, ranging from interpretations of cultural representation as a strict reification of existing negative cultural stereotypes to research exploring the liberatory possibilities contained in games. As Daniel Chávez (2010, 171) notes in his analysis of the dictator role-playing game *Tropico*, the most thoroughly developed critique of in-game Latin American cultural simulation yet published, “the possibilities offered by the ludic universe of simulation games are much broader than some critics seem to recognize.” Indeed, research has too frequently been undertaken without a sense of the methodological differences necessitated by the medium’s particularities. It would be unthinkable to base an analysis of cultural representation in literature strictly on editorial plot summaries on the books’ back covers or anonymous online reviewers’ comments, and likewise we should be skeptical of research that would condemn video games as strict “reproduction[s] of racist ideologies” when that research is based on “informal surveys of video game cover art and game descriptions, print and online game reviews” (Everett 2009, 146, 111). It should go without saying that, to analyze a game, a researcher must play that game, although this is not always as leisurely or enjoyable a pursuit as it may seem—current games routinely require well more than twenty-four hours of fully active play to complete, which means that individual games require much more up-front research time and effort than do films or even many literary works.

Once one commits to playing a game, it is key to do so without prejudgments that can lead to reductive dismissals of the complex cultural dynamics at play. Concluding that games “give life to dominant stereotypes and [give] legitimizing voice to hegemonic discourses about race,” for example, would require more than allegations that “stereotypes can be found in virtually any game,” for example “Arab terrorists in every war game” (Leonard 2006, 84–85). Indeed, the fact that Arab terrorists actually cannot be found in every war game is an indication of the invisibility of cultural portrayals in games, thus demonstrating that they are overlooked even by some of the researchers most closely analyzing the medium’s cultural implications. In contrast, such simplifications can be taken to the opposite extreme, implying that games will solve all of our problems through their capability to “erase, at a stroke, every contribution to human inequality that stems from body differences” (Castronova 2005, 258). Fortunately, the antidote to such idealizations can be found in well-contextualized critiques of the cultural dynamics involved in ludological simulations, which remind us that “changing

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erations behind all computer programs (such as search, match, sort, and filter); the conventions of HCI [human-computer interaction]—in short, what can be called the computer’s ontology, epistemology and pragmatics—influence the cultural layer of new media, its organization, its emerging genres, its contents.” Manovich advocates placing the “computer layer” on equal critical footing with the “cultural layer” in game analysis to attain a more fully grounded comprehension of the medium.

one's skin, . . . within the context of a fighting or shooting game, does not imply any experimentation with the types of real world social privileges that are linked to the skin" (Lahti 2003, 166). Both hyperbolic dismissals and celebratory panegyrics prevent cultural ludology from moving forward,<sup>5</sup> much as research focusing strictly on the paraphernalia surrounding a game without taking into account actual gameplay fails in its attempts to address the complexities of the medium. Games may feature morally questionable actions, but their open structures frequently allow for a great deal of variation in the ways a player can respond to those possibilities, thus creating space for the player to act "against the strategies of 'success' in the game, assuming a critical posture and an ethical perspective" (Chávez 2010, 172). Likewise, we must recognize that video games provide "both the opportunities for the articulation of outsider identities and also the means through which existing normative meanings around gender and race are circulated" (Dovey and Kennedy 2007, 147), and thus we need to take the time to seriously analyze not only those games that obviously participate in the "redeployment and reification of specious racial difference" (Everett 2009, 120) but also the ways in which game designers are undertaking "genuine attempts to transcend the simplifying patterns of representation in video games" (Šisler 2008, 205).

To move toward a more complete recognition of the cultural dynamics at play in the medium, we must accept that games are fundamentally reductive in nature and that this is not strictly a shortcoming. As McKenzie Wark (2007, para. 9) asserts in *Gamer Theory*, "History, politics, culture—gamespace dynamites everything that is not in the game, like an outdated Vegas casino. Everything is evacuated from an empty space and time which now appears natural, neutral, and without qualities—a gamespace." Such reduction, however, serves a purpose. As Rachael Hutchinson (2007, 286) reminds us, even a negatively connoted term such as *stereotype* does not "necessarily mean a negative caricature or discriminatory representation but . . . a representative image of a particular group of people or type of person based on simplified and exaggerated characteristics"; moreover, "there are good reasons for the use of such characters" within the simplified context of gamespace, and "given the importance of assigning simple, consistent distinguishing features to each character, the production of an essentialized image is inevitable." Along the same lines, Anthony Sze-Fai Shiu (2006, 122–123) clarifies that although games cannot be blamed for the genesis of stereotyping, they respond to this tradition: "the conditions for critique lie not in a recuperation of more 'just' subjectivities, but in a recognition of disaffiliation [between the self and the other]," and therefore "it is only with the dissipation of [the] self/other relationship, defined as such, that the replicatory racial, cultural, and romanticized visions of ethnic identity can be put to rest." The game world reflects, to an extent, the dynamics of the world in which it is conceived, and ethics do not exist solely within one realm or the other. Appealing to the concept of ludic practical judgment and ludic maturity as accounting for the relativism of interactions between

