

PLAYING THEIR CARDS RIGHT

THESE UGANDAN GAME DESIGNERS AND FOUNDERS ARE HOLDING UP
A MIRROR TO SOCIETY WITH THEIR ART.

By Alastair Hagger

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FORBES LIFE



Muhumuza and
Asiimwe

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As many a traveler knows, you're never alone if you've packed some cards. You could indulge in the terse isolation of Solitaire, but in East Africa, you can make an instant friend with an invitation to a game of *matatu*, a simple, addictive pastime played with a standard 53-card pack. The game is often encountered on the eponymous minibuses in the region, as seats can sometimes be turned to face each other so a feisty card battle can ensue.

A colonial acculturation introduced from Europe, card play thrived in the brighter, warmer climes of the African continent, where playing games like *matatu* on the streets triggered a viral propagation of these easily-learned diversions.

Since returning home after studying abroad, two childhood friends have created a company that reconfigures the hobby with a Ugandan twist, tapping into card games' inherent sociability and low barrier to entry. Denzel Muhumuza and JJ Asiimwe are the founders of the company Mizano, and creators of a vivacious range of games that draw on the cultural idiosyncrasies of modern Uganda.

"The name Mizano is derived from the *Ankole* language, and refers to the act of playing," says Muhumuza, the company's

Managing Director, and designer of the games' vibrant artwork.

"Uganda has a huge gaming culture. At the market in downtown Kampala, people are always playing cards. So we're trying to plug into that gaming ecosystem. The issue is that they're playing with cards that arrived in the 19th century – a White queen, a White king. We want people to play games that are inflected with their cultural identity. That was our driving mission: to uniquely celebrate our culture."

Their flagship product is *Mulodi*, a property game that leans hard into the spiky back-and-forth of East Africa's notoriously perilous real estate hustle: in a mischievous nod to the urban landscape's ubiquitous painted 'this land is not for sale' signs, the game even allows you steal another player's estate (and bank the proceeds).

"It's about making money – and trying to protect your property from other people!" says Asiimwe, Mizano's Co-Director. He points out some of the game's action cards. "*Banja* means getting back money from someone who owes you. And this one is 'wedding meeting', which means everyone has to pay you 20 million shillings towards your wedding. Weddings are a big part of our culture, and a lot of people have a meeting where you might have a community help you fundraise."

The name of the *Mulodi* game, which now has a safari real-estate spin-off, is another hat-tip to the stratified financial power-wielding of Ugandan society. "A rich, successful person is called a *mulodi*," Muhumuza says. "Here, there are no land titles. It's all based on your neighbors knowing you own the land. That's what we tried to capture: people are always trying to get ahead 'differently'. So, if you're playing this game, it's about understanding your partners are riddled with corruption..."

It's an affectionate but unflinching satire about the nefarious goings-on in everyday economic life, and a deliberate effort to educate as well as entertain (the company also produces a skew called *Eyidentify*, a symbol-matching game especially popular with children).

Do the two entrepreneurs feel a responsibility to decolonize popular gaming culture for this new generation of card players?

"Every problem's an opportunity, right?" says Asiimwe. "It reflects what we're going through. We were educated in this system, and went abroad; now we're back, reconnecting with our roots. So, it feels good, because it's in line with what we're doing with our own lives. We're doing it for business – but we're also contributing to society." 

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