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## Hecho en México



Enzo Scavone, senior journalist at OPNoobs, traveled to Mexico and met some of the leading figures of the wider professional videogame community in Mexico. Although his wallet was picked, his interest in the state of game development was also piqued, and he shares his thoughts here.

### MEXICO IS ROUGH

News about [scores of mysteriously disappearing students](#), [government corruption](#), [cartel violence](#), and [abject poverty](#) have colored the world's impression of our neighbor in a drab gray. How on earth does a population of a country that faces such problems have time to play video games?

Or, perhaps, maybe these problems are the reason Mexicans succumb to the escapist appeal of certain titles — in Mexico video games, like many Mexican past times, are enjoyed extensively and passionately. South-of-the-border gamers have begun to gravitate toward certain titles. Classic hits with a large following are [FIFA](#) and [Halo](#), which are produced by foreign studios, but there is also a homegrown hit called *Lucha*

*Libre*, a fighting game around the Lucha Libre spectacle in Mexico, in which players can play as the iconic and mysteriously masked wrestlers the Mexican public so adores. *Lucha Libre* made its mark as the first noteworthy Mexican AAA video game title.

However, Mexican youth did not remain passive consumers. During the early 2000s, they had been taking interest in *how* to make games, as well. It began as curious tinkering around against their parents' advice to do something with their lives. After school, they worked on ideas for their very own video games, dreaming of some day making that their living.

Eager to satisfy the need for game development programs, schools sprung up, like the [SAE Institute](#) (School of Audio Engineering), the [Universidad del Valle del Mexico](#), or ITESM ([Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey](#)). Game developers also spawn from the engineering program at UNAM ([Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México](#)), which didn't use to have classes specifically dedicated to game design, but many who initially enrolled to be engineers ended up creating video games, anyway.

Eventually, the indie game developers to-be graduated from whichever educational path they chose to acquire their skills and they were ready to try their luck in the real world. Confidently, they formed indie game studios, and after a while, these studios became numerous — not only in Mexico City, but also in other Mexican cities, like Guadalajara, Mexicali, and Monterrey. Some seminal members were [Snake & Eagle](#), [Aztech-Tech](#), or Ranflosoft, which created a tongue-in-cheek version of *Mortal Kombat* called [Kombate Mexicano](#) [EN: My god, that hit detection].

## **BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE**



The vanguard of indie game ventures in Mexico began around 2004. An early adopter was [Xibalba](#), based in Monterrey. The studio has recently published their title [Militant](#) and is headed by Ricardo Villarreal, one of the pioneers of Mexican indie video game development (VG Dev). He remembers that the movement was initially very slow; in all of Mexico, there were only a handful of serious studios — maybe five, including Xibalba. Once set into motion, everything seemed to be going well. However, problems arose soon after that: the young studios lacked experience in marketing and also in running a business in a harsh Mexican economic environment where consumers only paid attention to AAA studios located outside of the country.

At any rate, Mexico was more of a “console market” at the time, says Ricardo. Yet, small studios had great difficulties developing for console because, for some inexplicable reason, console manufacturers like Sony or Nintendo considered Mexico the top five ‘key markets’ in which to sell their games, but, according to Ricardo, were reluctant to give out development kits to Mexican developers. The level of technological development at that time also played a role: mobile platforms were not as powerful as they are now, limiting the sophistication of games. Between a rock and a hard place, it was a challenge for the studios to find a channel and an audience for what they were producing. Inevitably, studios closed, developers’ self-confidence waned, and the scene shrank. Then, [the financial crisis came](#), and for a couple of years after 2008, developers were beset by dark times.

But, the dust settled. Slowly, the economy recovered. Then, in 2011, we heard of [Kerbal](#)

[Space Program](#). The PR company, Squad, — who, as the legend goes, didn't want their developer team to be idle in between contracts — kept the devs on payroll by tasking them to develop a video game. They created *Kerbal Space Program*, and it quickly became an international success. For the first time, the world began to think about indie video games hecho en Mexico (that means “made in Mexico,” for all non-Hispanophones).

