

East Meets South: the creative appropriation of Nintendo and Sega videogames in Brazil

Mariana Amaro, Suely Fragoso

Digital Artefacts Laboratory (LAD)
Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS)
Rua Ramiro Barcelos, 2705
Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil, ZIP 90035-007
+55 51 3308-5067
suelyfragoso@ufrgs.br, mari.amaroc@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

This presentation is part of a cartography of Japanese influences on the Brazilian game industry. It focuses on videogames produced under the protectionist policies in force during the 1980s and 1990s and relates these games to different forms of appropriation which previous authors have considered peculiar to Latin America.

We define appropriation in line with Bar et al., as a creative and continuous process of re-negotiation through which “users take something external (alien, or foreign, something given to them by others), and make it their own” (2007, 3). According to the same authors, the contemporary Latin American techno-cultural landscape emerged under asymmetric power relationships which gave rise to forms of appropriation specific to the region. They organize these forms of appropriation in three categories, namely “baroque infiltration”, “creolization” and “cannibalism”, which we attempt to bring closer to notions of Latin American authors such as “in-betweenness” (Santiago, 1978) and “cultural anthropophagy” (De Andrade, (1991 [1928])). Finally, our presentation also follows the suggestion of Bar et al. (2007, p. 22) in ordering the examples from the least confrontational to the most radical type of appropriation, that is, from baroque infiltration to anthropophagic cannibalism.

PLAYTRONIC AND TECTOY: BRAZILIAN APPROPRIATION OF VIDEOGAMES

The effects of the protectionist policies which were in force in Brazil from 1984 to 1992 can still be felt. During that period, the law strictly forbade the sales of any type of electronic equipment manufactured abroad, with the stated intention of boosting the development of the national industry. However Brazilian entrepreneurs preferred to associate with North-American and Japanese companies to produce “nationalised versions” of their consoles and videogames. The major examples are Nintendo with Playtronic (a joint venture of the Brazilian companies Gradiente and Estrela) and Sega with TecToy. Under Nintendo’s tight control, Playtronic was restricted to the assembly and distribution of cartridges and providing translations for 3 videogames (Barros, 2016, 2017). The partnership between Sega and TecToy resulted in the commercialization of more than 500 videogames from the late 1980s to 2000. Under a less restrictive contract, the Brazilian partner exercised various forms of creative appropriation.

The translations of videogames to Brazilian Portuguese by Playtronic and TecToy can be considered cases of “baroque infiltration”, which Bar et al. (2007) defined as consisting of altering foreign cultural products without subverting their original prescriptions and rules. Videogames such as *Phantasy Star* (1991 [1987]) and *Phantasy Star II* (1996 [1989]) are examples of this straightforward and restricted type of appropriation. As translators explored blank spaces and double meanings, the appropriation of videogames grew in intrusiveness, turning into “in-betweenness”.



Figure 1: Multiple game screens of the Brazilian edition of *Phantasy Star*

Whilst Nintendo required Playtronic to send the translated text to be implemented in their own studios in Japan or US, SEGA granted TecToy the freedom to alter the videogame text directly. However, TecToy’s employees lacked the background knowledge for the task and had to resort to trial and error. Forced to learn through reverse-engineering and code-breaking, they discovered how to substitute the text, but also how to change sprites and backgrounds props (Fittipaldi, 1994, 36-37). This provided conditions for hybridization such as creolization as seen, for example, in *Sapo Xulé vs Os Invasores do Brejo* (*Smelly Feet Frog vs The Swamp Invaders*, 1995), a mod of *Psycho Fox* (1989). A more radical degree of creolization is found in the Monica gang’s game trilogy. The first videogame, *Mônica no Castelo do Dragão* (*Monica in the Dragon’s Castle*, 1991) is an appropriation of *Wonder Boy in Monster Land* (1987), with Wonder Boy substituted by the Brazilian comic book heroine Monica and his sword by her stuffed bunny. Differently to the previous examples, the videogame’s narrative was also changed: instead of saving the world from chaos and destruction, the player’s goal became that of preventing the villain Capitão Feio (Captain Ugly) from polluting the world. This borderline example of the type of appropriation Bar et al. (2007) named “cannibalism” differs in intention from “cultural anthropophagy” (De Andrade, 1991 [1928]).



Figure 2: Cover and game screens of *Monica in the Dragon's Castle* (above) and *Wonder Boy in Monster Land* (below)

The latter is named in reference to Brazilian anthropophagous tribes which cannibalized colonizers as a means acquire their power and knowledge. The best approximation in TecToy's case is the company's attempt to produce "original" videogames based on the expertise acquired in the cannibalization of Sega's licensed products. As the native tribes, however, TecToy soon discovered that cannibalization was not an effective way of learning: understanding of key aspects of game design, such as worldbuilding and the development of game mechanics, remained beyond their ability. Not surprisingly, videogames developed solely by TecToy, such as *Férias Frustradas do Pica-Pau* (*Woody Pecker's Frustrated Holidays*, 1996), *Castelo Rá-Tim-Bum* (*Rá-Tim-Bum Castle*, 1997) and *Sítio do Pica-Pau Amarelo* (*Yellow Woodpecker Farm*, 1997) did not succeed in the market.

However, when examined more closely, TecToy's "original" videogames reveal that the company did not embrace a central principle of cultural anthropophagy, namely, "nationalization". Wary of advancing towards unexplored waters, TecToy bet on characters already popular with its target public, independent of their nationality, such as the Mexican Chapolin Colorado (Captain Hopper) or the American Woody Pecker (Blog TecToy, 2017).

As indicated in the first lines of this abstract, this presentation is part of a larger project about the Japanese influences on the Brazilian game industry. We have focused on videogames produced by the Brazilian companies Playtronic and TecToy, in which we encountered signs of different forms of creative appropriation considered typically Latin American by previous literature: baroque infiltration, creolization, in-betweenness, cannibalism and cultural anthropophagy.

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