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Game design as multimodal intervention: Exploring Cuban media reality through the ethnographic video game *PakeTown*

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Abstract

The mobile video game PakeTown presents an ethnographic depiction of the history of alternative media distribution in Cuba. It is a joint project between a multimodal anthropologist and a Cuban media artist working with ConWiro, an independent Cuban game studio. We discuss our game as a multimodal intervention that generated new conversations with our research participants, new modes of collaboration, as well as new knowledge about our field that we wouldn't have been able to gather through traditional (non-interventionist) fieldwork methods such as interviews and participant observation. Developing PakeTown in conjunction with one of the initial video game companies in Cuba's still tightly regulated private sector provided a valuable understanding of how its founders, as key figures in the islands' emergent digital culture, overcame complex technological and political constraints at a time of profound social change. Moreover, the process of designing and marketing the game to resonate with local audiences offered us intriguing new insights into Cubans' everyday media consumption patterns. A supplemental guide to teaching this article is available at visualanthropologyreview.org/var411-suppl-koehn.

KEYWORDS
design anthropology, game design, intervention, multimodal anthropology, offline media culture

INTRODUCTION

PakeTown explores the unique history of Cuba's innovative offline media distribution through an immersive mobile game.[1] This project is a collaboration between an anthropologist (Steffen Köhn), a Cuban media artist (Nestor Siré), and one of Cuba's first independent video game studios, ConWiro. Games have recently garnered increasing anthropological interest (Collins et al., 2017; Farías & Sánchez Criado, 2023; Harper et al., 2023; Petridis, 2021). Anthropologists now not only conduct research on global video game cultures, as demonstrated by studies by Tom Boellstorff (2008), Bonnie Nardi (2010), Alex Golub (2010), Celia Pearce et al. (2011), or T.L. Taylor (2018), but are also actively exploring the potential of games, particularly digital games, to effectively engage with complex phenomena or concepts. As the lives of the people we study become increasingly intertwined with both games and gaming logic, such as "gamification" (Scholz, 2012) and "playbor" (Kücklich, 2005), practitioners contend that anthropologists have an obligation to engage with these media.

In their recent theorization of multimodal methods in anthropology, Samuel Collins and Matthew Durington argue that anthropological experiments with games generally fall into

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three broad categories: "games for teaching," "games for fieldwork," and "games as ethnography" (Collins & Durington, 2024: 95ff). In this article, we demonstrate how our game *PakeTown* serves multiple purposes within this framework. It represents our ethnographic research in an interactive, immersive manner that is accessible to students, colleagues, and wider audiences (aligning with the categories of "games for teaching" and "games as ethnography"). Additionally, the game has functioned as an elicitation instrument, sparking new conversations with our interlocutors and generating fresh insights, thus also serving as a powerful tool for fieldwork. However, we argue that the extended process of producing this game resulted in something more. It constituted an impactful intervention into the very social context we are studying by reaching a wide local audience, bringing to the surface the complicated relationship between independent Cuban media producers and the state, helping to launch a new local economic model for monetizing video games, and creating increased attention for the nascent Cuban video game industry. Thus, the game became a product of the quintessentially Cuban inventiveness it portrays. In discussing how our game became a part of contemporary Cuban media reality, our aim is to delineate broader conceptual and methodological insights about the potential of multimodal anthropology as an inventive and interventionist research practice. We seek to examine how collaborative multimodal interventions within an ethnographic context can provoke situations and processes that lead to understandings often inaccessible through conventional research methods based solely on participant observation and interviews.