After U.S.-indie games keep popping up at award shows and winning prizes (e.g. [Inside](#) at the Video Game Awards, or [Owlboy](#) at SXSW), there is no doubt that indie games in the U.S. are thriving and indie titles are claiming a rightful place next to AAA ones. Could the indie game scene, specifically, and video game development in general be an area where our Southern brother finds redemption? Could a country that, to this day, is feeling the aftermath of the financial crisis, and resentment from U.S. public opinion, make use of technological advances to succeed in claiming a place shoulder-to-shoulder with its North-American neighbors?

These questions only lead to more questions. First of all, *who* is the Mexican indie gaming scene? It consists of academics, technological evangelists, documentary filmmakers, and, of course, indie game studios, like Xibalba, [HaiKuSTUDIO](#), or [HyperBeard](#), to name a few. After I met with and interviewed them, it crystallized that this colorful array of individuals can be separated into two camps based on their outlook onto the Mexican indie game scene. The theorists, who consist of academics and intellectuals, on the one side and the practitioners, who are made up of game developers and their studios, on the other.

The camp of theorists who are reflecting on the Mexican indie game scene consists in part of employees of an institution within the Secretaría de Cultura, the [Centro de Cultura Digital](#) (CCD), in Mexico City: Jacinto “Chinto” Quesnel and Héctor Guerrero Merchant, who lead the Games Lab. There is also David Zuratzi, the director of [Development Hour](#) (DEVHR), an organization which facilitates meetups and El Foro Internacional del Juego, a video game developers conference (literally, “The International Forum of Games”).

Furthermore, this camp includes the independent documentary filmmaker Daniel “Ramza” Flores, who has been trying to bring light into the obscurity of development in Mexico with his documentary, [Jugamonos la Vida](#). Sadly, combating prejudices and a generally negative attitude of the Mexican population toward video games is part of this ambitious task.

## THE (FINANCIAL) REALITY

The conclusion of this group of theorists is that the Mexican indie gaming scene is not well and that is due to four factors: organization, follow-through, funding, and *malinchismo*. According to Chinto, game developers struggle with organizing their

enterprises. While the enthusiasm is there, there is a lack of knowledge or experience in how to run a studio and persist in the development jungle. Especially, as Chinto identifies, studios have to understand that game design is not something that manifests automatically when a studio works on an idea. Design is its own art which needs to take into account mechanics, rules, storyline, and the role luck and strategy play in a game. Designing the game has to be a dedicated process within the workflow, with a game designer considering all the necessary aspects.



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David Zuratzi, meanwhile, asserts that Mexican indie game studios have trouble with follow-through. Game Jams organized by the DEVHR are aimed to combat this flaw. At the events, teams of game development enthusiasts receive the task to develop a game from start to finish within forty-eight hours. During that time, participants are coached and can experience what actually goes into creating a game. Through this activity, DEVHR and the CCD (where the game jams take place) try to encourage and train flexibility, innovation, and follow-through. Furthermore, DEVHR organizes regular meet-ups where studios can network and share the progress on their respective projects. According to David, the gatherings are structured so that participants can share the knowledge and experience they have gained. It's also a perfect opportunity to bring in professionals from other disciplines, such as musicians, artists, psychologists, and journalists.

Among the many complaints that I picked up from my interviewees, the most persistent was that the Mexican indie game industry is starved for money. When you set out as a young, small studio, you quickly realize that the success of your revolutionary IP idea is still years in the future. How do you bridge the time until then and make ends meet? Either you do contract work that has little to do with game development or, if you're lucky, you can develop games, but they're other companies' IP.



An example for that is HaiKuSTUDIO, a small studio located in Mexico City, which virtuously aims to realize their IP, but has to face the financial reality of doing contract work. In the past, they have been cold calling venues asking whether they needed an indie game for their marketing efforts. The result was that they were able to convince businesses around Mexico City to consider video games as a publicity measure in order to create buzz and an experience for their customers. An example is an FPS they developed for a paintball park where the best scores on the leaderboard won free paintball matches.

Another example is [Bolerama Coyoacan Pocket](#), a fantasy multiplayer mobile bowling game they produced for a bowling alley. Fortunately, with their steadily increasing success HaiKuSTUDIO has been able to carve out more and more time to dedicate to their IP, *Rat's Tale* which will be an action adventure game where the player experiences the world from the perspective of a rat hero. The single player title will be released first on PC and then on consoles.

