

Trajectories of Professionalization as Game Developer in 2000s Brazil: stories from Tectoy Digital/Zeebo Interactive Studios/Tectoy Studios

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

How would someone become a game developer in a place when professional opportunities were volatile and, in many cases, rare? What practices and knowledges were/are deemed as valuable in these spaces, how have these practices shaped these professionals, their views about the games industries, and informed their future decisions related to, for instance, career and immigration?

This work is informed by recent developments in (local) histories of videogames (Swalwell 2021; Pérez-Latorre and Navarro-Remesal 2021), by game production studies – especially works that examine professionalisation and the professional identities of gamesworkers (Wimmer and Sitnikova, 2012), and the constitution of local and transnational professional cultures (Park, 2021; Minassian and Laban, 2023) – and by decolonial approaches to the history of technology (Gómez-Cruz et al., 2023). I also rely here on works that critically examine the games industries and its global status (Keogh 2023), in order to foreground the importance that so-called ‘minor’ or ‘peripheric’ spaces and actors have in shaping what we understand as videogames cultures, including here cultures of production (Švelch, 2021).

Here, I focus specifically on 2000s Brazil. My interest in this context is not only related to my own personal experience – as someone who worked as a game developer at that time and place – but also in mapping a specific moment, combining economic optimism in the Latin American Southern Cone region (Biancarelli, 2014; Bull, 2013), and the absence of more established routes towards professionalisation in game development, such as the limited numbers of higher education degrees specifically dedicated for videogames/game production. More specifically, I work with a particular case study: the stories of Tectoy Digital and its sibling studios, Tectoy Studios and Zeebo Interactive Studios (all defunct, mid-sized Brazilian game studios) workers. Tectoy Digital was, during the 2000s first decade, a game development branch of Tectoy, the reasonably well-known local SEGA partner in Brazil during the 1990s-2000s (Martins 2021), where staff combined work in original projects (e.g., games for mobile devices and for the Zeebo console) and portings of well-known companies for J2ME platforms.

Through data generated through a survey, supplemented by biographical interviews with selected participants, I discuss how these work-related moves not only offer a

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relevant snapshot of the local game production culture at a particular space and time (i.e., 2000s Brazil), but also on how certain practices and knowledges stemming from that particular time and space have potential to influence other local (game) development cultures, creating therefore hybrid development cultures - a similar phenomenon to what has been anecdotally noticed in the Netherlands, after the influx of Brazilian software developers in recent years (Pauline Vos [@vanamerongen] 2021). Such hybrid development cultures, I argue, are relevant because they challenge the commonsensical understanding of innovative flows as unidirectional, where the Global South is always at the receiving end of influences and innovation. With this work, my goal is to then propose a more nuanced way of conceptualising the complex transnational flows implicated in game development circuits (Sotamaa and Švelch 2021), rejecting simplistic models that see Global South contexts as always *catching-up* in relation to mainstream game development places in the Global North, as well as providing a relevant reflection on the role played by local game development cultures in shaping this global form.

Preliminary results indicate, for example, how precariousness and the specific conditions in place often led to the formation of professionals that are versatile and that often experienced a more generalist trajectory, only finding specialization later throughout their careers, and how the incipience of game development in a space like Brazil often made professionals to take challenging career decisions, such as changing sectors/careers or countries. Such insights, I argue, are relevant for considering the different realities about (trying to) professionally making games around the world (Keogh, 2023), especially in places in which material conditions might not be as favorable as in mainstream contexts, such as North America, Western Europe or East Asia.

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Keywords

Game production, history of games, Brazil, Tectoy, biographies.