

Brazilian Indie games and hyperlocal identity: analyzing culture, design choices, and Steam reception in Gaucho and the Grasslands

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INTRODUCTION

Gaucho and the Grasslands (Epopeia Games, 2025) is a hyperlocal (Švelch, 2021) farming simulator and adventure game developed in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Drawing on regional legends, indigenous and popular narratives, and the cultural identity of the *gaúcho*¹ of Southern Brazil, the game represents a rare example of Latin American hyperlocality gaining visibility on global platforms such as Steam. Yet its development and reception illustrate a recurring tension for Global South studios: how to produce games rooted in local epistemologies while navigating global market structures shaped by Eurocentric norms. This study investigates these tensions through two guiding questions: (1) How do Epopeia's developers understand and negotiate the inclusion of Gaucho cultural elements in the game? (2) How do players—Brazilian and international—interpret and evaluate these hyperlocal elements, and what frictions emerge in this process?

METHODOLOGY

To address these questions, we combine semi-structured interviews with three core developers (November 18–22, 2025)² and an interpretive analysis of 377 Steam reviews collected via the Steam API (October 5th). Reviews were cleaned and categorized using thematic coding in Google Sheets. A majority (89%) were written by Brazilian players, typically after substantial playtime. Both datasets were coded

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inductively to triangulate developer motivations, perceived constraints, and market considerations with player interpretations.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Developers as Cultural Mediators

Interviews reveal that Epopeia Games intentionally rooted the project in the hyperlocal culture of Rio Grande do Sul—an approach motivated by a desire for cultural visibility, creative specificity, and narrative authenticity (As illustrated in Figure 1, hyperlocal aesthetics play a central role in the game’s identity). The project was made possible through state funding, and developers emphasized the collaborative nature of building a game that expresses regional identity. Yet they also described negotiating a “fragile balance”: hyperlocal elements carry great cultural value for domestic audiences but risk being perceived as too specific—or illegible—by international players.



Figure 1: Gameplay screenshot from *Gaucho and the Grasslands*. Source: Screenshot from VICE, “‘Gaucho and the Grassland’ Takes a Dash of ‘The Legend of Zelda’ ...,” May 20, 2025.

Developers recognized that studios in the Global North can create hyperlocal games without risking market intelligibility because their cultural repertoires already circulate globally as default references. In contrast, Global South studios must often “dilute” or adapt cultural content to avoid confusing players unfamiliar with their context. This negotiation reflects longstanding market asymmetries in which certain cultural imaginaries are granted universal legibility while others remain “niche.”

Reception Asymmetries: Brazilian Players vs. International Players

Brazilian—and especially Southern Brazilian—players responded enthusiastically to the narrative and cultural references, frequently expressing pride, emotional recognition, and gratitude for seeing their identity represented. These players were also more forgiving of technical issues, focusing instead on the game’s aesthetic and

cultural contribution to an industry that rarely reflects their lived experiences. Figure 2 shows the reviews per language:

Reviews per Language						
Language	Negative Review	Positive Review	Total	Positive Percentage	%	% of Total Reviews
brazilian	8	328	336	97,62%		89,12%
Chinese		1	1	100,00%		0,27%
english	1	20	21	95,24%		5,57%
french	1	2	3	66,67%		0,80%
german		2	2	100,00%		0,53%
N/A		2	2	100,00%		0,53%
spanish		11	11	100,00%		2,92%
Ukrainian		1	1	100,00%		0,27%
Total geral	10	367	377	97,35%		100,00%

Figure 2: Steam Reviews for *Gaucho and the Grasslands*

International players also responded positively, but their praise centered on the novelty of the setting rather than cultural significance. Hyperlocal elements were interpreted as “interesting worldbuilding” rather than as meaningful cultural representation. Technical concerns such as performance, mechanics, and refinement were more prominent in international reviews, indicating that when cultural proximity is absent, evaluation shifts toward design and polish. This divide shows that hyperlocality enhances affective engagement for local audiences but does not automatically translate into broader global appreciation.

Hyperlocal Games in a Global, Colonial Market

The tension observed in *Gaucho and the Grasslands* reflects broader structures of coloniality (Grosfoguel, 2008; Mignolo, 2002, 2009), which organize global cultural circulation. Developers’ reflections echo into what decolonial scholars describe as epistemic hierarchies: cultural repertoires from the Global North are framed as universal, while those from the Global South require translation, adaptation, or simplification to become legible. Market preferences, far from neutral, act as mechanisms that reproduce these hierarchies.

This case also exemplifies what Faustino & Lippold (2023) conceptualize as digital colonialism: global platforms, engines, and production paradigms embed Eurocentric assumptions about aesthetics, pacing, gameplay structure, and narrative conventions. These norms shape expectations of what a “globally marketable” game should look like, thereby limiting the creative agency of peripheral studios.

Developers described how structural conditions—chronically tight budgets, the need to balance internal projects with outsourcing, lack of long-term funding, and historically limited industrial infrastructure—further reinforce these epistemic inequalities. These constraints affect not only production quality but also how local cultural elements are integrated into game design. While narrative authenticity was prioritized, technical limitations disproportionately affected international reception,

illustrating how global market standards implicitly penalize studios without access to resources in the Global North.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that *Gaucha and the Grasslands* contribute to an emerging ecosystem of Brazilian and Latin American games that mobilize local cultures as sources of aesthetic and narrative innovation. By triangulating developer interviews with player reviews, we demonstrate how hyperlocal representation generates strong affective resonance among Brazilian audiences while revealing the structural and epistemic barriers that Global South creators must navigate in a market shaped by Eurocentric norms. Although the developers do not explicitly frame their work as decolonial, the game performs a decolonial gesture by expanding the representational possibilities of the medium and asserting the legitimacy of Global South experiences within videogame culture.

Building on Švelch's (2021) understanding of peripheral game production, our findings show that hyperlocal games challenge center–periphery dynamics by positioning peripheral creators as producers of situated knowledge rather than mere consumers of global gamer culture. This contribution extends existing research by offering empirical evidence of how cultural specificity is negotiated in practice, both in production and in reception.

This is ongoing research. Future work will broaden the interview sample and deepen analysis of how narrative, design constraints, and player interpretation interact over time, further advancing discussions on hyperlocality, decoloniality, and game development in the Global South.

Keywords

Game design, Decoloniality, Peripheral game production, Hyperlocal games, Latin America.

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¹ *Gaúcho* culture, rooted in the cattle-herding traditions of southern Brazil and shaped by Indigenous, Afro-Brazilian, and Iberian influences, includes practices such as mate drinking, folk storytelling, horsemanship, and regional customs central to identity in Rio Grande do Sul and some other regions in Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay.

² Their contributions were anonymized, and the interviews were approved in the (omitted for blind review)'s Ethics Committee under the protocol number (omitted for blind review).