Lastly, the Mexican video game industry is not publishing games that break selling records and are widely spread among the gamers — and widely pirated, which has become an [unofficial measure of success](#) in the industry. When Mexican indie studios intend to produce such blockbusters, they are fighting an uphill battle. Even if a title has a solid concept, the consumers tend to consider them inferior simply *because* they have been made in Mexico. This prejudice is due to a Mexican cultural phenomenon called [malinchismo](#), as mentioned by Chinto and Daniel. Wide areas of Mexican

manufacturing face prejudice by their own population: what's produced in Mexico is automatically considered inferior to what's produced abroad, especially in the U.S., Canada, or Europe. The same prejudice applies to video games.

## 127 MILLION

These hurdles don't make the Mexican indie game scene a hopeless case. According to Chinto, a change of heart can be effected by bringing Mexican indie development to the consciousness of the public. This ought to happen through sound news reporting. According to Chinto, any efforts to create publicity around the Mexican indie game scene can take advantage of another peculiar phenomenon not unrelated to Malinchismo: Mexican media tends to look to U.S. outlets for content. Should U.S. media decide to report on the Mexican indie dev scene, quickly, Mexican publications would feel inclined to follow.

Another measure to improve the state of indie games in Mexico is to share knowledge. Taking part in it is an excellent opportunity for opinion leaders to make their voices heard. Successful developers or evangelists from the U.S., Canada, or even Europe, could share their knowledge with the upstart studios of Mexico — who are thirsting for it — and thus mentor this emerging phenomenon.

Last, but not least, cold hard cash in the form of investment is needed. The first two measures lay the groundwork to bring about enough trust in Mexican indie game developers that either domestic or foreign investors see investment into Mexico as a lucrative venture. Companies from the U.S. could open a branch south of the border or outsource part of their work to there. There is already an Ubisoft Mexico, who could expand their staff of five employees to service a country of 127 million.

## HAVING YOUR PASTEL TRES LECHEES AND EATING IT, TOO

The other camp in this dual look on the Mexican indie gaming scene are the independent developers themselves. Studios like [HyperBeard](#), [HaiKuSTUDIO](#), or, as mentioned above, Xibalba. Here, one can also find U.S. companies, like [Unity](#), which tries to bring the scene together as users of the *Unity* engine. The members of this camp work in major cities in Mexico and fight at the front trying to make Mexican indie games work — unlike their theorizing counterparts. They struggle with their position as underdogs — and us fickle gamers who buy indie games, but only if they're good, you know, AAA good, because we want to have our cake and eat it, too. Or, how about instead of cake, a [pastel tres leches](#)?

For the developers, founding an indie game studio in Mexico is an economic venture — no more, no less. You have risks and opportunities and have to weigh them against each other. The consensus among the studios seems to be that if you work hard, you

are going to succeed, no matter where. Thus, it doesn't matter that your location isn't in a center with easy access to consumers. Distribution platforms like Google Play or the Apple Store for mobile and Steam for PC open up audiences all over the world and diminish the relevance of location. If I can publish a product worldwide, it doesn't matter whether I'm located in San Francisco or Mexicali, and if the latter is the case, I can begin to compete with U.S. game development studios.

The outlook for investment coming to Mexican game development studios sounds great: it would mean money for Mexico and competitively priced labor for the rest of the world. However, the landscape of Mexican indie game developers is opaque. Nobody knows how many there are, what they are doing, at what stage they are in their project, and what are their areas of expertise. Should companies decide to work with Mexican indie devs or contract them for work, it would be hard for an executive to make the right decision and find the studio that is right for the job.



Take the example of HyperBeard. Few people outside of Mexico know that this studio's story serves as a successful example of how a game development enterprise can establish itself. Initiated by Antonio "Fáyer" Uribe as a project of the company for which he was working, he began to develop games for mobile with his partner Juan Pablo Riebeling in their free time. It was a playful and unburdened venture. The two were driven by their creativity and produced games always hoping the moderate success from their last title would sustain the work on the next one.