INFORMAL MEDIA DISTRIBUTION IN CUBA

Before we analyze the processes of conceptualizing, making, and disseminating the game, we briefly want to provide some context on the social phenomena documented in *PakeTown*. Despite the state's persistent restrictions on internet access, driven by government concerns over freedom of information and expression, Cubans have demonstrated remarkable resilience and ingenuity in surmounting these challenges.[2] They have developed a ubiquitous alternative data distribution network that spans the whole island and facilitates access to global media content such as pirated films, TV shows, Brazilian, Mexican, or Turkish telenovelas, music, software, or mobile phone applications. Business-savvy entrepreneurs have founded compilation studios called *casas matrices* that coordinate the daily download of large amounts of data through a network of people with privileged access to the official internet infrastructure in government workplaces, universities, or tourist hotels. These rivaling businesses compile a weekly collection of data, known as *el paquete semanal* (the weekly package) or simply *el paquete*, which amounts to approximately one terabyte, houses between 15,000 and 18,000 files, and is organized as a recurring structure of files and folders. An army of people working as *paqueteros* (delivery persons) then ensure that this treasure trove of content reaches all parts of the country by delivering it directly to customers' homes on hard drives. Additionally, individual media files, including the latest episodes of popular series, are sold to customers who bring USB sticks at *puntos de copia* (copy stores) that exist in every neighborhood across cities and even in the remotest villages. This phenomenon has its roots in older networks of informal media circulation dating as far back as the 1970s, when paperback novels marked the initial wave of entertainment materials circulating beyond government control after the Revolution, and later involving VHS cassettes and DVDs (Figure 1).

Players of *PakeTown* can playfully engage with this fascinating history by assuming the role of enterprising individuals within Cuba's informal media sector and running their own media business. The game unfolds across five distinct levels, each representing a different decade. At the outset, players generate income by renting out romance and western novels, which later enables them to invest in VHS recorders, cassettes, and illicit satellite antennas that unlock access to American and Latin-American TV programming. As the game progresses, players must adapt to changing media formats, such as DVDs and ultimately



FIGURE 1 A local data copy store in Camagüey, Cuba. Image Courtesy of Nestor Siré.

hard drives, which gained prominence with the increased availability of computers on the island during the 2000s after Raúl Castro's economic reform course. The ultimate goal of the game is to grow one's business by satisfying customers and keeping pace with technological advancements.

TRANSLATING ETHNOGRAPHIC FINDINGS BETWEEN MEDIA FORMATS: *PakeTown* AS ETHNOGRAPHY

As a work of multimodal anthropology, *PakeTown* draws upon—and represents—extensive ethnographic and artistic research. Steffen Köhn has engaged in fieldwork over numerous years with key players in Cuba's digital sphere (Köhn, 2019, 2025a, 2025b). Nestor Siré, on the other hand, brings a unique perspective to the project, having grown up in a family immersed in small-scale media entrepreneurship, where his grandfather and uncle made a living by renting out paperback novels and VHS cassettes. Nestor Siré's multifaceted artistic practice further frequently intervenes in the ingenious methods employed by his fellow Cuban citizens for media, information, and goods distribution. As a result of our ongoing collaboration, we have published research papers (2022a, 2022b), a video essay (2023), and created several art installations that explore the diverse realms of Cuban media culture. As neither of us had any prior experience with developing video games, we teamed up with the Havana-based game studio ConWiro. ConWiro is led by CEO and founder Rafael Martínez and technical lead Javier Domínguez. The team further included key members such as art director Orestes Suarez, unity developer Aniel Ramos, 2D artist Lázaro Piñol, and back-end lead Alejandro González. Prior to our collaboration, ConWiro had already achieved success with the completion of four video games, including a commissioned project promoting a Cuban dating app and a highly popular street racing game. Over the course of nearly 2 years, our collaborative efforts involved extensive discussions on game mechanics, debates on graphic designs, and multiple playtesting sessions.

To convey what we knew about *el paquete's* fascinating distribution system, we designed the game around the central idea of allowing players to take on the point of view (POV) of an entrepreneur in the informal Cuban media sphere. Aesthetically and conceptually, *PakeTown* thus belongs to the genre of business simulation and tycoon games. The inspiration for the game arose when we observed the significant popularity and consumption of business simulation games such as *Pizza Syndicate*, *FarmVille*, and *Resort Tycoon* in Cuba, which were a recurrent content of *el paquete*. We were intrigued by how these games resonated with audiences despite, or perhaps due to, the numerous restrictions imposed on the Cuban private sector. Games scholar Ian Bogost (2007) discusses how the mechanics of a game consciously

or unconsciously convey a certain worldview or ideology by promoting or discouraging specific behaviors (the most obvious example being Monopoly which conveys both the fun and folly of capitalism). He refers to this persuasive potential of games as their "procedural rhetoric." While much informal media circulation in Cuba occurs through social infrastructures like networks of friends and families, *el paquete semanal* operates as a large-scale business operation with intense competition. Considering this structure, we found that the format of a business simulation game (that uses individualistic competition as its primary mechanism) aligned well with our observations and research on *el paquete*'s distribution system.