5. I use the term *cultural ludology* to denote a focus on game studies through the lens of cultural studies, taking into account both the ways culture is coded into the structure of games and the broader impact of games on society.

players and nonplayer characters in games, Miguel Sicart (2009, 196) explains that “players engage in unethical actions in computer games because those actions have meaning within the game for the player-subject,” and such contextually meaningful actions should not be simply dismissed as legitimizing hegemonic and hierarchical cultural relationships without taking into account the ways they respond to both the endless complexities of the real world and the necessary simplifications of gamespace.

#### CONTRAS, TOMB RAIDERS, AND LUCHADORES

A first major step toward a systematic understanding of the impact of games on Latin American culture—as well as the necessary point of departure for the development of a particularly Latin American ludology—simply involves assessing the range of cultural simulations already in existence and attempting to schematize them within a comprehensible framework that takes into account their similarities while still allowing for their differences.<sup>6</sup> The taxonomies I espouse for such an undertaking—contras, tomb raiders, and luchadores—function dually, on both a literal and a symbolic level. I group as “contras” games that both situate Latin American culture within the realm of paramilitary warfare (beginning with the 1987 NES title *Contra*) and fundamentally provide a counternarrative wherein the region’s citizens are represented only as the anonymous enemy *contra* the American hero. “Tomb raiders” are games that both literally deal with the sacking of ancient gravesites (referencing the successful series that began with the PlayStation title *Tomb Raider* in 1996) and pilfer the symbols and tokens of ancient cultures to create a two-dimensional backdrop to gameplay, all while seldom providing depth to the simulation of the cultures in question. Finally, the category of “luchadores” includes both those games that literally foreground Mexican wrestlers (the actual luchadores of titles like the multiconsole 2010 release *Lucha Libre AAA: Héroes del Ring*) and those engaged with what I see as a deeper struggle—or *lucha*—for a more nuanced simulation of Latin America and its inhabitants. The games that fall into this final category ultimately represent the most promising avenue for further analysis of the simulation of Latin American culture in games.

The games I classify as “contras” include the thematic subcategories of paramilitary warfare in the combat genre (*Contra*, *Tom Clancy’s Rainbow Six* and *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter*, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*), drug-war simulations (*Code Name: Viper*, *Shoot to Kill: Colombia Crackdown*, *Call of Juarez: The Cartel*), historical dramatizations (*Tropico*, *Call of Duty: Black Ops*), and contemporary fictionalizations (*Mercenaries 2*, *Tom Clancy’s Ghost Recon: Island Thunder*). A few such

6. Certainly, this is only a first step. A further step would be focused analyses of particular games, unpacking the algorithmic, cultural, political, and/or economic dynamics surrounding their production, distribution, consumption, and/or impact. In addition, areas beyond the scope of this research report, such as the characterization of US Latinos in video games and the simulation of Latin Americans in sports games, could be productively examined. Such analyses, along with a consideration of the growing regional consumer base and the rapidly expanding list of titles set in the region, will pave the way for broader theorizations of video games’ place in Latin American studies.

games can rightfully be said to pertain to what has been called “the military-entertainment complex” (Huntemann and Payne 2010, 5), insofar as they are the products of relationships between the military and software companies. Most, though, function more in the manner that Claudio Fogu (2009, 118) has described, in which “real names of nations and world leaders, their images and words, all serve to instantiate the ‘historical’ as general referent in the game, not as something to be represented” but rather as a context for “role-playing, simulation, immersion, and interaction, not representation.” Such simulations incorporate historical elements to rewrite history for the purposes of entertainment.

