

# Production Dynamics in Indigenous Latin American Games: *From, With or About*

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## INTRODUCTION

The video game industry in Latin America, amidst its increasing relevance in global markets, faces distinct challenges and opportunities, particularly in its engagement with indigenous cultures and narratives. The representation of indigenous people has been increasing in the last decade, especially in Mexico and Peru, however the participation of indigenous peoples in the development is still lacking in these processes, and even more if we look for projects developed from those communities. This research project focuses on the nuanced dynamics within game design and production in this context, specifically examining the implications and methodologies involved in creating video games in collaboration with indigenous communities versus those developed about these cultures without their direct participation. The representation of indigenous cultures in Latin American video games transcends mere artistic expression. It is deeply intertwined with historical, cultural, political, and ethical dimensions. This investigation aims to unravel how these representations are shaped within the gaming industry and to understand the broader consequences of these practices.

Key to this study is the analysis of Lienzo, an indie game studio from Chihuahua, Mexico. Lienzo's works, particularly *Mulaka* (Lienzo 2018) and *Aztech: Forgotten Gods* (Lienzo 2021) serve as pivotal case studies to explore the contrast between games developed "with" indigenous communities and those created "about" them in their absence. *Mulaka* emerges as an exemplar in this context, having been developed in close collaboration with the Rarámuri community. This partnership resulted in a game that not only authentically reflects the culture and beliefs of the Rarámuri people but also demonstrates the rich potential of such collaborative endeavors.

In contrast, *Aztech: Forgotten Gods* represents a different approach, developed without direct indigenous collaboration. While it offers a speculative and imaginative interpretation of Aztec culture, it arguably lacks the authenticity and depth that might have been achieved through direct community involvement. This distinction highlights the varied outcomes of different developmental approaches and underscores the importance of ethical considerations in game design.

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The study adopts a decolonial framework, emphasizing the importance of dismantling colonial legacies in cultural production, especially in contexts involving historically marginalized communities. It employs a qualitative methodology, combining textual analysis of the games with interviews and secondary literature, to understand the broader socio-cultural context and the specific production dynamics of each game. The research also engages with concepts of nature as relation, such as the one of Chicueyi Coatl (2021), the Rarámuri worked by Servín (2015), and "oikeios," as proposed by Moore (2015), to analyze the depiction of nature and the environment in these games, underlining how indigenous conceptions of nature can offer alternative narratives to mainstream gaming tropes.

A critical aspect of the research is the examination of the ethical responsibilities of game developers when representing indigenous cultures. This includes a discussion on the implications of commodifying indigenous spirituality and culture for entertainment purposes. The study highlights the potential risks of perpetuating stereotypes and misrepresentations when developers work "about" indigenous cultures without involving them in the creative process. Conversely, it demonstrates how collaborations "with" indigenous communities can lead to more nuanced, respectful, and enriching representations.

The findings of this research are multifaceted. *Mulaka* represents a successful model of collaborative development, where the inclusion of the Rarámuri not only enriched the game's narrative and authenticity but also fostered a respectful portrayal of their culture. This approach also benefited the community, providing a platform for their cultural expressions and narratives. On the other hand, *Aztech: Forgotten Gods*, while an ambitious project, reflects the limitations and challenges of developing a game about an indigenous culture without direct community engagement. The analysis shows how this approach can lead to superficial representations and missed opportunities for deeper cultural exploration and understanding.

This research contributes significantly to the discourse on game production in Latin America, particularly in the context of indigenous representations. It offers a critical perspective on the practices and decisions that shape how indigenous cultures are portrayed in video games. By highlighting the differences between developing games "with" or "about" these communities, the study provides valuable insights for game developers, scholars, and players interested in ethical and culturally sensitive game design.

In conclusion, this project underscores the necessity for a nuanced, responsible approach to game development in Latin America, particularly when it involves indigenous cultures and narratives. It advocates for collaborative practices that respect and involve indigenous communities, ensuring their narratives and cultures are represented authentically and respectfully. This research not only contributes to academic discourse but also serves as a guideline for future game developers, encouraging practices that are ethically sound and culturally enriching, paving the way for a more inclusive and respectful gaming industry.

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