Players run their own copy store in *PakeTown*. They need to ensure they have a diverse selection of popular books, films, and TV shows to meet the demands of their NPC (non-player character) customers who visit the players' copy store with specific requests. Players must fulfill their clients' demands by providing the requested items, earning rewards, and building a reputation as a reliable source for sought-after media. Players must further manage their resources effectively. This involves tasks such as creating, copying, and overseeing the inventory of media products and guaranteeing a consistent and diverse supply of fresh content. Additionally, it entails allocating funds for enhancing the store's conditions and facilitating its gradual expansion. Furthermore, they must safeguard their costly equipment, such as antennas, from theft or potential decommissioning by the authorities, while also earmarking funds for routine maintenance and upgrades. As players successfully fulfill media requests and provide quality service, their reputation within the community grows. A positive reputation attracts more customers and opens up new opportunities for expansion and advancement within the informal media distribution network. This reputation is quantified through a popularity bar and a score that reflects the players' standing and recognition among their clientele. The game thus communicates our research in a way that audiences can experience and feel, rather than just read and imagine. The following video is a condensed playthrough created to showcase *PakeTown*'s gameplay mechanics and visual appeal (Figure 2).[3]

Since our initial concept aimed to trace *el paquete*'s roots back to older media distribution infrastructures like book and VHS cassette rentals, a connection that was not widely known, we recognized the importance of conducting additional biographical interviews. We wanted to gather specific details that would help us accurately depict the various decades covered by the game. Therefore, we actively sought out individuals who were involved in informal media distribution during the 1970s to 1990s and engaged them in our research process. We specifically requested these individuals to share any photographs, books, cassettes, or other relevant items they might still possess. Further, we engaged with individuals who are currently involved in the business of selling digital data, utilizing various elicitation methods. One such method involved using photographs, sourced from Nestor Siré's archive or other research participants, as visual prompts during the interviews. Additionally, we conducted



FIGURE 2 The playthrough video of PakeTown is available here https://youtu.be/wSw6PbCcQcw?si=pI3yF9xZcNN1QM_A.

"screen walks," wherein we recorded the process of copy shop owners explaining how they organized their data collection on their computers.[4]

Through this investigation, we were able to obtain vivid and highly detailed descriptions of the day-to-day operations of informal media circulation. These accounts provided fascinating insights into the specific media contents that were popular during different decades. Additionally, we learned about the most widely available VCR and antenna models at the time. Furthermore, our interviews and interactions shed light on the measures implemented by the government to regulate or control these informal business activities. Many of the rich ethnographic details we gathered during this research have been incorporated into the game. The specific media items (displayed in small speech bubbles above their heads) that the NPC customers request in different decades represent the books, films, and TV shows that were highly sought after during those periods. The in-game artwork depicts objects such as general decorations and furniture, televisions, video cassettes, computers, fans, air conditioners, stereos, and printers that are available for purchase to furnish the copy shop. These objects accurately reflect the models that were available for sale in Cuba during each era. The objects undergo changes as the game progresses, with each level symbolizing a different decade and introducing new technological devices in alignment with the historical context (Figure 3).

The logos that players can choose for their businesses are inspired by the real logos that the first matrices put at the beginning of the VHS tapes they rented or the DVDs they copied. The shop that players open at the beginning is located in the hallway of a private home, which is a common arrangement for private businesses in Cuba. This is primarily due to the financial constraints faced by business owners, who often lack the funds to rent a separate sales space, and because, prior to the reforms introduced during Raul Castro's tenure after 2010, there was no legalized private housing market in Cuba.

Furthermore, the experiences shared by our research participants have directly influenced the game mechanics. As many individuals told us about the risks of being involved in such an informal business activity, we included the protection of their equipment as an additional task players have to undertake. They need to strategize and implement measures to avoid detection and potential decommissioning of their equipment by state representatives. This involves hiding satellite antennas in water tanks or investing in anti-theft structures to safeguard Wi-Fi antennas. Engaging in these activities allows players to understand how digital media are organized, distributed, and consumed on the island. The game further conveys this phenomenon's political, economic, and social context, thus illustrating the social impact of the increasing democratization of digital technologies. It allows users to experience firsthand the changes in the means of distribution and reception that have shaped the Cuban media sphere since the 1970s.



FIGURE 3 Development stages of all items players can buy to advance in the game.

