

Venezuela, choose your President

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We can learn a lot about the current humanitarian crisis in Maduro's Venezuela through Woody Allen and the Tropico computer game series. [Español](#)



Venezuela, April 13 2010, members of Chavez's National Revolutionary Militia, celebrate the 9th anniversary of the failed 2002 coup. Picture by: Ariana Cubillos / AP/Press Association Images

On December 17th, 1982, a young Lieutenant stood in front of his colleagues at a military base and gave a speech to commemorate Simón Bolívar's death. Hoping to revive the dreams of one of the Latin American independence movement's greatest heroes, he told his audience: "Bolívar is in the heavens of America, vigilant and frowning... because what he didn't do, still has to be done today". Less than 20 years later, Hugo Chávez would come to be recognised as one of the 21st century's most charismatic leaders and a symbol of the region's wave of populist-progressive movements.

Chávez led with a style of anti-imperialist rhetoric that few can pull off, as he implemented what for Venezuela was a radical programme of social reform. Constantly battling domestic opposition, and its alliance with what he saw as international imperial interests, the Chávez era represented both positive reform in search of social justice, but also political volatility – manifesting itself most clearly during the attempted *military coup* in 2001.

As the current President, Nicolás Maduro, attempts unsuccessfully to fill his predecessor's big shoes, he seems unable to escape the political volatility that is associated with his presidency in the headlines. Hugo Chávez divided domestic opinion, but he clearly defeated the opposition in four successive elections, and although his public support dropped significantly throughout his four-term presidency, Maduro's [reported](#) 21.2% approval rating is certainly a new low. With his government failing to manage inflation, the country has entered a downward spiral as basic amenities, such as food, medicine and electricity, have become scarce for much of the population.

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Yet, the humanitarian crisis – and that is what it is – has received very little coverage internationally, as headlines

that *do* cover Venezuela focus more on the political melees between the government and the opposition-led street protests than the deprivation, collapse of healthcare services and rising violence. In fact, the Venezuelan crisis, to the eyes of a global audience, is hidden behind a powerful narrative that accompanies both Venezuela *and* the entire Latin American continent – a narrative that assumes constant political volatility, as nations swing from one strong leader to the next and society erupts around it. It is a harmful narrative that sets low expectations for Latin America and distracts the international community not only from the shady geopolitical games that are being played in the region, but from the unacceptable social/humanitarian situation that is currently at hand.

“Congratulations, *Presidente*, you’ve been elected... again!”

Narratives are an unavoidable part of trying to understand the world around us, and they can both help *and* hinder us. These narratives, and the stereotypes that accompany them, are often constructed and visible through the mass-media we consume – cinema being an important example in the case of Latin America. In his book *Latino Images in Film*, Charles Ramírez Berg argues that characters such as *the Latin lover*, *the harlot* or *the drug runner* have been the “defining and demeaning images of Latinos in U.S. cinema for over a century”. By appearing on our screens, these characters are not only reflecting, but mostly shaping our perception of Latin American culture and its peoples.



Woody Allen, American comedian/director, visits London in connection with his film 'Bananas' (1971). Picture by: PA / PA Archive/Press Association Images

Beyond character stereotypes, cinema uses cultural narratives as it seeks to recreate a familiar visual environment for the audience. Like stereotypes, these narratives reflect our perceptions of a homogenous 'Latin society'. One

such narrative is that of the region's traditional political instability and volatility. Such themes as popular revolt, extrajudicial killings and dictatorial regimes are common in cinematic representations of the region. Take, for example, Woody Allen's *Bananas* (1971). Set in the fictitious Latin American state of 'San Marcos', the opening scene treats the audience to the assassination of the country's President, as part of a military-led *coup d'état*. Crowds of rowdy spectators fill the frame of the picture as – in a satirical style - the assassination is presented as a recurring major sporting event. The environment is one of civil unrest and violent politics.

Such narratives are obviously not confined to cinema. Like film, computer games are designed for mass appeal and therefore provide a valuable insight into popular perceptions of the world. Through what [Jesper Juul](#) refers to as 'stylised simulations', computer games similarly seek to replicate these perceptions, in order to provide *the gamer* with the desired sense of (virtual) reality. If you want to launch a successful anti-terrorist *first person shooter*, you need to create a believable environment based on familiar narratives and stereotypes - for example, a US-UK Special Forces joint operation in pursuit of Russian-linked Eurasian terrorists.

The Latin American narrative is perfectly visible in this form of media. An appropriate example, and by no means an isolated case, is the *Tropico* computer game series. As dictator of a Latin-Caribbean island, beyond the mundane management of schooling, healthcare and the economy, you are also expected to crush insurgents, order the 'disappearance' of out-of-favour citizens by your Secret Service and fill the airwaves with pro-government propaganda. Choosing your dictator of choice (including 'cult' figures, such as Fidel Castro and Evita Perón), you are further tasked with balancing your politics to appease the international powers of good old USSR and Neoliberal USA - at the expense of any principles you may have honourably carried with you into the game.

The humanitarian crisis will not be televised

There are claims that Latin America is experiencing a '[new political cycle](#)'. As the continent faces plummeting world commodity prices and thus economic stagnation, history is picking off each of Latin American 'progressive' leaders one by one, in Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia and Ecuador and a number of Central American states. Venezuela is left kicking and screaming, as the country's hydroelectric energy supplies are curtailed by drought, [oil production hits a 13-year low](#) and hyper-inflation (a reported [annualised inflation of 773%](#)) triggers social meltdown. Maduro's stubborn refusal to concede to reform is likely to be his swan song, but we are not there yet.

This is not acceptable governance in any country and deserves the attention of the international community. The humanitarian crisis that is affecting the lives of hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans should not be trivialised under this narrative of typical Latin American political volatility. But more importantly, this is not an opportunity for outside interference with the future of Venezuela – which will only fuel fears of imperial interference and lead to further political confrontation. Rather, we need to challenge this outdated (if not occasionally comical) narrative and ensure that the media differentiate between the region's alleged political cycles and the stories of the citizens that are living on the ground.

If we fail to separate individual humanitarian crises from the narrative of volatile, political cycles, then they will remain part of Latin America's future.



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