

Exploring Contemporary Southern African Culture through Animation and Video Games

A Case Study on KURHWA and THE TALE OF STAVO

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Abstract

The breadth of narrative videogames and animated films has expanded wildly over the past 30 years, not only in the sheer volume of titles released in recent decades, but also to include a multi-cultural cast of characters that celebrates the range of ethnic diversity that exists in reality. Among these cultures, norms, and values are those belonging to contemporary southern Africa, and how its pre-colonial socio-economic practices, which were guided by indigenous philosophy called *ubuntu*, have been fused with post-colonial norms to result in a wholly unique backdrop to stories emerging from this region. This fusion has influenced how stories are told and changed, how a new generation of African storytellers share their reality with the global audience. KURHWA is a video game that is in development in Zimbabwe, and together with an animated series entitled THE TALE OF STAVO, the two projects will serve as references for the use of contemporary southern African culture in modern storytelling.

1 INTRODUCTION

Kurhwa means “to fight” or “fighting” in the Shona language of the Zezuru or Shona people of Zimbabwe. It is also the title of a video game franchise in development by a team I lead at Kay Media Africa, a game development studio in Zimbabwe. Since 2017, I have been the lead writer and character designer for the game, which is building up to become a narrative franchise that draws audiences

from outside of the gaming niche by appealing to fans of fantasy literature, comic books, and animation from around the world.¹ My team includes fellow Zimbabwean creatives such as Tinodiwa Zambe Makoni and Keith Kuhudzai. The mobile game is designed to be a Multiplayer Online Battle Arena game (MOBA) in the style of Valve's DOTA2 (2013).² The characters are made up of a cast of Zimbabwean archetypes, that are inspired by both folklore and contemporary urban legends unique to the southern African landscape. The players are free to draft a team from this selection of culturally accurate but diverse characters in order to compete against an opposing draft by another group of players. The ensuing race for resources and siege of the opposing team's stronghold is what determines the winner. The aesthetic of the game's maps and environments are heavily influenced by Afrofuturistic and traditional African landscapes, architecture, and props. The game aims to stir up the player's competitive nature while immersing them in both traditional and modern African sounds, language, ideas, visuals, and culture.

EPHEMERAL TALES: THE TALE OF STAVO (2022)³ is an animated African mini-series available on YouTube. It exemplifies the use of African culture and contemporary social phenomena as a device in which culture and tradition can be shared through animation. I served as the writer and director of EPHEMERAL TALES, which uses a format with strong musical elements and a contemporary approach to teen comedy. The series has 4 episodes that tell a story about 2 young people, who meet under very serendipitous circumstances on an informal taxi. They unintentionally complicating each other's lives after a freak accident causes them to accidentally swap cellphones. EPHEMERAL TALES is fictional; however, it does not lean on fantasy elements, but uses the cultures, practices, and social systems found within the township setting as devices to escalate events and build tension. The various social phenomena exist only in the African townships, thus I'm calling this type of story 'Township Drama.'

THE TALE OF STAVO approaches the musical genre differently from the Western format, which involves singing dialogues, acting out of emotions in dance scenes, etc. Though there is a strong focus on music, there are only few classic

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- 1 KURHWA's development has been pending since 2022 as a result of disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent HR challenges. The game continues to be developed under Kay Media Africa and updates on the development and publishing of the game can be found on the company's website (www.kaymdiaafrica.com) and social media platforms. All content and media in this article are a genuine representation of the progress made to date.
 - 2 DOTA 2 (USA 2013, O: Valve Corporation).
 - 3 EPHEMERAL TALES (ZW 2022, D: Eugene Mapondera).

(Western) musical elements. This is specific to African musical tradition, where the narrative is sung in the verse and the moral, or lesson, is repeated in the chorus. This leaves the male and female singing voices to play the roles of the narrator, and in some parts for emphasis, the characters. This format is a derivative of the ‘fireside oral tradition,’ in which a verbalized story could be accompanied by a chorus in which the audience could join in to break the monotony, or introduce a new chapter.

I have paired the two projects as case studies for this written piece because they contribute to the same mandate, namely the use and celebration of African modernity and culture through animation and games. The essential outcomes we want to achieve through *KURHWA* and *THE TALE OF STAVO* arise by answering the following questions:

- How do we share the near-extinct folklore of minority groups from Africa through games and animation, in the hope of initiating some genuine global interest in them?
- How do we introduce the sophisticated dynamics that African society has to the world through the game’s menus and gameplay?
- How do we challenge the prejudice that African social and cultural beliefs are backwards or primitive through the game’s narrative?
- How do we give global audiences another avenue to experience Afrofuturism as a narrative device?