While we believe we successfully rendered the everyday work involved in running a successful copy store, we were unable to fully incorporate the networked aspects of the *paquete* phenomenon. Despite having numerous ideas for multiplayer modes—where players could compete online, exerting influence in specific Havana neighborhoods, and trading media archives as real copy stores often do—technical limitations and the predominantly offline Cuban media context prevented us from implementing these features. The figure of the *paquetero*, who serves as the main interface with the *paquete* infrastructure for Cuban media consumers not frequenting copy stores, appears in the game only as a side character. Players can use him to earn extra income by sending him to clients' homes. However, this portrayal fails to capture the *paqueteros'* social roles, which often include providing personal recommendations based on their intimate knowledge of customers' individual tastes. To reduce complexity, we also did not allow players to specialize in specific media genres, as real copy stores often do. We could not devise a functional mechanism to reflect how such specialization would impact a player's success.

The lack of possible interaction between players initially also resulted in a lack of competition within the game, causing the first version we playtested to become quickly boring for many testers, as it lacked a definitive ending or goal. To address this issue, we integrated a global ranking system visible to all *PakeTown* players, allowing them to compare the success of their businesses through their popularity scores. Additionally, we introduced five different medals that players can earn by reaching specific score thresholds. This provides them with tangible goals to strive for within *PakeTown*'s otherwise open-ended gameplay.

The choice of a business simulation game format, which typically encourages individualistic rather than cooperative play, still made sense because such games are among the most popular content in the *paquete*. Consequently, this genre was already familiar to Cuban media consumers. This made it, for the purposes of our project, an ideal platform to give our research on the history of the *paquete* an artistic, interactive, and locally meaningful form. We hoped that it would provide users the opportunity to view a mass cultural phenomenon from a fresh new perspective. While we recognized the power of the video game medium to effectively communicate rich ethnographic detail and directly immerse players in the captivating cultural practices we aimed to portray, the process of producing and distributing the game within the complex Cuban political and technological landscape quickly proved to be an invaluable source of knowledge in its own right. The challenges and limitations we encountered throughout this journey provided us with a deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics and constraints faced by individuals operating within the Cuban private sector.

GENERATING KNOWLEDGE THROUGH COLLABORATION: *PakeTown* AS A TOOL FOR FIELDWORK

Beyond serving as a medium for disseminating ethnographic knowledge, *PakeTown*'s production process itself generated fascinating new insights. It allowed us to witness firsthand how individuals within Cuba's emergent digital culture ingeniously navigated not only the complex technological and political constraints imposed by government restrictions but also the punitive US trade embargo that limits Cubans' access to technological devices as well as digital platforms and tools. Furthermore, the design and marketing process of the game provided intriguing observations into Cuban audiences' specific media consumption patterns and tastes. Multimodal anthropology offers a fertile ground for collaborative endeavors, providing researchers with the opportunity to actively engage and collaborate with diverse stakeholders, including both interlocutors and broader community members. As noted by Holmes and Marcus (2005), contemporary anthropologists often engage with "cultures of expertise," referring to contexts that are populated by highly knowledgeable professionals. In these situations, anthropological work often revolves around shared concerns and takes

the form of epistemic collaboration. Our work with the game studio ConWiro serves as an excellent example of this.

Drawing from their expertise in developing successful indie games, the ConWiro crew consistently challenged our ideas, compelling us to reevaluate and refine our vision. This dynamic reconfigured the traditional ethnographer-interlocutor relationship we were accustomed to and fostered a more horizontal form of collaboration where we placed trust in our collaborators' expertise. Furthermore, several members of the ConWiro team had acquired software programming skills through Havana's community computer network SNET, another grassroots response to the constraints of internet access in Cuba through which users also share media files (Köhn & Siré, 2022a). This background gave them a para-ethnographic interest in and understanding of Cuban alternative media distribution, which proved invaluable to our project. As all of them had grown up accessing foreign media through informal distribution networks, they not only contributed their intimate knowledge of the game's subject matter but also their extensive expertise in game design. Consequently, their role oscillated between being research participants and media professionals who actively engaged in the analysis and translated it into an accessible game form.

