

On decolonizing fantasy



Game designer and Twin Drums founder Allan Cudicio on the racism built into many fantasy worlds, researching African history to create his new RPG, and why the word “gamer” needs to disappear.

October 13, 2020 -

As told to Rebecca Hiscott, 2158 words.

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You founded Twin Drums after working as a game designer for companies like King and Wooga. What led up to establishing your own studio?

A couple of factors. One of the biggest ones, which a lot of creatives have, is that you’re constantly negotiating your creativity. The larger the company, the less creative control you have. The best-case scenario is you’re doing amazing things together. But sometimes it borders on factory work, where you’re just one piece of one cog in the machine.

This was compounded by the fact that I wanted to create things that were further away from what I was working on. I wanted more creative freedom and I wanted the opportunity to work on things that were less mainstream and orthodox. One of these things is exploring my African heritage and representing it more in my products. I realized I had gotten to the point where I had enough experience. I was like, “Okay. I think I’m ready. I can do this.”

Twin Drums is also hoping to bring more representation of Blackness and queerness into games. Can you speak a little bit more about that mission?

It’s really about visibility and representation. It’s about showing to the world that games don’t have to be based on Eurocentric imagination and escapism. We can expand our horizons of the imaginary. For Twin Drums the focus is on bringing more Black and African aesthetics, stories, voices, visuals, even mechanics into the industry.

There’s another element, which is related, about the company itself. It’s about proving that in a world of mostly cis white men, crunching and working in unsustainable environments, we can have a family-friendly, mental health-friendly, non-crunch environment which is very diverse, where no matter your sexual orientation you are welcome. You are standard. Unfortunately, the usual majority is white, straight, cis. People try to integrate diversity, but still you are an exception.





Twin Drums is working on its first game, *The Wagadu Chronicles*. Tell me a little bit about where you're at in the process of making it and what kind of work has gone into it so far.

One [aspect] is the lore. I've worked on games where the setting and the lore are not fundamental. You focus on the mechanics—something bounces, it explodes, it's fun. Then you think, "Should we make these ponies or pandas?" and it doesn't matter. But in this case, because it's so much about the aesthetics, the themes, and about role-playing in this specific world, I started building the setting even before the game. That's basically done. Of course, it will keep on growing, but there is a setting that is already explorable.

On the other hand, for the software of the online role-playing game, we have a quite advanced early build, an early version of the game you can play on the server with others. We have crafting, we have some degree of customization, we have some exploration. It's like a small, cute early version of the game, a digital slice that we will be expanding into the final game after the Kickstarter.

What kind of research have you done to create the world of the game?

I feel like one day I'll have to do a workshop or something because it's like, where do I start? It started as a personal experience. I consider being Black a blessing. It does make your life harder in this world that is dominated by light-skinned people. But for me, I feel like I'm blessed because it's something that's given me so much. It has been such an empowering thing. [I've been] doubly blessed by having a single mother who made sure her kids were connected to the continent. Even when we had financial issues she'd try to make sure that every now and then we'd go to Ghana, we'd spend some time there.

Then, eight years ago, I decided to spend a year living in Ghana. I built upon my knowledge of Ghana. I saw some of the rituals that would be in the game, or animals, or people, and many of the stories I've heard from my

grandmother or mother. That's the bedrock of the research.

But it was nowhere near enough, because one, there's just so much. I mean, Africa is such a massive continent, there's so much to research. Secondly, Africa has a very oppressive background of colonialism that led to the destruction, even physical destruction, of many cities and temples and artifacts. Lots of the ancient art from Africa is in Europe or the U.S. Lots of Africans have never seen many of the masterworks of their own ancestors because they have to travel and get a visa to the UK or Germany or New York to go and view their own art. So that requires a lot of research.

The internet, too, this thing that we consider this neutral platform, it's not. It's created and still mostly managed by white, straight, middle-aged men. To give you an example, if you go on Wikipedia and look for some of the biggest cities in Africa, or ancient empires or religions, you find maybe one line. Go and look for a tiny village in the U.S., and there will be a full page. There's such a clear bias. So that led me to books. I have a whole collection. Some of them are really expensive because they're either out of print or just 100 copies were printed. Some of them I just couldn't afford. But overall, I've managed to find a lot. In Ghana, the librarian of the university knows me.





Another thing that makes *The Wagadu Chronicles* unique among fantasy games is its focus on characters' lineages, rather than race. I'd love to hear more about that distinction and why it's important to you.