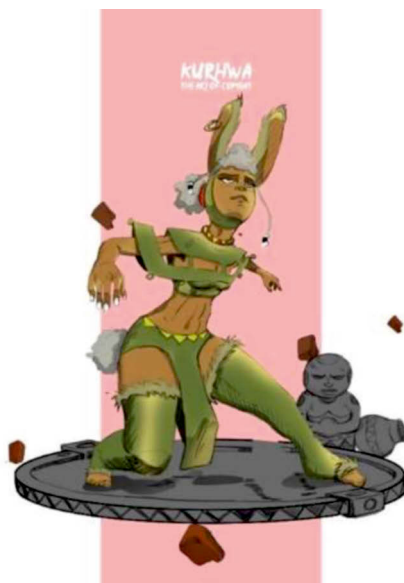
2 AFRICAN FOLKLORE FOR GEN Z

Southern African folklore and folktales, specifically from Zimbabwe, are a combination of history and a fictional ending or moral warning, where the protagonists and antagonists are represented by animals. The most popular series of folktales among the Shona people in Zimbabwe is that of the Rabbit and the Gorilla, *Tsuro na Gudo*.⁴ Traditionally, the two characters have chance encounters where they

4 Tsuro is the name of the rabbit; Gudo the name of the gorilla. Depending on the interpretation, Gudo can be a gorilla, a monkey, a baboon, or a bird. Tsuro’s character remains consistently a rabbit or hare. There is no record of the exact origin of the *Tsuro na Gudo* folktale, as it has been passed down through generations of oral storytelling in Zimbabwe and other African countries. One of the earliest known written versions of the story was recorded by missionary and ethnographer Andrew W. Smith

behave like human beings as they engage with each other because of some basic need, such as rights to build shelter, ownership of a food source, or other beneficial outcome. The folktales involve some exchange in which the rabbit outwits the gullible gorilla. In almost all cases, the gorilla is outwitted or cheated. This is a kind of meta-narrative, that shows us that intellect triumphs over physical strength and size. These types of stories have been used traditionally to teach young children about the value of investigation, wisdom, and not taking whatever possessions or opportunities they may have for granted. The *Tsuro na Gudo* folktales also reinforce the morality of honesty by showing the rabbit as being shrewd and self-serving, because she always seems to get away with taking the gorilla's 'birth-right' or possessions. This aspect of the folktales is meant to teach young people that selfishness is contrary to the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*.⁵ KURHWA uses this folktale and reimagines the two characters as anthropomorphic characters from a mystical place within the setting of our game. Tsuro and Gudo are now represented as two teenage anthropomorphic girls from competing houses, who

Figure 1: Early concept of Tsuro, an anthropomorphic character from the game KURHWA



Source: Kay Media Africa/Sigma Digital Studio.

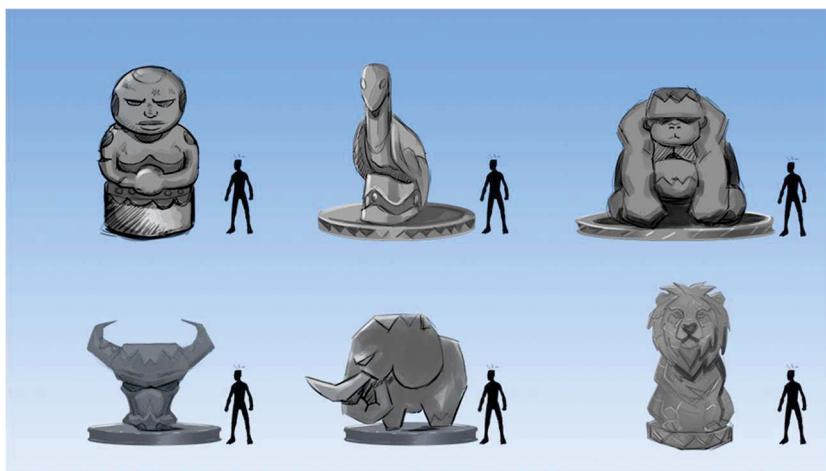
in his book *The Folklore of the Shona People*: Smith, Andrew W.: *The Folklore of the Shona People*, Harare: Baobab Books, 1997[*1929].

