

## **Review of a Creative Work**

### ***Andres Bonifacio:*** ***Aswang Hunter (2012) by Team Algo***

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This review looks into *Andres Bonifacio: Aswang Hunter* (hereon, ABAH), a 2.5D action platformer<sup>1</sup> created by Team Algo. The game stands out among other titles as it has the potential to be considered a contribution to the literary genre of historical fiction. In this review, the game is assessed in terms of the manner of how the mechanics have been executed as well as the portrayal of characters. This essay concludes with recommendations on how ABAH can be improved.

The storyline of the game uses references to events shaping the elections at the first Tejeros Convention and the proceedings of the Magdiwang Assembly leading to the election of Andres Bonifacio as President. Shortly after, the Bonifacio brothers, Andres and Procopio, are accused of treason and are ordered by Aguinaldo for capture and execution. Blindfolded, the brothers are taken to separate locations on a mountain. Before the sentence is carried out, Andres's captors spontaneously decide to amuse themselves first by letting Andres loose in the area and attempt to hunt him down. At this point, Andres's objective is to stay alive, avoid the enemies, and save his brother. Their reunion is short-lived as Procopio is bitten by an Aswang, bringing to Andres a new mission that is seen as conceptually tied to the title of the game. His new objective is to retrieve a cure for his brother.

Assuming the character of Andres Bonifacio, the player has to survive waves of enemies which impede advancement to level endpoints. For some chapters, Andres is equipped with a gun and a bladed weapon that the player can alternate from as means of defense given that physical contact with the enemy results in reduction of health and eventual death. True to the format of a platformer, the objective of the player is to move from point A to point B without falling, as well as making it past obstacles and enemies. Points are earned for every enemy killed.

## **INSPECTING GAME MECHANICS**

The game has some praiseworthy details. The creators' choice of genre, the platform game (a.k.a. Platformer), is a decision that has democratic implications. Not everyone is a gamer, and there are those who are interested in approaching gameplay for its storyline value. Given this, there is paramount need for simple, easy-to-recall controls that the game does provide. In theory, anyone can play the game. The amount of frankness in ABAH, as seen in the instances where there are no items to restore health lost, is appreciated.<sup>2</sup> It is this that grants a vulnerable feel to the fight and flight premise driving the game. Guided by the sole health bar (a meter that shows the player the extent of damage the avatar has taken) next to Andres Bonifacio's avatar, the rule is very simple—don't die.

On the other hand, what "slandered" the game? In terms of interface, it is unsure where the creators got their reference for their head-up display (HUD), a display that holds status information about the character and gameplay. Such decision to position the death statistic at the bottom corner violates the basic rule on HUDs, which is to present as much information as possible without hindrance to the player.<sup>3</sup> This item, on occasion, interferes with the player's ability to determine platform clearance. The game map (a menu providing the player with locations to explore) is geographically off, observable based on the progression of the story. The way it operates appears to be more of a splash screen (a graphic display shown while the game or a section of the game is loading) than a game map because of the player's inability to freely backtrack or select previous areas.

One significant flaw concerning mechanics is the absence of a quick save feature (a measure to save present gameplay progress at the press of a particular button). This would, more often than not, result in frustration on the part of the player. Of complementing mention is the fact that the program has no automatic saving to enable the player to proceed from an already completed stage. The absence of this save mechanism means that all progress will automatically be lost upon closing and restarting the program.

Consistent with the usual formula characterizing platformers, there are tracts of different widths and heights and progression requiring the (perfect) timing and holding of jumps or leaps. It is unfortunate how there are problems with regard to speeds and controls, which make the progression more difficult than expected. Some may find further creativity in this painful aspect as the chapter exemplifies, through practice, the discouragement of hesitation—an irreverent and anchored play on the Rizalian adage: "Ang hindi marunong lumingon sa pinanggalingan..."

where “looking/going back” via back arrow (as is the tendency so as to not fall off the edge resulting from under or overestimation of a leap) following a jump results in Andres’s demise. The game also stops at inconvenient times and it is difficult to properly determine the amount of hold and release required because of precision issues. There are even instances when the sprite still moves even though the controls are released.

