

Social Impact Arts Prize '22

SPACE SALAD

Doba-Dash is a 3D combat racing game developed by SpaceSalad Studios that draws attention to the daring environmental work of informal waste collectors or 'Street Surfers'. With its roots in the Zulu word for 'collect' or 'pick up', Doba-Dash gamifies the experience of informal recycling as it plays out on South Africa's streets. Through in-game rewards for those who translate game-play into real life behavioural change, Doba-dash is aimed at encouraging young people to appreciate the work of waste collectors and respect the planet by recycling.

SpaceSalad Studios is a multi award winning indie game studio based in Johannesburg made up of Thabo Tsolo (Team Lead and Game Designer), Rethabile Koma (Lead Programmer), Neo Ramathinyane (Lead 2D Artist), Wandile Matsebula (Sound Designer) and Minentle Ndzala (Sound Designer). Their collaborative practice uses storytelling, music and entertaining game-play to virtually immerse their audiences in social, environmental and political narratives.

Interview with SpaceSalad Studios for the Social Impact Arts Prize 2022:

SIAP: Can you talk about the characters in Doba-Dash, who they are, where they come from, what their stories are?

SpaceSalad: Doba-Dash characters are inspired by real people who have overcome personal struggles by joining the waste management industry. So far we have six different gangs named after six types of recyclable materials including: paper, glass, metal, electronic waste, plastic and fast fashion.

Azania is a street kid from the plastic gang. When she was only nine years old, she ran away from home because of her abusive stepfather, and found a new family of street kids at the plastic junkyard. She races in Doba-Dash, along with other kids who live at the junkyard, in order to earn money so that they can keep their home safe and clean.

Wandile belongs to the paper gang. Known as one of the high-flying lightweight racers, Wandile is originally from the street-surfing community and works as a waste picker by day. By night he turns into a Doba-Dash racer, trying to triple his earnings by beating all the other racers.

Nomkita is from the metal gang. She has a spiritual calling (Sangoma) which gives her superhuman strength in carrying the heavy metal load on her trolley. She became a Doba-Dash racer because the rivers, which connect her to the spiritual world, are being polluted. She makes sure no waste material is left unrecycled by being one of the toughest racers.

Sello is from the glass gang. He is currently doing his teaching degree. He could have finished a long time ago but when he first arrived from the village to pursue his studies in the city, he developed an addiction to alcohol, which caused him to fail and lose his bursary. Now he races to pay for his school fees and avoid the shame of returning to his village a failure.

SIAP: You've used foley sound, various 'classical' instruments and drawn from amapiano as a reference in your soundtracks. What are your interests where sound and music are concerned and how do these interests feed into your game design process?

Wandile and Minentle: We're interests include electronic music, house music, hip hop and jazz - to name a few. All these genres have influenced the way we think about time signatures, the type of melodies and drum patterns we've created. What's also important is adding emotion to our music, which can be difficult to convey to the average listener.

All these elements create different channels that enable us to achieve specific goals and to generate different game sounds. Whether it be portraying by deep emotion, humour or playfulness.

SIAP: Where do your ideas come from?

Thabo: I usually draw my inspiration from my surroundings, what I see, the people I engage with. I'm pretty big on storytelling. My whole life I wanted to tell stories, I wanted to share my stories. That's how I learn in life - through listening to people, how they speak, what they've gone through. I want to give people an experience. That's why I studied animation, but I realised that with gaming, it's a step further. You're putting the people inside the story. You can take them on a journey.

With Doba-Dash, these guys come through every Thursday in my neighbourhood and I remember one time my dad invited one of the guys in for breakfast. I was still in high school at the time and everyone was freaking out, I even called my mum and told her, "Dad's bringing homeless people in the house!" I thought to myself, "this is scary, he's going to rob us!"

So I'm preparing my lunch for school and eavesdropping on their conversation with my father. He's saying he's trying to make a better future for his family back in Lesotho. He's from Lesotho (most of these guys are from Lesotho). And I'm thinking, Wow, this guy has a pretty unique story that a lot of people don't understand - and that's how I pitched it.

SIAP: What are your research methods, what strategies did you use to gain a better understanding of the world and characters you seek to represent through Doba-Dash?