5 This will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 4.

later become stranded in unfamiliar territory and are forced to put their differences aside.

The retelling of this age-old story was intended to appeal to the so-called Gen Z audience, without taking away the traditional uses of these characters as a means of teaching moral lessons of teamwork, family, and unity. Furthermore, their re-design as anthropomorphic teenage girls was deliberate to provide a representation of women in this fictional world, where battles and conflicts do not necessarily need to be remedied by men alone. This is a nod to how women in pre-colonial times played a pivotal role in decision-making, warfare, and battle. Historical examples of this in Zimbabwe include Mbuya Nehanda, a spirit medium who would later be executed by British settlers for leading the resistance against the colonial incursion of the early 1900s in Zimbabwe.

Figure 2: Early Totem designs from KURHWA



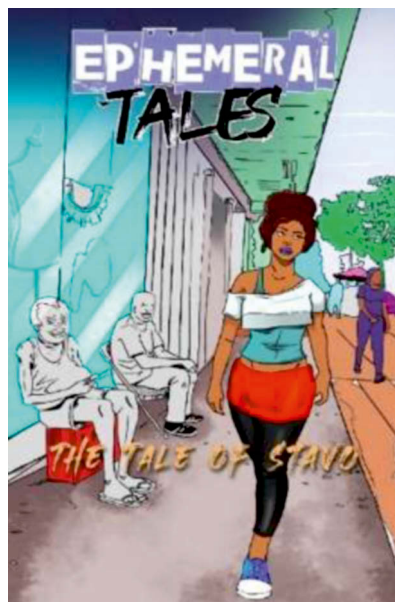
Source: Kay Media Africa/Sigma Digital Studio.

3 UNIQUE AFRICAN SOCIAL DYNAMICS: INTRODUCING THE ‘TOWNSHIP DRAMA’

In *EPHEMERAL TALES: THE TALE OF STAVO*, the writing was structured in such a way, that the protagonist falls deeper into unpleasant situations as a result of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. This is set on the backdrop of the African ‘township’, where the story takes place. African townships are urban settlements that emerged because of gentrification in the colonial era. They are high-density

suburbs that thrived beyond the colonial era because of informal economic systems, such as unofficial marketplaces and services, tightly knit communities, religion, and the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. The most famous African township known to the world today is Soweto, in South Africa. Nearly every Southern African Country has a township. Because of the numerous unique social phenomena that exist within townships such as informal ridesharing, foreign currency trading and lending, African religious beliefs, and the relationship that the people have with law enforcement, it offers an interesting and specifically African setting which nevertheless serves as an arena for a modern, and universal, story. For example, *THE TALE OF STAVO* begins with an informal ride share, that is known in the township as *mushika-shika*. This style of transport emerged only because of the failed provision, or neglect, of gentrified people living in the township. Our story takes advantage of this by placing our lead characters in one of these ride shares, and compelling them to engage with each other due to the inconvenience of it all. The first scene descends into events that feature sexism and harassment within the car, to the harassment of the same car by the police, who treat those who run this system with extreme prejudice. The result of this is how *EPHEMERAL TALES* can feature entertaining, unique scenarios to show foreign audiences, and offer an authentic look at certain aspects of township life.

Figure 3: Scenes of Township life from *EPHEMERAL TALES: THE TALE OF STAVO*



Source: Kay Media Africa.

Township life also features some universal challenges, such as drug and alcohol abuse, which take place in what are called *beer halls*, or *shabins*, instead of the Western or Eastern alternatives. *THE TALE OF STAVO* references the ‘legal’ crack-down by the police on young people’s abuse of over-the-counter drugs. It then goes as far as to focus on bribery and the involvement of loan sharks that make up the antagonist of the animated show.

4 AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY INCORPORATED INTO CHARACTER LEVELING IN *Kurhwa* THROUGH *UBUNTU*

Ubuntu can best be described as an African philosophy that places emphasis on ‘being self through others.’⁶ It is a form of humanism that can be expressed in the phrases ‘I am because of who we all are,’ or *ubuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, in the Zulu language. In this case, the Zimbabwean narrative tradition relates much more to the ensemble than the Western, hero-centered narrative. This avoidance of messianic figures aims to strengthen social ties and communalism beyond the family unit. Though *KURHWA* is designed to be a MOBA like *DOTA2*, it deviates from traditional MOBA character leveling mechanics, which typically have each individual teammate accumulating gold and experience while getting stronger alone. *KURHWA* employs a different approach as a game by leveling up the team as a whole, thus promoting teamwork and fulfilling *Ubuntu* within the gameplay.

