Nigeria seeks to conquer African video games market

March 9 2014, by Cecile De Comarmond

It's a common enough scenario in Nigeria and across Africa: how to get rid of pesky mosquitoes whose buzzing disturbs sleep and whose bites can carry malaria and other diseases.

Two Nigerian start-ups have tapped this—and other aspects and quirks of daily life in Africa—to create online and mobile phone video games that are winning fans around the world.

It's easy to see why "Mosquito Smasher"—which has earned comparisons to "Angry Birds", the worldwide mobile app success of recent years—might be a hit.

The graphics are simple, the aim clear and the reward immediate: squash as many of the blood-sucking parasites as possible under your thumb with a satisfying "Splat!"

Another, the highly popular "Okada Ride", has players guide a motorcycle-taxi driver around roadside street vendors, road-blocks and police in the notorious traffic of Lagos, a sprawling metropolis of nearly 20 million people.

"What I like about Nigerian video games, it's one: the local content, because it tends to give you that everyday feel," said Chucks Olloh, 32, a big fan.

"For example the 'Okada' hussle, it tells you how you ride on your bike,

trying to avoid so many obstacles on your way home or on your way to work," said the computer programmer from Lagos.

"Two: it's very simple. All you have to do is to gain as much points as possible and avoid the obstacles."

An African flavour

The worldwide video games industry, worth more than $63 billion (46 billion euros) in 2012, is expected to reach nearly $87 billion in 2017, PricewaterhouseCoopers said in a recent study.

And while the African market has not figured prominently on the radar of game developers, the founders of Maliyo—the makers of "Mosquito Smasher" and "Okada Ride"—and Kuluya are hoping to change that.

Both firms were launched about 18 months ago and draw inspiration from life in Lagos. Kuluya—"action" in the Igbo language of southern Nigeria—has already created some 70 games.

It hopes to reach one million mobile telephone users by the end of June and has fans well beyond Nigeria's borders.

"In Africa, we have a lot of downloads from Ghana, Kenya and South Africa," said Lakunle Ogungbamila, who runs Kuluya.

"There was a particular game that a lot of people downloaded in Ethiopia, I'm not sure why. It's called 'Ma Hauchi': it's a hunter who is shooting vultures. A very simple game...

"Also, we get a lot of downloads from China, India, Thailand, Taiwan."

'Mobile is massive'

Adapting the games to the platforms that Africans use is vital, said Ogungbamila and Maliyo founder Hugo Obi.

Unlike in Europe or the United States, sales of games consoles are low in Africa and there is a preference for playing on-line.

Internet access comes rarely via home broadband hubs but instead—and increasingly—via smartphones.

"Mobile is massive in this part of the world. It has the highest penetration, especially for Internet users. And we are exporting a lot of our games onto mobiles," Maliyo's Obi told AFP.

Figures clearly show the trend in Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation with 170 million residents and nearly 100 million mobile phone users in 2012.

In 2011, it is estimated that 46 million people used Internet, up from 2008 when there were only 11 million Internet users.

Obi, who invented "Mosquito Smasher", spent 10 years in Britain running a recruitment company before returning home in 2012 to set up his on-line games company.

To share Nigeria's high operating costs, with daily power cuts the norm and investment in diesel-powered generators a must, his five-member firm shares workspace with eight other companies.

From an office in the Lagos suburb of Yaba, Maliyo now offers 10 free on-line games to some 20,000 users across Nigeria but also in Britain and the United States.

It is preparing to launch smartphone versions of its most popular games.

Expansion plans

Kuluya, meanwhile, started with an investment of $250,000 but is now worth an estimated $2 million and employs about a dozen people in its Lagos office.

Sitting behind large Apple Mac screens and armed with giant tablets and light pens, the creative team, all Nigerian, find inspiration from what dominates their daily life but also comb the web for information about other African countries.

Along with the typically Nigerian games, their catalogue now nods to Kenyan culture with the game "Masai" and another called "Matatus", which features the minibuses that travel around Nairobi. Their "Zulu" game, meanwhile, has clear references to South Africa.

For the moment, Kuluya, which is seeking new investment, earns little money from advertising. Maliyo, for its part, funds itself by creating games for businesses.

The next stage for Kuluya is to introduce payment by text message for more sophisticated versions of its games.

© 2014 AFP