This worked for a while, and then came success. Their title *KleptoCats* sold extremely well and allowed HyperBeard to expand, then *Clawbert* came, and then *Chichens*, a whimsical mobile game that combines flashy graphics and sounds and — of course — cats who steal things. Now, HyperBeard has seven employees in Mexico and rents its own space in Mexico City. Antonio emphasizes the need for Mexican studios to receive support in developing better games; help is needed to understand what it means to make games, and especially what it means to try and sell them. Antonio stresses the necessity of a means to showcase the state of the art of the Mexican indie developer scene.

As a means to do this and offer more insight into a chaotic, budding scene, a group of dedicated individuals had the idea to form a Mexican association of game developers. This will help facilitate insight into in a growing, ever-changing industry. Yet, the work on the association is stagnating. The lack of momentum and differences of opinion about the setup, formalities, and who exactly gets to join continue to hinder the efforts. One example of the internal differences was a discussion about HyperBeard's membership. The founding members of the association were debating for a while whether they wanted to be an association of companies or people. While Antonio and Juan Pablo are Mexican, their company, HyperBeard, is technically a U.S. studio with Mexican employees, which would have made a membership through their company contentious. After some debate, the association decided to accept individual people as members as well, which resolved the issue.

## **POSTPONED GRATIFICATION, WITHSTOOD ANXIETY**

After having spoken with the thinkers and the makers, it appears that, although the two camps differ in their outlook for the indie dev scene in Mexico, some shared quintessential insights can be drawn about how the situation could be improved. The first, very basic one is that Mexican indie devs need confidence. They need to have faith that they can do it and they can do it together. Why get distracted and lose resources in trench battles at home while the real labor, i.e., bringing the industry up to par with foreign countries and stabilizing the position at home, remains undone? Currently, potential synergies from collaboration remain unharnessed because each studio is trying to make its own ends meet. That is understandable, but some gratification has to be postponed, and some anxiety withstood, so that the greater goal can be achieved. After that, may the battles resume [EN: GLHF].

Once this attitude forms in the hearts and minds of the developers, Mexico — it's public, that is — needs to engage in more discussion about indie video game development. This is the task for the domestic media, who seem to be instead preoccupied with [fallacies](#) about how [video games lead to violence](#) or [a diminished libido](#). They ought to cast a glance at this group of industrious developers who are working hard to imbue labor done in Mexico with worth. If U.S. outlets like OPN set an example, Mexican

outlets will follow.

While busy at work in their country, the video game industry has to be aware that it needs the outside: possible collaborators could be countries who have a more developed video game industry and, put plainly, are richer, like the U.S., Canada, Japan, or Europe.

Conversely, these countries have to leave their first-world hubris behind and have confidence that the indie dev scene in Mexico is stable and can deliver. Fear pockmarks any thoughts of investment in Mexico, fear of volatility. That fear comes from an old misunderstanding about Mexican workers. According to Chinto, Mexican work ethic is particular. It's different from Anglo-American, Asian, or European work ethic, but it's there, and it can produce. For an outsider dealing with Mexican workers, it is about knowing how to translate foreign requirements into a Mexican action plan. As Chinto stresses, "the emphasis is in translation itself, you need to learn to work *with* Mexicans, not isolated from them." Practically, that could mean that you don't want a foreign executive office that releases orders to its Mexican workers, but rather a team comprised of Mexican and foreign workers who have an equal say in how production ought to be laid out.

For the outside to trust in the Mexican indie dev scene, it has to be more intelligible. Who specializes in what, and where are studios currently in their project? The creation of an association is the first step toward that. It would give the Mexican indie dev scene a clear shape and direction. It's left up to hope that these efforts don't fail because of internal differences or a loss of momentum.

## **A MEXICAN ACTION PLAN**

In Mexico, two undeniable truths clash: on the one hand, Mexico is poor. Many of its population are struggling, and for them, technological advance or video games are a luxury with a very low priority far after sustenance. On the other hand, there exist those who can afford to play video games and have the economic power to spend money and drive industries as consumers. It's this one-foot-in-poverty and one-in-technological-advance that tears on Mexico. While one struggles and the other wishes, the Mexican population cannot take a definite direction into which to move ahead. Step by step, however, with an openness to collaboration with other countries, progress can be achieved, and developers in Mexico can find acceptance on an international stage.