In this context, the ConWiro studio effectively became a second fieldsite for our research, a place where not only our multimodal artifact was shaped but also new ethnographic situations emerged. Spending significant time at their office in Habana Vieja provided us with an intimate impression of the challenges and intricacies involved in running a digital business in Cuba. We witnessed firsthand how Rafael, responsible for business operations, and Javier and his team, overseeing the technical aspects, tackled both internal and external challenges. Internally, they confronted obstacles such as restricted internet access, bureaucratic barriers, limited venture funding opportunities, and a feeble legal framework for private enterprises. Externally, they grappled with additional limitations imposed by the US embargo, such as exclusion from international payment systems and restricted access to vital software and programming tools.

One of ConWiro's most challenging endeavors was to obtain legal recognition for their company in a country that continues to constrain private economic activity and protect its state monopolies, particularly in the technology sector. Because Rafael's first private business, a laser tag arena, was closed by local state authorities due to their disapproval of his activities, he tirelessly explored various options to achieve the desired legal status. Despite the state's discontinuation of licenses for private software developers, Conwiro managed to find a solution by registering their company as an independent studio of audiovisual production with the national *Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos* (ICAIC, Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry). Once they obtained official recognition, ConWiro wasted no time in establishing connections with state institutions to be able to distribute *PakeTown* through official channels, such as Apklis. Apklis serves as the state-run national app store, providing an alternative to the Google Play and Apple App Store to which access is restricted by the US trade embargo against Cuba. This platform features a variety of local Cuban applications as well as some pirated international ones. This accomplishment was the outcome of skillful negotiation and rapport-building with state representatives, with Rafael effectively advocating for his company's interests. Our involvement in these processes gave us fascinating insights into the extent of maneuverability individuals can have within the rigid Cuban political system and how they navigate extralegal and unregulated spaces. It showcased the potential for leveraging opportunities while working within the boundaries of the existing framework.

The ConWiro team encountered additional challenges and limitations imposed by US policies. Despite the United States allocating substantial funds to “digital democracy” programs in Cuba (Eaton, 2021), US law still compels its tech companies to comply with sanctions on their software and services. Consequently, Cuban Internet users face various difficulties in accessing widely used applications such as Zoom, Spotify, or the Adobe Creative Cloud. These limitations effectively hinder their ability to directly purchase digital goods or services

from US companies. For ConWiro, these restrictions had specific implications. To access the cross-platform game engine Unity, which they utilized to develop *PakeTown*, they had to resort to using a VPN (Virtual Private Network). Moreover, they had to rely on a contact in the United States to upload their games to the Apple app store to make them available to international audiences.

In a significant contribution, Stephanie Takaragawa et al. (2019) have cautioned against assuming that multimodal approaches in anthropology are inherently liberatory. They highlight that the digital technologies and infrastructures enabling these approaches can inadvertently perpetuate power hierarchies by either indulging in techno-fetishism or masking neocolonial forms of exploitation. Their work prompts important questions about how technologies function, who produces them, and under what conditions they are created. They call on anthropologists to reflect on how many technologies we use in our discipline are deeply involved in the oppression of people and communities. These tools, for example, often perpetuate labor inequalities, resource disparities, and disconnection from land, and they disproportionately impact marginalized populations in developing regions and minority groups in developed nations. Although our project relied on software and digital infrastructures created in the capitalist technological hubs of the Global North, it heightened our awareness of the global power imbalances that Takaragawa and colleagues urge us to consider. The restrictive impacts of US digital imperialism were evident in ConWiro's daily efforts to develop the game. Recognizing that our Cuban audience would face barriers in accessing the game through global app stores, we resorted to the established alternative distribution channels within the island. Consequently, we decided to publish the game on Apklis as well as through *el paquete*, where we made the game available as a file that users could sideload onto their phones. Hence, by utilizing the existing local distribution infrastructures, our game became more than just a representation of the phenomenon; it effectively became an integral part of the phenomenon itself.

