

# Counterfeit Circuits: Decolonial Practices and the Rise of Video Games in Brazil

**Emmanuel Ferreira**

Universidade Federal Fluminense

Rua Professor Marcos Waldemar de Freitas Reis S/N – IACS

Niterói, RJ, Brazil

[emmanoelf@id.uff.br](mailto:emmanoelf@id.uff.br)

## INTRODUCTION

Although video games have become a central cultural and technological medium, their historiography remains heavily shaped by narratives from the Global North. As Penix-Tadsen (2019) argues, understanding game cultures from the Global South requires acknowledging practices that fall outside official market structures: informal, improvised, and sometimes illicit, yet fundamental to the development of local game ecosystems. This research examines how cloning and piracy practices shaped Brazil's nascent video game culture in the 1980s, treating these practices not merely as economic responses to scarcity, but as decolonial interventions in global circuits of technology and media.

The study focuses on the Brazilian Market Reserve period (1984-1992), which restricted imports of computer technologies (Ikehara 1997; Marques 2000) and unintentionally stimulated the emergence of a robust local industry built on unauthorized reproduction of hardware and software. Brazilian companies produced functional clones of systems such as the Atari 2600, NES, Apple II, ZX Spectrum and MSX computers. Rather than derivative imitations, these clones constituted adaptive responses to local material conditions and demonstrated a form of technological agency that disrupted the notion that legitimate innovation flows exclusively from the Global North.

Drawing on Walter Mignolo's concept of epistemic disobedience (2009; 2012) and Jacques Rancière's idea of reconfiguring the "distribution of the sensible" (2009), this study understands cloning and piracy not only as strategies for accessing restricted technology but also as processes that opened alternative circuits of production, circulation, and knowledge. These practices effectively challenged the North-South hierarchy embedded in global media industries and contributed to the early formation of a national gaming culture.

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## **DECOLONIAL PRACTICES IN CONSOLE AND COMPUTER CLONING**

Cloning practices in 1980s Brazil cannot be fully understood through legal or economic lenses alone. In a context shaped by the coloniality of power (Quijano 2000), global technological flows tended to reinforce dependency upon industrial centers in the United States, Europe, and Japan. The Brazilian cloning industry – by replicating and modifying systems such as the Atari 2600, NES, and MSX microcomputers – embodied a different trajectory: local companies created accessible alternatives that circumvented restrictive global market structures and allowed widespread entry into digital culture.

Rather than simple copying, these practices exemplified what Mignolo (2009) describes as delinking: a mode of action that interrupts dominant epistemologies and proposes other ways of knowing, producing, and distributing technology. Brazilian clones frequently included technical modifications, localized features, and hybrid solutions adapted to local constraints – from power standards to component availability. In doing so, they reinterpreted imported technological forms and reinscribed them into new cultural, economic, and material contexts.

These practices also highlighted the limits of universalist narratives about technological progress. Through the lens of decoloniality, cloning becomes a strategic appropriation that negotiates with, rather than merely receives, dominant technological forms. Such negotiation challenges the assumption that legitimate technological modernity must follow a linear, North-to-South trajectory. Instead, Brazil's game culture emerged from a constellation of local agencies that reconfigured the conditions of access to digital media.

By foregrounding these situated practices, this research contributes to efforts to provincialize global media histories (Chakrabarty 2000) and to document how countries in the Global South not only adapted imported technologies but actively reshaped them. In Brazil's case, cloning and piracy produced tangible consequences: they enabled early familiarity with game genres, mechanics, platforms, and developers; they fostered communities of players, programmers, and hobbyists; and they laid the foundation for both formal and informal markets that persisted into the 1990s and beyond.

## **CLONING AND PIRACY AS KEY FACTORS IN THE ESTABLISHMENT OF BRAZIL'S NASCENT VIDEO GAME MARKET IN THE 1980S**

The Market Reserve Policy generated paradoxical effects. While intended to protect and stimulate domestic industry, it also restricted access to foreign hardware and software, encouraging local entrepreneurs to reverse-engineer and reproduce them. The resulting ecosystem combined legal ambiguity, technical experimentation, and cultural improvisation, contributing to the rapid diffusion of game consoles and computers across the country.

Cloning and piracy accelerated the formation of Brazil's game culture in several key ways:

- **Early access to games and developers**

Through clones of NES and MSX platforms, Brazilian players encountered titles such as Double Dragon, Metal Gear, and a wide array of games by Taito, Konami, and other international developers – often shortly after their original releases.

- **Exposure to multiple genres and mechanics**

Cloned systems enabled players to explore platformers, side-scrollers, shoot'em-ups, adventure games, and sports titles, fostering technical and aesthetic literacy among early users. This diversity of experiences helped establish a broad base of familiarity with global trends in game design.

- **Formation of gaming communities**

SESC and other institutions organized early video game tournaments, often attracting large numbers of participants and receiving coverage in mainstream media. Such events created nascent player communities and established games as public cultural activities.

- **Emergence of clubs and rental networks**

Video game clubs – often modeled on video rental stores – allowed players to rent games for a small monthly fee, expanding access beyond the limited number of officially available titles.

- **Growth of informal exchange and piracy networks**

Especially among microcomputer users, cassette and diskette copying allowed games to circulate cheaply and widely. These networks played a crucial role in shaping programming communities and fostering experimentation, as users routinely modified, analyzed, and redistributed software.

These overlapping practices helped consolidate a gaming culture that would otherwise have been significantly delayed. Without cloning and piracy, Brazil's encounter with the global video game ecosystem – already constrained by economic inequalities, import restrictions, and technological barriers – would likely have occurred a decade later.

Following Zielinski's (2006) call to uncover overlooked genealogies within media history, this research highlights the importance of examining informal and often marginalized practices that shaped early digital culture in Brazil. By understanding these practices not as deviations from an assumed technological norm, but as constitutive elements of a distinct media trajectory, this research contributes to a more inclusive, decolonial history of video games.

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