

“Emergent countries play, too!”: A decolonial take on the history of videogames through the Zeebo platform

Bruno de Paula

University College London – IOE, Culture, Communication and Media
UCL Knowledge Lab
23-29 Emerald St, London WC1N 3QS, UK
bruno.depaula@ucl.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This paper explores questions related to the histories of videogames and, more specifically, to how we investigate videogames in the Global South. This work is then positioned within the recent research wave (Anable 2018; Nicoll 2019; Nooney 2013; Penix-Tadsen 2016; 2019; Švelch 2021; Swallwell 2021) that challenges conventional narratives about the history of videogames constructed through a universalist position grounded on epistemic privilege (Mignolo 2009). Swallwell (2021, 1–2) highlights this position when she reminds us that “at least until relatively recently, histories of digital games have been written as from North American, Japanese, and—to a lesser extent—U.K. perspectives. Geography has usually been ignored, with the implication being that games and their reception were the same everywhere.” As an example, she discusses Montfort and Bogost’s seminal *Racing the Beam*, specifically how the examples and figures used to exemplify Atari’s popularity are void of context: “Failing to locate the[se figures] demonstrates just how unconscious the operative U.S.-, U.K.-, and/or Northern hemisphere-centrism is. The assumption is that the experiences of making, selling, and playing games in this era were the same everywhere. This is not only factually wrong; it begs the question about the gaps in existing historical knowledge.” This paper, therefore, seeks to make visible some videogame histories that do not fit in conventional narratives, exploring how these histories can challenge universalist assumptions about what videogames are, and by whom they are played.

In doing so, my aim is not only to preserve different histories of videogames from the Global South, but also to challenge perspectives that see non-mainstream contexts merely as exotic places that only become meaningful to the videogames landscape when registered by mainstream circuits of gaming (Švelch 2021). In this paper, I will foreground that non-mainstream contexts, such as the late 2000s Brazil scenario, are not lesser counterparts to mainstream contexts in videogame histories, but spaces that should be recognized as sites of knowledge production, evidencing how peripheric practices and knowledges (Ferreira 2017) also contributed to the constitution of videogames as pervasive cultural phenomena. In other words, here I echo the argument proposed by Messias and colleagues (2019), defending that the history of games in non-mainstream contexts – such as Brazil – should be seen as a decolonial project (Mignolo

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2009), one that cannot be completely understood via universalist epistemological models about videogames that emerge from other contexts.

To exemplify the insufficiency of traditional, universalist epistemological models, I borrow Nicoll's (2019) approach in *Minor Platforms in Videogame History*, to look at Zeebo, a Brazilian console produced in the late 2000s (Aslinger 2010), as an epistemic tool (Nicoll 2019, 14). In the context of videogame history, an epistemic tool challenges "dominant conceptions of what qualifies as an object or subject of videogame history". Nicoll goes on arguing that minor platforms can allow us to access alternative structures of feeling (Anable 2018), "provid[ing] a window onto suppressed, unrealized, or oppositional cultural and affective patterns in videogame history" (Nicoll 2019, 14). Exploring Zeebo, an obscure platform produced in a marginal context – according to the market-oriented standards set by the Global North (cf. Aslinger 2010; Penix-Tadsen 2016) – can help us move beyond simplistic narratives about (commercially) *failed* platforms, in order to capture a more granular picture of its significance to videogame history. In this paper, to explore Zeebo as an epistemic tool that gives us access to alternative structures of feeling emergent from a specific locality, I resort mostly to "discursive" media archives (Nicoll 2019, 29), delving into materials found at Brazilian news outlets such as press releases and retrospective interviews with those involved in Zeebo's conception and production to identify how certain discourses (about the platform, about players, about the spaces Zeebo wanted to occupy) were articulated through and around the platform.

More than another cautionary tale of how not to produce a platform, my intention here is to remark how the Zeebo, as a console produced in the Global South, for the Global South, but mediated by Global North values, ended up occupying an ambiguous position, one that allows us to read it as a partial decolonial project. On one hand, it was an artefact emergent from a particular structure of feeling (Anable 2018) in the Global South during the commodities boom in late 2000s and the rise of emergent economies (Barrinha et al. 2014), foregrounding Global South players and destabilizing simplistic narratives that define innovation flows as unidirectional from Global North to Global South (Medina et al. 2014). On the other hand, it refrained from challenging epistemological structures set by Global North, especially in relation to aspects such as piracy or Global South players.

Keywords

History of videogames, Global South, decoloniality, platforms, Zeebo.

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