PakeTown AS A MULTIMODAL INTERVENTION

Our collaboration with ConWiro provided us with firsthand experience of the obstacles they faced in their day-to-day work. The experience of having an agency (and a product to market) gave us a much deeper understanding of the Cuban informal media sector than could have been achieved through participant observation alone. The release and distribution of the game within the domestic Cuban market represented an intervention that thus went beyond the observational conventions of ethnography. We actively aimed to make our game successful in the competitive attention economy of Cuban media consumption. By embracing this agential role, we sought to navigate the intricate dynamics of the Cuban media landscape and understand how our game could resonate with and capture the tastes of Cuban audiences. As we chose to represent our research not as an academic article or book, but as a video game that traversed the same media distribution networks it depicted, *PakeTown* became an ethnographic artifact that reverberated within the very social context it emerged from. It unfolded as both a response to and a product of the boundless creativity and inventiveness we witnessed in Cuban social life, not only at the ConWiro office but among all our research participants who were engaged in the informal Cuban media sector. We wanted to create something that was intricately shaped by the social practices it portrayed while at the same time being of immediate local concern and relevance. Therefore, we conceptualized our approach as a multimodal intervention, an anthropological medium that not only conveyed knowledge but became a trigger, sparking discussions and reflections among our research participants and leaving a tangible material presence in the field.

The disciplinary approach that has arguably delved the deepest into theorizing ethnography as intervention is design anthropology. However, many existing interpretations of design anthropology have tended to subordinate ethnography to the needs of design, as is

noticeable, for example, in the ethnomethodological tradition of research within the field of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI). Moreover, in our own design collaboration, we were less interested in changing social realities for the better, as advocated in many contemporary design anthropology approaches (Gunn et al., 2013; Pink et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2016). Instead, our design process with ConWiro was focused on gaining a profound understanding of and reflecting upon the specific Cuban economic and sociotechnological landscape. We utilized the creation of the game as a catalyst to establish new fieldwork situations. Our objective was to build a platform for meaningful dialogue and reflection with our research participants. Consequently, we viewed our collaboration as a reciprocal exchange, reinforcing mutual relationships (Otto, 2013). In the case of ConWiro, our ability to channel funds from the German Embassy and the Goethe Institute into the local digital economy during the economic challenges of the pandemic served as our way of reciprocating the support we received from our interlocutors during our research. Furthermore, for the broader Cuban audience of the game, *PakeTown* provided a gamified representation of a specific local phenomenon. This rendition served as an invitation, encouraging individuals to contemplate its history and cultural significance.

Adolfo Estalella and Tomás Sánchez Criado (2023) have described the outcomes of such experimental epistemic collaboration between anthropologists and their counterparts as "field devices." In their perspective, these field devices devise the dispositions for ethnographic encounters in a manner that goes beyond the standardized framework of conventional research methods. Unlike the stability and standardization typically associated with research methods, they envision field devices as provisional arrangements that do not emerge from meticulous research designs but rather from creative tinkering and improvisation in response to particular field conditions. This reaffirms their idea that ethnography, above all, is an act of invention.

In our collaboration with ConWiro, our collective goal was not merely centered around the goal of producing such a field device for representing our findings or stimulating further discussions with our interlocutors. We wanted to create a successful product that specifically catered to and had a tangible impact on the local market and aligned with the preferences of Cuban audiences. To ensure we captured the essence of Cuban media circulation, we conducted several game testing sessions using beta versions of our game and thus invited more participants into the process. These sessions involved friends and acquaintances from the technological and gaming communities, which were also part of the communities we studied during our fieldwork. By involving them, we gained valuable feedback and insights into their expectations for a game about Cuban media circulation, allowing us to fine-tune our approach and ensure that we "got it right."

To facilitate communication and gather feedback from our playtesters, we established a group on Telegram, a platform that became increasingly important for Cubans during the pandemic for trading scarce goods and sharing information about the availability of products in state-run stores (Köhn & Siré, 2022b). This group allowed us to ask specific questions, conduct impromptu polls, and engage in discussions regarding the game mechanics and aesthetics. Through this interactive process, we encountered numerous reflexive situations where our ideas were challenged. One significant realization was that many players expressed a desire to arrange the furniture and equipment in the store according to their preferences. Initially, we had not considered providing this level of creative freedom, as it seemed to primarily serve aesthetic purposes without directly impacting gameplay. However, through the feedback and discussions with our playtesters, we recognized the importance of allowing players to personalize their store setup. This aspect, alongside the ability to choose a name and a logo, contributed to the sense of ownership and immersion, making the business truly their own. Game testing thus emerged as a peculiarly recursive mode of ethnographic inquiry that led to unexpected revelations (Farías & Sánchez Criado, 2023). Playtesters further had a direct impact on the successful completion of the game as they helped us find and eliminate all bugs in the beta versions.