If, as some have suggested, such games have the capacity to change perceptions of history, teaching it as a participatory experience rather than representing it narratologically (Power 2009, 211), then their general historical focus is, of course, driven by a focus on violent conflict. In such a context, Latin America is inscribed within what I would call a broader geography of chaos, an imaginary *Call of Duty* world in which the Brazilian favela is a virtual neighbor to war-torn Afghanistan, and the streets of Havana or a fictitious Cuban nuclear-weapons production facility border the wasteland of Chernobyl and Vietnam’s infamous “Hanoi Hilton” prison camp. Turned into settings for the leisurely pursuit of play, the violence portrayed in war games “is cleaned up, devoid of horrific consequences, civilian casualties, and psychic devastation” (Huntemann 2010, 232). Although such simulations incorporate an ever-expanding variety of local cultural and geographical elements to distinguish these locales—characters voiced by actors who speak Brazilian Portuguese, mural advertisements for the Cuban Comités de Defensa de la Revolución on the streets of Havana, realistic tropical-jungle sound effects—they nevertheless deeply distort the cultural geography they represent, which means that the places in question generally appear as “barren wastelands devoid of civilians and infrastructure in need of saving and U.S. intervention” (King and Leonard 2010, 91). And as Miguel Rafael Montes (2007, 160) has argued in one of the only published works to date focusing specifically on Latin American cultural simulation in games, despite this apparent need for external intervention, the region’s citizens, “far from being the populace to be liberated, are transformed into the enemies who impede the potential advancement from mission to mission.” Such simplifications serve concrete purposes for game designers, and they are becoming ever more complex as technology advances, thereby opening up further territory for the analytical exploration of this genre.

Likewise, the games I refer to as “tomb raiders” fundamentally simplify the complex cultural backdrops against which their action takes place, using the familiar symbols of ancient Latin American cultures (e.g., etched stone petroglyphs depicting gods and cosmography; Mayan, Aztec, and Incan ruins) to create a more fleshed-out context in which to situate the game’s narrative arc. Such games generally employ Latin American geography (and rarely its population) as the setting for treasure-hunting jungle adventures. Generally, such games appear in simplistic incarnations like the 1982 Atari title *Pitfall!* (arguably the first video game set in Latin America), the original *Tomb Raider*, or the first installment of the *Uncharted* series and, so long as they encounter financial success for the software companies designing them, lead to a series of sequels, each more specifically contextualized

within Latin America than the last.<sup>7</sup> Still, these games tend to relegate the symbols and geography of ancient cultures to a background, rarely offering the possibility of interacting with either the contemporary inhabitants of the region or the original ancient culture in question (an exception is the PC-based title *Age of Empires II*, in which players partake in the conquest of Tenochtitlán). Although it would appear that the only updates to the original context of *Pitfall!* have been to render the treasures, jungle animals, quicksand, and gold more realistically, these games nevertheless represent a significant contextualization of Latin American culture for a mass audience.

In light of the exceedingly gradual development of cultural simulations in the first two categories of “contras” and “tomb raiders,” the most fruitful possibilities for complex and nuanced portrayals of Latin American culture exist in the third category I propose, “luchadores.” If we take seriously Frasca’s (2004, 93) assertion that “neither art nor games can change reality, but . . . they can encourage people to question it and to envision possible changes,” then such questions will be raised first and foremost in games seeking to transcend the traditional limitations of genre and technological abilities. Several unique examples exist that demonstrate the potential for contributing to a deeper knowledge and understanding of Latin American culture through gaming, and their rate of development is likely to increase in coming years. The PlayStation 2 title *Just Cause*, set in the fictitious tropical island of San Esperito, is one of the first games with a protagonist of Hispanic descent, thus offering a wide audience of players the possibility of a virtual experimentation with Latin identity, even if “in-game representations do not circulate in a ludological vacuum,” and therefore “there are broader social consequences to consider” (Chan 2005, 29) than just player identification with a protagonist from a different culture than those normally represented in games.

A handful of recent “luchadores” have expanded significantly on this possibility, and they offer some of the most compelling representations of Latin American culture to date. The literal “luchadores” in this case are the characters in the game mentioned above, *Lucha Libre AAA: Héroe del Ring*. Developed by software companies in Mexico, Colombia, and Argentina, the game bears the distinction of being the first multiconsole title developed entirely in Latin America (Sheffield 2010). Marketed internationally in Spanish to an explicitly Latin American and Latino audience, the game also goes into great detail regarding the cultural context of Mexican wrestling. The game begins with a historical review of *lucha libre* that the player can choose to watch in Spanish or English and that reaches back to the 1930s, featuring video clips of luchadores through the ages. In developing their careers, players must choose to align themselves with the *técnicos* or the *rudos*—the classic good-bad character binary of the sport in Mexican culture—after which point they receive instruction on how to properly perform as that type of luchador. Along the way players face off against simulated real-life luchadores, each of whom is provided with a detailed biography that helps connect the game’s fictionalizations with real-life Mexican sports history. As they battle in the

7. See, for example, the sequels *Pitfall: The Mayan Adventure* and *Pitfall: The Lost Expedition*, each of which builds upon the Latin American geographical and cultural contexts of the original *Pitfall*.

octagonal rings in Mexican locales, the crowd cheers and taunts in authentically accented Spanish, rounding out one of the most detailed ludological contextualizations of Latin American culture to date.

