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## “Emergent countries play, too!”: The Zeebo console as a (partial) decolonial project

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## Abstract

The present paper discusses questions related to the histories of videogames, more specifically about how we approach videogames in Global South. By using *Zeebo*, a Brazilian console produced in the late 2000s as an epistemic tool, I discuss the limitations of universalist, mainstream-centric epistemological models for exploring videogames as cultural phenomena. By investigating *Zeebo*'s discourses about piracy and players in the Global South, I argue that this platform can be seen as a partial decolonial project, destabilising conventional historical narratives about South-North relationships in videogames, but refraining from challenging a mainstream, Global North oriented epistemology. This exploratory work, therefore, elaborates on how a decolonial project of history of videogames, one that is more epistemically just to Global South, can be sought.

### Keywords

Zeebo; history of videogames; Global South; platform; piracy.

## Introduction: on possible histories of videogames

Conventional narratives within the history of videogames tend to be simplistic: according to Newman (2017), these are usually framed through biographical takes or through stories of rises and falls in specific eras and places – usually in mainstream contexts such as the USA, Japan or Western Europe. Such simplistic understanding of videogame history, criticised by different authors (Apperley & Parikka, 2018; Nooney, 2013; Therrien & Picard, 2016), is in the interest of the Empire<sup>1</sup> (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009), favouring neoliberal – individualistic, meritocratic (Paul, 2018) – values and strengthening an overoptimistic view of the market, posing unrelenting capitalist competition as the main driving force for videogames becoming a culturally significant practice (Nicoll, 2019).

This narrow conception of videogame history is grounded on the epistemic privilege (Mignolo, 2009) of mainstream places, reproducing a universalist position that treats the history of videogames in mainstream contexts as the only history of videogames. Recent research, however, have challenged this mainstream-centric logic, exploring how videogames, through different circuits and worldwide connections (Amaro & Fragoso, 2020; Apperley, 2010; Penix-Tadsen, 2016; Švelch, 2021) became a pervasive cultural practice around the world (Wolf, 2015). Here, however, lies a trap for doing videogame history beyond mainstream contexts.

Preserving local histories of videogames can easily reinforce the epistemic privilege of certain contexts. Švelch (2021, p. 251), for example, reminds us that *peripheric*<sup>2</sup> productions tend to be valued only when they “make it big in central markets and cultures”. The value attributed to non-mainstream productions is constantly underpinned by ideas of exoticism (Švelch, 2021), reiterating epistemic injustice (Mignolo, 2009). The *peripheric*, therefore, becomes a lesser actor, never an equal to *central* ones. Such stance towards *peripheric* productions, one that sees them more as curiosities than as *real* games<sup>3</sup>, also plays in favour of consumerist impulses. Contributing to an association between exoticism, rarity and market value, as embodied by the figure of the videogame collector.

If we want to challenge this epistemic injustice (Mignolo, 2009), studying the *periphery* on its own terms (Švelch, 2021) while also avoiding preservation as a consumerist endeavour, how should we approach videogame history? In *Minor Platforms in Videogame History*, Benjamin Nicoll (2019) points out the importance of rethinking the praxis of videogame historiography, discussing more specifically how elements that are deemed to be *curious* or *failed* can offer different paths to how we conceive the history of videogames.

Rather than salvaging them for their own sake, or even fetishizing historical artefacts – e.g. auctioning copies of rare games – Nicoll makes the case for using *failed*<sup>4</sup> games and gaming devices as epistemic tools, as these objects of knowledge “can help us think differently about videogames and their histories – past, present and future” (Nicoll, 2019, p. 14). Such approach, informed by media archaeology

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<sup>1</sup> As outlined in *Games of Empire* (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009), “a system of exploitation and control [...] that is different from the earlier imperialism of nation states and informed by a global *biopower* that imperceptibly pervades all walks of quotidian life” (Hammar et al., 2021, p. 288), one that is “symptomatic of global, social and economic forces” (idem).

<sup>2</sup> In this paper I am using *mainstream*, *centre* and *Global North* interchangeably to refer to the same contexts – those who usually hold epistemic power – in opposition to the terms *non-mainstream*, *peripheric* and *Global South*.

<sup>3</sup> We cannot ignore that these notions of what constitute a *real* or a *good* game are, after all, grounded on a particular epistemic approach that favours Global North and have a deep relationship with hypercapitalist values such as a unrestrained consumerism driven by obsolescence (Kline et al., 2003) and meritocracy (Paul, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> “videogame platforms tend to be considered successful when they exhibit qualities of creative innovation, financial performance, and global interpenetration. A platform needs to inspire creative programming, to register on the radar of global capitalism, and to articulate formal partnerships across multiple media markets.” (Nicoll, 2019, p. 99).