But for social science and humanities majors playing this game, one may ask: is there a textual saving grace to this particular design faux pas? Possibly so, if one subscribes to the view of Andres Bonifacio as an uneducated, reckless, impulsive, and unreflective person. This would also be the case if viewed as an uninformed attempt to animate the popular impressions casted by his proud statues and tough, stern profile on coins<sup>4</sup>—an approach reminiscent of, but not necessarily employing, procedural rhetoric.<sup>5</sup> But discourses from the last thirty years on the Katipunan and Bonifacio prove otherwise, negating the chances of this flaw in mechanic depiction as being an acceptable perspective. It is maintained that the *Kartilya* of the Katipunan requires of its members—and reflects Bonifacio’s and his co-authors’—presence of depth, honor, sense of purpose, understanding of righteousness, morality and propriety, and humility in their dictionary of being.<sup>6</sup>

Another assessment of the game’s mechanisms and a point of amusement is how Andres appears to skid when walking slow—reminiscent of “Icy Reception” in *American McGee’s Alice*. There is also no jump-and-slash move combination, which would permit the player to engage in mid-air combat. It is also difficult to be precise in combat, as there are greater chances of killing enemies if they run into Andres’s sword from behind. Glitching (a sudden malfunction) is also observed where it isn’t possible to shoot an enemy point blank, often resulting in mixing with the sprite (graphic representations of characters).

### **SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON SPRITES AND CHARACTERIZATIONS**

A good amount of attention should be directed to the sprites. That of Andres Bonifacio appears to pay homage to Abraham Lincoln (who was portrayed in a film as hunting vampires the same year ABAH debuted) in terms of the contouring of Andres Bonifacio’s head and face—a detail somewhat forgivable as the similarities are only visible on the concept art (not available in the executable and installation files) and obscure in the game itself.

Specific attention should be paid to the enemy group comprised of various creatures from Philippine folklore. The list is limited to the more popular, recognizable entities: the Aswang, Tikbalang, and Kapre. The rendering of these entities employed a scantily featured, monochromatic theme and an attempted concentration on sexual dimorphism. This is a schematic that isn't unique as there have been other games with foe sprites that played on the element of ambiguity and nods to certain references. This is usually done by the designers with the intention of creating a bank for the personalization of fear, where it is up to the player to assign *their* own reasons for alarm, and hence justify avoidance of a particular foe. *Slender: The Eight Pages* and the *Slender* variations, *Hospice*, *Sanatorium*, and *Elementary*, are a case in point. This approach significantly backfires for Team Algo's rendering of the Aswang, which appears to resemble Link from the *Legend of Zelda Majora's Mask*, only with wings, conjunctivitis, and gynecomastia. The creators' take on the Tikbalang is conceptually lost (where the enemy merely charges after the player), while the Kapre is an overgrown gnome.

There is no justification for ABAH sprites exhibiting techniques that rely on ambiguity and personalization as the creatures are concept-wise already predefined. In other words, there is much information about the Aswang, Tikbalang, and Kapre that it is considerably difficult to re-present them and also have confidence in this new composition during gameplay. Players would want to see a set of Aswang that reflects the inversion of the roles of the Babaylanes<sup>7</sup> and the attack on gender equality through the curtailing of the influence and liberties of the 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century female defined in her torso and her non-conformity and rebellion to the order of things symbolized in aerial locomotion.<sup>8</sup> In the case of how the Tikbalang was rendered, aside from the need for a more defined sprite, it would have made more sense if its personality in-game was demonstrative (e.g. making the player "lose his or her way"). Games that use mythological creatures for sprite styles require the visual artist to do detailed representations. In this case, platformers are all about the oculars. Basic visual shorthands miss the premise behind the creature/sprite, reducing what should be the artful element of fear to a mere dread of mechanical, in-game death.

### **Final Notes and Recommendations**

The points mentioned would lead one to ask if this is an incomplete game. It was, after all, a GAME ON! 2012 Master Class entry.<sup>9</sup> If this is the case, then it is a real shame that no initiative has been exerted as, impression-wise, ABAH may be recognized under the rubric of independent, Philippine-themed games in studies on

video games. In terms of its plot, it can be considered in terms of its presentation of alternative history, or as a fun break mid-lesson on Bonifacio. Presently, where the primary source of pop and sub-cultural information is the internet, it is important to remember to improve a work even after an event has ended because of exposure, including both direct and indirect publicity, from social networks that could make or break chances at getting opportunities.<sup>10</sup>