MOBAs generally feature a single shop for buying items that boost damage, health, armor, etc. *KURHWA* features a different approach by having ‘tuck-shops’ across the map, which are inspired by family-owned tuck-shops that exist in African townships, where you can buy from a local family or even get household items on an informal credit system based on your family’s relationship with the owner or reputation in the community. The same system is featured in the game as a call-

6 The earliest known text on African philosophy of *Ubuntu* is from 1980: Samkange, Stanlake J. W. T.: “Hunhuism or Ubuntuism: A Zimbabwe Indigenous Political Philosophy,” in: Chimakonam, Jonathan (ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of African Philosophy*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017[*1980]. The book discusses the concept of *Ubuntu* as a philosophical concept and its significance in African society. The concept of *Ubuntu* emphasizes the significance of community and teaches that “a person is a person through others.” Archbishop Desmond Tutu drew on the concept of *Ubuntu* when he led South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which helped South Africa reckon with its history of Apartheid. See: Tutu, Desmond: *No Future Without Forgiveness*, New York: Doubleday, 1999.

back to contemporary African communalism or *Ubuntu*. KURHWA as a game features aesthetics in its style of character and environment design which shows these types of venues and gives the player opportunities to purchase non-elicited shop items to gain an advantage or a power-up.

In THE TALE OF STAVO, the main character's motives are revealed not to have been selfishly motivated but as a realization of *Ubuntu*. At the end of the series, his goals are revealed to be in service of someone weaker and more vulnerable than himself.

5 REDEEMING AFRICA'S REPUTATION THROUGH AFROFUTURISM IN VIDEO GAMES SUCH AS *Kurhwa*

The MOBA genre of video games is made with the intention of offering the player base an intricate variety of archetypes to explore from different genres of fiction. For example, most popular MOBAs such as Valve's DOTA2 and Riot Games' LEAGUE OF LEGENDS (2009)⁷ have a cast that is in excess of 100 characters. These characters may be inspired by one genre, for example technology or sci-fi, or may have purely fantasy elements, including mythical creatures. Others may be physical warrior-like characters, while others still are assassins or archers. The idea is that each role in the team is filled by a specific class of character.

For a game like KURHWA, this presented itself as an opportunity to showcase various archetypes with an African interpretation or an African take. An example is the character of Tashinga, a marksman. The typical marksman in a MOBA wields a ranged weapon—a gun, rifle, bow, etc.—and fires with bursts of varying damage from varying distances. One common archetype of a marksman, known as a gunslinger, carries a Western-style gun with bullets. Tashinga is a character with a clear Afrofuturistic background and technology. Although he's categorized as a marksman, his weapons are two soapstone-carved devices that emit purifying energy. The concept of bullets is a Western invention, and the principle was to abandon bullets in exchange for African mythology, which implies that soapstone can purify things from a distance. Soapstone sculptures are small yet valuable and popular in southern Africa. They have a distinct smoothness and color that stands out as opposed to the machined appearance of metal on guns and rifles. This nuance allowed for sleek and curved designs to be created for Tashinga's soapstone weapons and informed his gameplay mechanic, which doesn't require him to reload since his weapon does not use physical ammunition. The modernity of it,

7 LEAGUE OF LEGENDS (USA 2009, O: Riot Games).

along with its aspiration of a superior yet regal weapon, distinctly bears the hallmarks of Afrofuturism without changing the genre of video game under which KURHWA is classified.

Figure 4: Early prototype of KURHWA displaying in-game combat



Source: Kay Media Africa/Sigma Digital Studio.

