Platforms at the Peripheries: A Case Study Analysis of Historic Bootleg Consoles

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INTRODUCTION
Game studies has begun to adopt a globally conscious lens that considers regional game studies and gaming communities at the peripheries both geographically and culturally (Liboriussen and Martin 2016; Penix-Tadsen 2019). Game historians too have taken up the call to decenter gaming history from one only focused on the industrial countries of origin (Wolf 2015). Yet many of the historical accounts devised to understand the regional and cultural traditions of communities at the margin are still situated in object-oriented frameworks whereby access to dominant, predominantly western, technology and platforms is considered the beginning of history. Left out of this narrative are devices and platforms that do not fit the standard copyright protected model the gaming industry has adopted, particularly illegal or pirated devices that play another manufacturer's software without permission. Colloquially referred to as "bootleg consoles" in the western gaming community, these devices are typically jeered as illegitimate knock-offs or poor approximations of official hardware. Yet these platforms are widespread in their prevalence around the world and they still exist in the modern gaming market as cheaper alternatives to official legacy devices such as the *NES Classic Edition* (Nintendo 2016) and *Sega Genesis Mini* (Sega 2019).

Pulling together and building upon existing literature on platform legitimacy (Consalvo and Paul 2019), platform studies in social context (Boellstorff and Soderman 2019), and postcolonial game theory (Mukherjee 2017), this ongoing research project argues for bootleg consoles' place in gaming history as culturally meaningful and socially connecting artifacts of gaming's past that shed insight into gaming's emergence in markets left unsupported by dominant game manufacturers. Additionally, it contributes to research that constructs alternative gaming histories, such as Jaroslav Švelch's *Gaming the Iron Curtain* (2018), and demonstrates the tenacity of users to improvise and innovate even when structural support is absent and the resulting regional game identities that are forged in the practices and platforms at the peripheries.

To construct this alternative history, this project utilizes a case study approach to explore these under researched devices and the cultural narratives that accompany them. Specifically, I look at three technically similar yet geographically disparate historic platforms: 1) the Steepler *Dendy* (1992) that originated in the USSR, 2) the

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Gradiente *Phantom System* (1998) that originated in Brazil, and 3) the Subor *SB "Little Tyrant"* series of educational machines (1998) that originated in China. These three devices have been chosen because, like Nintendo in Japan and the U.S, they all became synonymous with gaming in their respective countries. Based on preliminary analysis of the landscape of clone devices, they also represent the most prominent style of bootleg console: reproductions of Nintendo's *Family Computer* (1996), a trend of devices colloquially called "famiclones". On a more practical front, they represent the most well-known and documented devices among hundreds of famiclones and as such their cultural influence may be the most generalizable and impactive to the widest audience. In looking at these devices as case studies, I seek to answer three overlying research questions about cloning practices more broadly: R1) how have bootleg consoles contributed to gaming's global ubiquity? R2) despite being vastly separated geographically, what similarities do the three bootleg consoles share? Where do they differ? And R3) how might historical and archival efforts contribute to a more globally inclusive history of video games?

To explore these questions, historical analysis has been chosen as the primary method of inquiry, with in-depth interviewing of users of these devices serving as a supplementary tool of data collection when possible. As artifacts of long dissolved foreign companies, the opportunity for firsthand accounts of the design process and cultural impact of these consoles are infeasible at this stage of the research and represent a current limitation. Historical analysis has been chosen as a fruitful alternative because it allows the researcher to peer into the past through the usage of historical documents, testimony, and media. However, as Mills et al. (2014) point out about historical research, the data is constrained and at the mercy of previous generations' efforts to chronicle and keep documentation. Although all three of these consoles were manufactured less than 30 years ago, they exist as fragments of the past because of their questionable legality, sparse archiving, and concerted efforts by companies like Nintendo to dissolve and replace their influence. Piecing together fan efforts of documentation, interviews, and lingering media will help construct a fuller history of these consoles.

As research in progress, I expect the analysis of these devices to have rich, relevant findings for the construction of a gaming history that considers the experiences and voices of underrepresented gamers, particularly those in the global south and players of lower socioeconomic status. Additionally, I take to heart Lawrence Liang's (2009) goal of dismantling and reconceptualizing piracy as an illicit act and I move towards a perspective that considers class, structural circumstances, location, and access as defining markers of the construction of regional gaming identity.

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