How can ABAH be improved? Considering its design and original purpose, it is not an educational game. However, if improved, it may have the potential to be employed as an interactive visual aid under the rubric of portrayals of creatures from Philippine folklore.<sup>11</sup> Aside from refining the controls and addressing the glitches, revisions should include better sprites that are inspired by (if not in accordance to) folklore and cultural studies. The monochromatic theme should also be done away with in favor of colored and detailed sprites. There is margin for experimentation with colorizations of certain segments to emphasize parts that have original or added figurative significance to the plot. Platformers like ABAH are considerably restricted in terms of the storyline information that could be provided. This highlights the need to maximize rhetoric whenever possible in the artistic audio-visual aspects of the game data. Access to concept art files should be available in the installation files if not included in the game itself. For those studying the characters, this would enable a better inspection of sprites since these are considerably smaller and mobile in-game. Commentaries from the developers themselves could also be optionally enabled in the game or accessible in the files, as this feature could inform players of the hermeneutic considerations shaping the idea and design. This detail has been integrated before in commercial games, popularly in *Amnesia the Dark Descent*.

In the case of games in which designers choose to borrow fragments of historical references for their storyline, these creators need to bear in mind the purpose of their game. If it's purely for entertainment, historical precision isn't always important, but some research is necessary in order to make a situation or person—whether fabricated, embellished, or twisted—sellable. A lack of transition (from the established frame of the concept, to the more experimental rendering) often results in inadequacy and, similar to that mentioned earlier, there are expected references from existing concepts that some players may be looking for before an unanticipated shift in the concept being experimented on. Without these, the resulting concepts cannot be related nor includable under the tier to that which they were supposed to be based on. Of course, games with educational objectives are a different case entirely, and that discussion would belong in a separate article.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> A video game genre which involves the maneuvering of an avatar to jump between platforms, over or under obstacles, coupled with occasional fighting in order to progress in the game. There is a need to control and time these jumps in order to prevent the avatar from falling from the surfaces or missing necessary jumps.
- <sup>2</sup> By not giving the player the option to have their avatar recover, there is a heightened difficulty, which is welcomed. It provides a distinction compared to games from 2012 to present in which several developers have illustrated avid interest in power-ups.
- <sup>3</sup> Lecky-Thompson 194.
- <sup>4</sup> A rough translation of the line borrowed from Michael Charleston Chua's TV segment on Gat Andres Bonifacio. In verbatim it can be heard as: "...isang pangalan na nagpapagunita sa atin ng isang a-tapang a-tao, ngunit madalas, ng isang matayog na rebulto o matigas na mukha sa barya." Chua, "Ulat ni Xiao Chua".
- <sup>5</sup> Procedural Rhetoric involves the creation of a design which would demonstrate how a certain subject or concept would work, and this would require a graphical and interactive representation which would enable experimentation. Bogost ix, 02-03.
- <sup>6</sup> Chua, "Ang Kaugnayan ng Mabuting Kalooban Sa Salamat ng Kalayaan at Pagkabansa ng Katipunan".
- <sup>7</sup> The concept of the Aswang resulted from the Spaniard's antagonization of the Babaylanes which are priestesses or female shamans who have been recognized in history for three things: their healing capabilities, their status as religious leaders, and their role during times of war where they are said to "...incite men into fighting fury" and "...hurl invectives at their foreign enemies." Herminia Menez's proposition is that the traits of the Aswang are convenient inversions of the characteristics of the Babaylan's attributes. She posits that the Aswang's diet and manner of food harvest are a sensationalist reversal of the role of the Babaylan as healer and midwife. To further the Spanish influence on the symbol of the Aswang, they also attempted to discredit the female shamans on grounds of their sexual powers and sense of liberality. (Menez 86-95)
- <sup>8</sup> As discussed by Rody Vera in Clark & Del Rosario, "The Aswang Phenomenon."
- <sup>9</sup> The theme for the 2012 competition was Philippine Heroes. The competition is designed to pair student teams with mentors from the game development industry who will assist them in the process of developing their entries.
- <sup>10</sup> Events like game design-related workshops and competitions can be included in (online) professional profiles/portfolios. Participants need to mull over the importance of improving former works before including them in their list.

- <sup>11</sup> Because there are games which may still serve some educational purpose (ex. demonstrating or illustrating a concept) through elements in game data, even though they are not originally designed to be explored in that manner. For an example of this, see Dominique Angela Juntado. "DELIBERATELY FALLING THROUGH A CODED RABBIT HOLE: A Sociocultural Written Let's Play of *American Mcgee's Alice*." *The International Journal of Social Sciences* 27.1 (2014): 44-73. Online.

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