Figure 5: Early character design of Afro-futuristic character



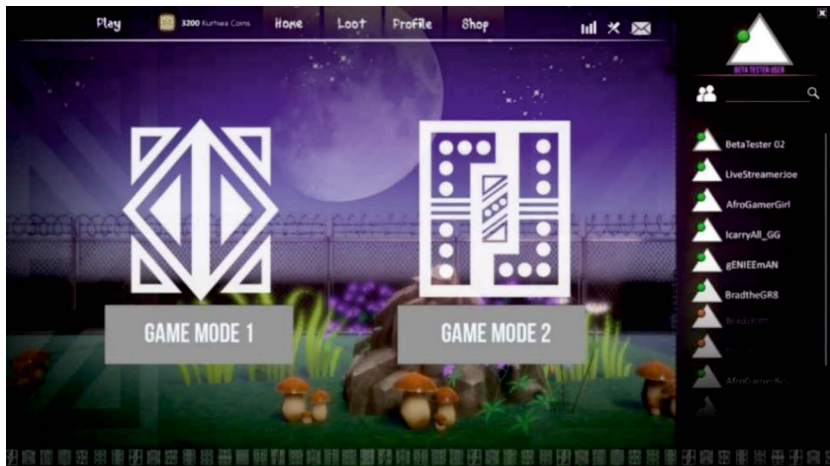
Source: Kay Media Africa/Sigma Digital Studio.

6 MUSIC AND SOUND AND SYMBOLISM IN GRAPHIC DESIGN

Both KURHWA and THE TALE OF STAVO utilize African music and symbolism in their communication and design. By referring to African tradition, THE TALE OF STAVO utilizes more music than KURHWA. The music, however, borrows from African oral tradition by fusing Afro-pop and hip-hop-like chants. It tells the story of THE TALE OF STAVO by introducing a mixture of English and Shona vernacular to make the storyline more engaging. Dialogue is absent and narration is carried out through the four songs' verses and choruses.

KURHWA as a Game utilizes African dingbats⁸ and typography by renowned African graphic designer and typography artist Baynham Goredema. This came from the game designers identifying an opportunity to introduce the world to African typographic art. Unlike the Western community's familiarity with Asian characters and typography, such as Mandarin characters and Japanese kanji, there hasn't been an occasion for the world to experience African characters and symbols in a similar manner. The user interface, or GUI, of KURHWA places a number

Figure 6: Early GUI design showing African typography in the Kurhwa game menu



Source: Kay Media Africa/Sigma Digital Studio.

- 8 Dingbats are non-letter, non-number, and non-punctuation graphical symbols that are used to add decorative or symbolic elements to a text. Examples of dingbats include stars, arrows, smiley faces, and other graphical icons that are included within a typeface. The Microsoft Word font Wingdings is one example of a font made up of dingbats.

of these modernized graphics and symbols into the navigation experience. It attempts to create an immersive African experience where a non-African audience can begin a journey of cultural discovery.

7 CONCLUSION

In summation, this investigation has looked into the initial questions on the global appeal and potential of African culture and contemporary social practices with some definitive answers based on our case studies. We certainly can utilize the near-extinct folklore of minority groups from Africa within games and animation in the hope of initiating some genuine global interest. By highlighting our philosophies, such as *Ubuntu*, and incorporating them into gameplay and game design, we can introduce players and audiences to specific African ideals. Through this, we can demonstrate our ability to be inventive, creative, and enterprising, comparable to the rest of the developed world.

By integrating concepts of everyday social interaction which are common within African Townships, we can introduce these dynamics into cooperative gameplay in a way that is reflective of modern African society. Credit systems that are based on trust can be made available to teams as a secondary way of scaling the team's power or gaining an advantage over an opposing team that's failing to apply the communal system effectively.

We, as African game developers and narrative writers, can challenge the existing prejudices that African social and cultural beliefs are primitive by incorporating Afrofuturism within our character designs and game aesthetics. The design and incorporation of local technology and scientific concepts can help to dispel inaccurate prejudices while celebrating the indigenous sciences around geology, climatology, and physics, that would be categorized as fringe science by Western academics.

Global audiences can be introduced to several avenues to experience Afrofuturism as a narrative tool. African modernization was interrupted by colonialism. However, the aspirational aspects of Afrofuturistic fiction allow new audiences to join in on the positive societal, scientific, and political aspirations of African creatives. Through Afrofuturism, people can entertain ideas about what could have become of Africa if it were not for the deprivation and disruption caused by social, academic, political, and military infringement—that is, colonialism.

LITERATURE

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FILMOGRAPHY

EPHEMERAL TALES (ZW 2022, D: Eugene Mapondera)

GAMEOGRAPHY

DOTA 2 (USA 2013, O: Valve Corporation)

LEAGUE OF LEGENDS (USA 2009, O: Riot Games)