(Apperley & Parikka, 2018), challenges the limited narratives that consider videogame history as a linear sequence of progresses (cf. Therrien & Picard, 2016).

The approach defended by Nicoll, therefore, helps us look beyond a narrow history of videogames, one based on “founding fathers” (Nooney, 2013) and incremental technological development by a handful of actors in mainstream spaces. Nicoll’s approach allows us to discuss histories of videogames, ones that are not centred solely on mainstream experiences and epistemological models.

On the contrary, this approach allows us to resignify peripheral contexts, understanding these spaces as sites of knowledge production. Such approach culminates in a more epistemological understanding of the histories of videogames, recognising the importance of peripheric practices and knowledges to the constitution of videogames as pervasive cultural phenomena.

Therefore, this paper aims at unearthing to make visible videogame histories that do not fit into conventional triumphalist narratives, exploring how these histories can challenge universalist assumptions about what videogames are (Aslinger, 2010; Nicoll, 2019). By looking at *Zeebo*, a short-lived console developed in Brazil in late 2000s as a joint venture between Tectoy and Qualcomm (Aslinger, 2010), my intention is not to present it as a curiosity or as a cautionary tale for producing market hits. As a platform that was developed in the Global South for the Global South, but through Global North values, *Zeebo* is a relevant epistemic tool to understand how non-mainstream positions are articulated through videogames. *Zeebo* unsettles simplistic narratives about unidirectional flows of innovation (Medina et al., 2014), and exposes how epistemic models originated in the Global North are insufficient to make sense of the multitude of gaming practices around the world. In the following section, I turn my attention to Brazil, the context from where *Zeebo* emerged, to later revisit how the platform articulates a particular view about the *periphery* as a result of a specific structure of feeling (Anable, 2018), ideas about piracy (Holm, 2014; Messias, 2015; Pase, 2013), and consumption (Canclini, 2001). This articulation can then be used to reflect about *Zeebo*’s contribution to the history of videogames.

## Is “periphery” always “periphery”? A brief overview of videogames in Brazil

*Peripheric* contexts, as criticised by Švelch (2021), are often seen as lesser counterparts of central spaces, with *centre-periphery* boundaries constructed according to standards outlined by the *centre*. In relation to videogames, Latin America tends to be classified as a peripheric context (Penix-Tadsen, 2016): this classification is grounded mostly on economic metrics (Penix-Tadsen, 2016) such as local revenues for global companies or the global appeal of local productions (Švelch, 2021). These metrics, however, are insufficient to capture the complexity and the pervasiveness of gaming as a sociocultural practice in all contexts around the world (cf. Apperley, 2010; Penix-Tadsen, 2016). My goal in this section, therefore, is to discuss the limitations of labelling a place such as Brazil as a gaming *periphery*, as it ends up obfuscating the pervasiveness of gaming in this place. Nevertheless, to develop this argument, I must return to the constitution of gaming as a sociocultural practice in Brazil.

To some extent, the history of videogames in Brazil is similar to the history of videogames in other so-called gaming peripheries, such as former Czechoslovakia (Švelch, 2021) or South Korea (Nicoll, 2019), with videogames being popularised during the 1980s through local, often unofficial, versions (*clones*) of existing international platforms (Ferreira, 2017). The Brazilian context in the 1980s, still under military dictatorship and following an import substitution industrialization policy<sup>5</sup>, opened up paths for local enterprises to reverse-engineer and commercialise *clones* (Ferreira, 2017; Penix-Tadsen, 2016).

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<sup>5</sup> A protectionist policy adopted by the Brazilian military government that forbade Brazilian companies from importing electronics, having at its heart the idea of reducing competition to strengthen local production. See Ferreira (2017) for more details.

Mainstream-centric approaches could frame this history as one grounded on lax stances to copyright, contraventions and piracy: in other words, as a history of lesser groups taking advantage of the work and inventiveness of *mainstream* groups, capitalising on “illegitimate commodities” (Nicoll, 2019, p. 99). This could also be framed as a history of catching-up, following the imitation/innovation paradigm (Nicoll, 2019), since this first imitation phase laid base for a local gaming industry after the ban on imported products<sup>6</sup>, with local companies such as Tectoy or Playtronic partnering up with SEGA and Nintendo, respectively (Amaro & Fragoso, 2020).