After the release of *PakeTown*, we utilized our connections with Cuban journalists and social media influencers to generate media coverage for the game. We were interviewed by independent online platforms such as OnCubaNews and Hypermedia, which provided valuable exposure for the game. Additionally, we received reviews from various sources, including outlets like *Juventud Técnica*, which is a Cuban state press publication, and were interviewed by the provincial community television channel in Camagüey. Notably, several Cuban YouTubers who specialize in covering gaming also reported on the game, and some players from our game-testing community further contributed to its visibility and reach by creating gameplay videos. At this stage, the framing, discussion, and interpretation of the game had entered the Cuban media sphere and were beyond our control. We could only wait and observe how the key figures in the Cuban video game world would respond to our intention to transform the island's media reality into a simulation (Figure 4).

To further promote the game in Cuba, we also made arrangements for public presentations. However, obtaining permission to showcase the game at a state institution proved to be more challenging than initially expected. Staff members at Havana's *Palacio Central de Computación*, the headquarters of the nationwide network of government-run *Joven Clubs de Computación* (youth computer clubs), expressed concerns about the political implications of featuring a game centered around an extralegal phenomenon.[5] As a result of these concerns, we were unable to present the game at a state institution in the Cuban capital. Instead, we opted to organize an event at *Espacios Creativos*, a recently established creative space in Habana Vieja. This space is funded by the European Union and falls under the jurisdiction of the *Oficina del Historiador de la Habana* (Office of the Havana Historian), an institution primarily responsible for the restoration of the city's Old Town. The *Oficina del Historiador de la Habana* maintains a degree of autonomy from the government due to its management of its own funds, which include contributions from various sources, including international organizations. During the event, we organized a public talk with Rafael, the founder of ConWiro, where we discussed the development process and the underlying ideas behind the game. In addition, we also extended invitations to several local independent game designers to showcase and discuss their own ongoing projects. By inviting these designers, we aimed to foster a sense of community and collaboration within the Cuban game development scene (Figure 5).

Interestingly, we observed that the concerns raised by the leadership of the *Palacio Central de Computación* in Havana were less prominent in other regions. In fact, the director of the youth computer club in Camagüey allowed us to present *PakeTown* to club members and the broader interested public. This highlighted once more the varying levels of discretion exercised by decision-makers within the hierarchical state structures of the country. In Camagüey, we organized a quiz to engage the audience and test their knowledge about the



FIGURE 4 PakeTown (as seen on the screen in the background) is the subject of discussion on a Cuban YouTube channel dedicated to video games. Screenshot from the YouTube video Paketown | Reseña. Videojuego Cubano. Courtesy of Fate Studios, 2022.



FIGURE 5 The inaugural public presentation of PakeTown, which took place at Havana Espacios Creativos in December 2021. Image Courtesy of Nestor Siré.



FIGURE 6 PakeTown presentation at a Youth Computer club in Camagüey. Image Courtesy of Nestor Siré.

intricacies of alternative media distribution. Additionally, we had the opportunity to present the game on the computers provided by the Joven Club, which are utilized by young technophiles as part of their activities and education within the club (Figure 6).

As part of our promotional initiatives, we also collaborated with ETRES, Cuba's first advertising agency that generates and incorporates promotional content into the *paquete*. Additionally, a local web design and development studio, Xdot, designed a website for the game. The website allows Android users to download the game's apk file (the file format used by the Android operating system) and features a wiki containing comprehensive information on all the game's elements and their functionality. We further created a video trailer, designed custom Telegram stickers specifically for the game's community, and organized a national tournament where we offered a prize to the player who achieved the highest score in their popularity ranking by a set date.

The publicly accessible leaderboard allowed players to witness their businesses' names rise or fall in real time, which proved to be highly engaging for the game's most dedicated players. The prize awarded to the winner consisted of a 3D-printed trophy representing the first computer that players can purchase within the game. Ultimately, the prize for the tournament went to a player in Cienfuegos. During our promotion tour, we had the opportunity to visit this player in person. It turned out that the winner was actually a *paquetero*, someone involved in the real-life alternative media distribution portrayed in the game. The player expressed fascination with seeing his everyday work represented in the game and added a unique connection between the game and real-life experiences (Figure 7).



FIGURE 7 The triumphant individual who emerged as the winner of our contest. Image Courtesy of Nestor Siré.