In the last few years, I realized how entrenched racism is in fantasy. I love J.R.R. Tolkien. When I read *The Lord of the Rings* for the first time, I think I was 12, I couldn't leave the room. But Tolkien crafted this world from which most [other] fantasy worlds spring out in a world that was very racist. White people were seen as the best people, the most civilized people. In some instances he was very open about, for instance, looking at what he described as the most ugly type of people, "Mongoloid" people, to take inspiration for Orcs. If you look at the elves and Nordic people, they're good people, mostly, and then the darker people, the Haradrim, the Southerners, are with Sauron, and they're described as dark-skinned.

The bias is quite visible, and once you see it, you cannot unsee it. Lots of the people who are still using these worlds are not racist. Many of us are people of color. Can we rethink the foundation of fantasy, getting away from these racist concepts? Race, surprise surprise, is racist as a concept. If you look at what happened in countries like Ghana or India or Nigeria, people were separated into races and given attributes. Like, "This is a warrior race, so let's hire them for the army. This is a farmer race, so we'll put them in farms." We need to get away from that.

In fantasy, race always coincides with your culture. We're having conversations like, can you be French or German or Russian and be Black or Asian? If you look at fantasy, these fantasy worlds say no. If you have pointy ears and are tall, then you're an elf and you're culturally elf. These assumptions are dangerous because they're unspoken. Especially as kids, we're growing up and we think this is normal. An elf believes in Elvin gods. An Asian person with a Vietnamese name must be from Vietnam. But no, maybe they're German. I decided, blank slate, let's re-look at the whole concept for *The Wagadu Chronicles*.



You've already released elements of the game online, including [this huge lore book](#). What has the response been like?

Amazing. Until not long ago it was just a thing that I and a few people on the team knew about. For the first time, being able to get feedback from the wider world was really touching. Some of the emails I got, especially from Black people, people of color, it was especially touching when people tell me, "This is what I was looking for my whole life."

Lots of people who have no connection to Blackness or Africa have really loved the setting as well. For me that was like a double validation. I feel like it touched the people who it was meant to touch, and other pieces are for everyone. I hope it keeps on being like this.



I imagine it also feels like a rebuke to the games industry that for so long has said, "There's not enough of an audience for this." That's actually not true.

I remember an investor asking me, "What do you think about the high spender, middle-aged white man? Aren't you worried that they're not going to be playing the game and therefore your audience is going to be too small?" I've

had these conversations openly with people, even potential stakeholders who did not end up being a part [of it], because I think if you have this conversation with me, you're not going to be a stakeholder.

What advice would you give to people who want to do what you do?

By "do what you do," do you mean, like, quit your job and burn through your savings? [Laughs]

Yeah, that—and getting into games, making your own games, making games that are independent and outside of the mainstream. All of that.

One, have a plan. You hear lots of stories of people who go out there and improvise and explore and somehow something comes out. I think those success stories are great, but I don't think they represent the most efficient way. How many people quit and then end up with no money, no idea, no product? Try to have as much of a plan before quitting whichever job you have. If you decide to do this part-time, I think the goal should be to try and get full-time on the project, but having done as much as possible. Gain momentum and then quit and focus on it.

Another thing I would recommend is to create a network. I know not everybody is an extrovert, but there are techniques you can use, even as an introvert. Networks are so crucial. When you're by yourself trying to build something, people can give you all sorts of input. The setting book of *The Wagadu Chronicles*, which is free, basically almost everything you see and read was done for free. One person helped me with the layout, this amazing designer from California. Then all these artists... Literally, someone from every continent helped to do art.





If you were to imagine the ideal future of games and the games industry, what would it look like?

I would hope to see less guns and less blood and less explosions. In every medium, violence can be a powerful tool to tell stories, but I think we, as an industry, need to rebalance it. There are so many awesome games that are "wholesome." There are even games about war without shooting and guns. There are so many interesting worlds we could use for our games that we should explore more. More worlds and more diversity, not only in aesthetics and tone, but even from an action point of view, what you do and experience.

The word "gamer" would disappear, because [playing games] would be just like going to the cinema. I hope games lose their reputation as being either for kids or just violence, and they become a medium to experience things within a spectrum of art experiences.

Allan Cudicio Recommends:

Homegoing by Yaa Gyasi: A wonderful intergenerational Black novel.

Kind Words (lo-fi chill beats to write to): Can games be more wholesome?

Sudan Archives by Sudan Archives: What a reinvention of African sounds!

Don Giovanni by W.A. Mozart: It's good, I promise.

Dredd: An underrated sci-fi gem.



Name

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Vocation

Game designer

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