Thabo: At first, we reached out to different organisations that work with reclaimers. But these guys are so used to people coming to them and asking for things and not getting anything from it, so we came up with a different approach when that didn't work out. I already have this relationship with a guy who comes around my neighbourhood, so I thought how do I take this a step further and get to know him on a more personal level?

So he told us where he stays, near the Hill, south of Joburg and that we should come through. We went looking for the camp and struggled to find it. We asked around and got misled a few times by people in the area and we were about to leave when I said I just want to drive past, we're out here already. So we drove past, and I saw a guy I recognised from my neighbourhood. We parked the car and I went in alone and everyone is looking at me and asking me questions like "what do you want? Why are you here?" And I'm trying to be nice and friendly and I tell them that I'm here for Namane. When I finally found him I told him I was so scared I thought I was going to die. There was a whole group of guys gathered around me then and I told them I'm actually here to show you a game we made about you. I'd like to know what you think. And they were going crazy, surrounding me. They were really excited about it and they wanted to know what I wanted from them and I told them I just wanted to show you guys, my job is to show people what you're doing. I'll never forget that feeling.

Then, on a more practical level, in terms of building the game, we actually also got hold of a trolley, so I learnt how to ride it - just to immerse myself, see how it works and how it feels.

SIAP: Given that many of your games explore themes relevant to the everyday social, political lives of South Africans, what are your thoughts on social responsibility within game design? Do you think the gaming industry should consider social responsibility in their work or is this just a choice you have made for yourselves and your company?

Neo: In the beginning we made games based on our surroundings and subjects we were interested in. What started out as an innocent interpretation of the world we live in, turned to be what makes us unique, which is making games with a message. The gaming industry is already in the business of making games with a focus on social responsibility. We see it in organisations like 'Games for Change', that has been around since 2004. Their mandate is to encourage visibility for developers who make serious games, while also pushing for diversity within the industry.

We also believe it's important to make games that don't consider social responsibility - games that are just fun to play. These games are just as valuable because they help us disconnect from the burden of reality. They offer us an escape. We try to be the bridge between serious games that have the potential to inspire behavioural change, and fun, entertaining games.

SIAP: Can you talk about your experience in the gaming industry and the kind of changes you'd like to see?

SpaceSalad: We always say that we're the biggest black-owned gaming studio in the world right now. It's easy to claim that title. There are not a lot of us. When we started out in 2019 we were usually one of, if not the only black people in the spaces we visited. Although The SA indie game developer community was really friendly and welcoming, we sometimes felt that we didn't belong in this industry, like we were just passing by and weren't going to stick around for long. There is pressure from all sides (from within our communities and elsewhere) to constantly prove that we deserve to be here. We want to make sure that one day we won't be the only contenders for the position of the biggest black-owned gaming studio in the world.

We look forward to seeing more diversity, more black voices coming into the industry. Africa has one of the lowest performing gaming communities despite having one of the biggest populations. This is partly because of a lack of infrastructure. By diversifying the gaming space, we believe we'll see a jump in demand from newer audiences, which will drive the production of affordable hardware for consumers and game developers. This will encourage more investment from the private and public sector, which can support upcoming developers like us to create what they love and also to create jobs.

SIAP: Are there other game design studios or games that you look to for inspiration in your work? Can you describe what it is about their processes or style that resonates with you?

SpaceSalad: We look up to 'Free Lives', which is an indie game studio based in Cape Town. They are the biggest commercially successful gaming studio in Africa and make games that are really funny. What resonates most with us is how they approach multi-layered theme in their game, using humour to connect the players with that theme. We also like their playful, laid-back approach to the industry.

SIAP: Who is your ideal player?

SpaceSalad: Our ideal player is someone who wants to do more than just play games, a player who wants the time they spend playing the game to have an impact on the world they live in, and lastly someone who is looking for uniquely African content that resonates with the global human experience.

SIAP: What are your plans for Doba-Dash going forward?

We've decided to take the game a step further. We're working on a mobile version now, which we've designed so that when you recycle in real life, you can scan a packaging label and get points in the game. We're hoping to partner with a brand that might see an incentive in tracking what happens to their packaging. But it's not so easy to get hold of these guys. It's hard to get a response - especially if you're just like us, you know, the biggest black owned gaming studio in the world.

**Thabo Tsolo,
Rethabile Koma,
Neo Ramathinyane
Wandile Matsebula
Minentle Ndzala**



DOBA DASH