CONCLUSION

After the game's successful launch in Cuba, we sought to make it available to international audiences.[6] Thanks to the help of Rafael's contact in the United States, ConWiro was able to place *PakeTown* on both Apple's and Google's app stores, where it is available in Spanish, English, and German. According to Game Analytics, a tool for game developers to monitor and optimize the performance of their games, *PakeTown* had around 190,000 unique users at the time of writing. The vast majority of them, almost 180,000, were from Cuba. In a country with 11 million inhabitants and where smartphone penetration lags behind that of most more developed countries, this could be considered akin to mainstream success.[7] As Game Analytics only counts users who were connected to the internet at some moment while playing the game, the number of Cuban players might actually even be higher, given the country's semi-offline context and our efforts to distribute the game through *el paquete*. While retaining *PakeTown* as a free-to-play game, we made the decision to grant ConWiro permission to introduce micropayments within the game. Parallel to their work on *PakeTown*, ConWiro achieved a significant milestone by becoming the first Cuban private company authorized by the state telecommunications monopolist, *Empresa de Telecomunicaciones de Cuba S.A.* (ETECSA), to charge micropayments via SMS within apps on the official national app store. They also opened this platform, called WiroForce, to other local developers to provide them with potential new revenue streams with the goal to further professionalize the still marginal Cuban game industry. These micropayments provided players of *PakeTown* with the option to progress at an accelerated pace, while simultaneously affording ConWiro the funding to potentially enhance and expand the game in the future. Thus, our game became a test case to determine whether players in Cuba would embrace micropayments in local games.

For us as researchers, creating *PakeTown* not only provided us with a new platform to share our extensive research on the informal Cuban media economy, making it accessible to wider audiences and culturally relevant locally, it also served as a catalyst for generating new knowledge that ultimately transformed our fieldwork. The years-long effort put into the game not only spurred discussions about new topics with our existing research participants (such as specific aspects of Cuban media history we wanted to accurately represent in the game). The game also became an elicitation tool, connecting us with new interlocutors. Additionally, *PakeTown* facilitated discussions beyond our control, as evidenced by the various reviews and gameplay videos published by Cuban independent journalists and social media influencers. It fostered new forms of collaboration, completely transforming the conventional relationships between anthropologists and interlocutors. Most importantly, it generated fresh insights into the Cuban sociotechnical landscape and functioned as an intervention within the intricate political context. The design of the game and its subsequent

distribution generated new field situations that enabled us to better grasp the limitations and possibilities that media entrepreneurs navigate within the constraints of the authoritarian Cuban system.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The development of *PakeTown* was made possible through the generous funding provided by the German embassy in Havana and the Goethe Institute.

[2] The Cuban government initially provided public internet access through Wi-Fi hotspots in parks and squares starting in the summer of 2015. Subsequently, a mobile internet network was introduced in December 2018. However, the cost of accessing the internet through these means remains excessively high, especially for data-intensive activities like streaming or downloading videos and music. As a result, many Cubans still find it difficult to afford internet access for such purposes.

[3] Playthroughs are recordings where someone plays through a significant portion of a video game, and they are highly popular among gamers and enthusiasts. They provide an immersive way to experience and engage with games, allowing viewers to enjoy the gameplay and atmosphere without playing themselves.

[4] The screen walk method, as described in detail by Köhn (2025b), allowed us to capture these participant-led explorations as screencasts on their devices. Some of this recorded material was utilized to create an audiovisual essay, which we subsequently published on the phenomenon (Köhn & Siré, 2023).

[5] The Cuban government's position toward *el paquete semanal* has been complex and evolving. Initially, the Cuban government took a somewhat ambivalent stance toward the phenomenon, neither endorsing nor explicitly banning it. This allowed the distribution network to flourish as a popular and widely used alternative to limited internet access in the country. However, the Cuban government has implemented certain measures to regulate and control *el paquete semanal*. In recent years, the government has sought to incorporate aspects of the distribution network into official platforms and services. For example, it has introduced *La Mochila*, a curated data collection that can be copied for free in the *Joven Clubs de Computación*. *La Mochila* features official and educational content, but also many films, series, or YouTube videos that are also featured in the *paquete*.

[6] The game is available in both the Apple App and Google Play Store as well via www.paketown.net.

[7] By October 2023, the game had 179,794 players from Cuba, 4845 from the United States, 1785 from Mexico, and a couple of hundred from Canada, as well as from various European countries, such as Germany, Spain, Great Britain, and the Netherlands.

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