*Red Dead Redemption*, developed by Rock Star Games (makers of the rampantly successful and equally polemical *Grand Theft Auto* series), exemplifies the figurative luchador in this preliminary taxonomy—it is a game that has nothing to do with wrestling itself, yet it struggles against the stereotypical norms of Latin American cultural simulation in games. The game, set along the Texas-Mexico border during the Mexican Revolution, follows the protagonist, John Marston, as he seeks revenge for past crimes against him and makes his living by wrangling cattle and assisting various lawmen, outlaws, and shysters. As the game progresses, the presence of the Mexican population increases, and Marston (and thus the player) eventually ends up embroiled in the Revolution itself, first on the side of the federal authorities and later, after becoming disillusioned with their corruption, joining the ranks of peasant revolutionaries. As with other “sandbox” games—those that allow the character to freely roam without the necessity of following a particular narrative trajectory—details, side missions, and diversions abound. When Marston is not corralling steers, he is just as likely to be collecting the herbs of the Sonoran desert for bartering purposes as he is to be learning about the poetry of Mexican corridos from revolutionary leaders. Theatrical scenes on the trail between points of the missions give exposition about the infighting and corruption of the Mexican military during the Revolution while commenting on the divisions and injustices experienced by people at all levels of Mexican society at the time. Newspapers available for purchase go into detail regarding the struggle taking place south of the border, and although many of the Mexican characters are off-center and not entirely likable, this puts them on a level playing field with all the game’s characters, who are all driven by self-interested desires and motivations.

How do these luchadores undermine the stereotypical representation of Latin American characters and culture? *Lucha Libre AAA* does so by providing a distinctly Mexican cultural narrative and historiographic background that provide depth and context for understanding the culture being simulated. *Red Dead Redemption*, in contrast, adheres to a deeply contextualized moral relativism that eliminates the “us versus them” mentality and produces a world in which nobody is right. Both represent significant breaks with the ludological tradition of two-dimensional stereotyping, showing separate paths toward the same end: the development of nuanced and groundbreaking in-game portrayals of Latin American culture. These titles pave the way not only for a new category of cultural simulations but also for the development of a Latin American ludology that not only concentrates on the ways traditional concepts of cultural identity are sealed off by video games but also examines the spaces that the medium opens up for identity negotiation and cultural contemplation.

#### CONCLUSION: POWERING UP

Why should we take video games seriously? The goal of formulating a Latin American ludology is to comprehend the possibilities that are opening up in our

time and to understand the singular distinctions that make video games a worthy, if neglected, medium. These distinctions include those explored above: massive dispersion and consumption, participatory cultural simulation, the remediation of existing expressive traditions, and the capacity to have a profound impact on the way an ever-growing portion of the population sees our world. Joseph Kahne (2009, 62) has posed the question of whether “games designed to challenge problematic stereotypes have their desired effect.” It is perhaps of equal importance to first consider how games developed simply as a popular form of entertainment may already be shaping our comprehension of stereotypes for the worse and for the better, and to question to what extent we can—or should—really separate what happens in gamespace from what happens in the real world.

When shouldn't we take games seriously? In short, when those who bring games into the dialogue are not taking them seriously themselves but are rather using them as mechanisms for the advancement of existing agendas, be they ideological or intellectual. The characters we play—our in-game avatars—act as public citizens, and although they “may act in antisocial and even pathological ways,” they also open up “myriad positive, democratic, and participatory possibilities” (Noveck 2006, 269–270). This is why we need a Latin American ludology—because to date we have not made a vigorous enough attempt to understand the portrayals of the region's culture that are circulating, and thus we are missing out on the possibilities unfolding before us.

Real-life experience today is melding with virtual experience, and virtual experiences are contributing ever more to the way we live and understand our real lives. Video games have been said to “commodify our cyborg desires, our will to merge with and become technology” (Lahti 2003, 166), and it is essential to understand this melding not as a simplification or diminishment of past formulations of culture, but as an expansion of the possibilities for the future. We live in an age in which powerful experiences are taking place in the virtual realm. Grant Tavinor (2011, 179) recently reflected, “One of my most vivid recent memories is riding my horse into Mexico for the first time in the open-world videogame *Red Dead Redemption*. It was late in the day and the sun was hanging low in the sky over the San Luis River, the reflections of distant mountains and rock formations on its rippling surface. The landscape was one of flowering cacti, bleached white sand and brilliant orange rocks.” It is no longer time to ask whether games are worth studying; it is time to commit to the recognition that games today are lived experiences, deeply affecting the way the world understands Latin American culture and the way Latin Americans understand themselves. After all, as Ian Bogost (2007, 340) emphatically reminds us, “despite the computers that host them, despite the futuristic and mechanical fictional worlds they often render, videogames are not expressions of the machine. They are expressions of being human. And the logics that drive our games make claims about who we are, how our world functions, and what we want it to become.” This is why the development of Latin American ludology is urgent for us today; it represents an attempt to understand who we are as a field, how our area of research functions, and what we want it to become as the future unfolds and our lived and virtual experiences overlap and become one.

## APPENDIX

*Latin American Culture in Games: A Preliminary Chronological Taxonomy*

Title	Release year	Tomb Raiders (T), Contras (C), Luchadores (L)	Latin American setting(s) or approximate setting(s)
<i>Pitfall!</i>	1982	T	Amazon (?)
<i>Contra</i>	1987	C	Unnamed South American island
<i>Ninja Gaiden</i>	1989	T	Amazon
<i>Code Name: Viper</i>	1990	C	South American jungle
<i>The Amazon Trail</i>	1994	T	Brazil and Peru
<i>Pitfall: The Mayan Adventure</i>	1994	T	Mexico
<i>A-10 Cuba!</i>	1996	C	Guantánamo Bay, Cuba
<i>Tomb Raider</i>	1996	T	Peru
<i>Grim Fandango</i>	1998	T	Mexico-based "land of the dead"
<i>Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six</i>	1998	C	Brazil
<i>Age of Empires II: The Conquerors Expansion</i>	2000	T	Tenochtitlán, Mexico
<i>Tropico</i>	2001	C	Caribbean and Central America
<i>Shoot to Kill: Colombian Crackdown</i>	2003	C	Colombia
<i>Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Island Thunder</i>	2003	C	Cuba
<i>Pitfall: The Lost Expedition</i>	2004	T	El Dorado
<i>Psychonauts</i>	2005	L	Mexico
<i>Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory</i>	2005	C	Peru
<i>Total Overdose: A Gunslinger's Tale in Mexico</i>	2005	C	Mexico
<i>Just Cause</i>	2006	L	San Esperito (fictitious tropical island)
<i>Terrorist Takedown: War in Colombia</i>	2006	C	Colombia
<i>Tomb Raider: Legend</i>	2006	T	Bolivia and Peru
<i>Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter</i>	2006	C	Mexico City and Nicaragua
<i>Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Double Agent</i>	2006	C	Mexico City
<i>Call of Juarez</i>	2007	C	Mexico
<i>Tomb Raider: Anniversary</i>	2007	T	Peru
<i>Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter 2</i>	2007	C	Ciudad Juárez, Mexico
<i>Uncharted: Drake's Fortune</i>	2007	T	Amazon and El Dorado
<i>Ninja Gaiden 2</i>	2008	T	Amazon
<i>Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots</i>	2008	C	South America
<i>Conflict: Denied Ops</i>	2008	C	Venezuela
<i>Mercenaries 2: World in Flames</i>	2008	C	Venezuela

<i>Global Conflicts: Latin America</i>	2008	C	Bolivia, Guatemala, and Mexico
<i>Tomb Raider: Underworld</i>	2008	T	Mexico
<i>Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2</i>	2009	C	Brazil
<i>Call of Juarez: Bound in Blood</i>	2009	C	Mexico
<i>Resident Evil: Darkside Chronicles</i>	2009	C	South America
<i>Tropico 3</i>	2009	C	Caribbean and Central America
<i>Call of Duty: Black Ops</i>	2010	C	Cuba
<i>Lucha Libre AAA: Héroes del Ring</i>	2010	L	Mexico
<i>Red Dead Redemption</i>	2010	L	Mexico
<i>Tropico 4</i>	2011	C	Caribbean and Central America
<i>Call of Juarez: The Cartel</i>	2011	C	Mexico
<i>Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Future Soldier</i>	2012	C	Nicaragua and Bolivia
<i>Max Payne 3</i>	2012	L	São Paulo, Brazil
<i>Counter-Strike: Global Offensive</i>	2012	C	Aztec ruins in Mexico and sugar and drug plantations in unnamed Latin American locations
<i>Call of Duty: Black Ops II</i>	2012	C	Nicaragua and Panama

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