This way of framing Brazilian videogame history, however, still focuses on commercial benchmarks, revenues and enterprises. This narrative, therefore, is still framed by (neo)colonial epistemologies (Mignolo, 2009) guided by capitalism – represented here, for example, by copyright as a mechanism to police ways of knowing<sup>7</sup> (Messias, 2015; Nicoll, 2019). Here, therefore, we should move aside economic standards and the techno-masculine narratives of progress (Anable, 2018) to better understand how these early steps shaped a particular and rich local gaming culture that cannot be reduced to a lesser counterpart to mainstream contexts (Penix-Tadsen, 2016).

When looking at the 1980s gaming scene in Brazil, Ferreira (2017) identifies how industrial and commercial practices – e.g. *cloning* – facilitated other sociocultural practices, such as gaming tournaments, *locadoras*<sup>8</sup>, videogame clubs, and (in/formal) trades, which ended up shaping local gaming practices. Since those early moments, gaming in Brazil – and, more broadly, in Latin America (Apperley, 2010; Penix-Tadsen, 2016) – carried a strong social component, with players “hang[ing] out together, talk[ing] about games, and actually play[ing] with their friends, forming group relationships that can significantly impact the popularity of a given game in the region” (Penix-Tadsen, 2016, p. 52). These conditions led to the establishment of a strong and popular gaming culture in Brazil, one that can be seen as considerably distinct from the one constructed in other central contexts: rather than the stereotypical solitary US gamer, Brazilian players’ experiences – like their Latin American counterparts – tended to be much more collective (Penix-Tadsen, 2016).

These conditions created a unique scenario for Brazilian videogame players. In a mainstream-centric perspective (one that favours revenues and official numbers as markers of dissemination), Brazil was indeed a *peripheral* context, since official distribution was often limited<sup>9</sup> and official prices were reasonably prohibitive for a great part of Brazilian population (Aslinger, 2010). Official numbers until mid-2000s also indicated that platforms tended to have a longer life in Brazil (Penix-Tadsen, 2016), which could be interpreted as a sign that Brazilian videogame players, much like its early industry, were still catching-up with last technologies<sup>10</sup>.

That perspective, however, ignores that local practices, such as the social way of playing – either privately with friends and family, or in *locadoras* – or informal distribution networks – either commercial, such as piracy (Messias, 2015) or non-commercial transactions, like trading or borrowing/lending

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<sup>6</sup> The protectionist policy (described on note 5) was scrapped in 1991 – see Ferreira (2017).

<sup>7</sup> Even if the clone *phase* can be seen as an act of resistance to epistemic ways of policing knowledge (cf. Ferreira, 2017; Nicoll, 2019), we cannot ignore that, at some point, clones became inviable due to a subscription to mainstream ideals such as copyrights.

<sup>8</sup> A cross-space between a rental service and a console-based cybercafé. Penix-Tadsen (2016, p. 51) description of a typical Latin American *cybercafé* can be useful to contextualise the local operation of a *locadora* as a gaming space: “a small-scale operation in which a single owner will purchase several game consoles and monitors, as well as his or her own selection of game software, then rent out gameplay time to the consumer by the hour, or by the minute”.

<sup>9</sup> With some noticeable exceptions, such as SEGA and Tectoy partnership, which gave the former an important edge in Brazilian market. That is indicated, for example, by *Dreamcast*’s success in Brazil, in opposition to its underwhelming commercial performance globally (Apperley & Parikka, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> My intention here is not to reify the perpetual innovation reinforced by videogame industries (Kline et al., 2003), but to remark how this argument can be used to frame Brazil as a *gaming periphery*.

– sustained a strong gaming culture. This is not to say that problems with material access or ramping inequalities did not exist – as they still do – but that the Brazilian player, differently to what a naïve Global North-centric perspective might imagine, was, and still is, reasonably literate in videogames. This local gaming culture shared some values with that of mainstream contexts: players were familiar with gaming genres and conventions (Ferreira, 2017) and, with the support of auxiliary industries such as specialised magazines (cf. Therrien & Picard, 2016), were used to the consumerist idea of “perpetual innovation” (Kline et al., 2003) as a gold standard, even if the newest platform was prohibitively expensive for most of the players.

These two narratives – the *dependent periphery* and the *culturally rich gaming place* – are not mutually exclusive, as both explain gaming in Brazil. On one hand, looking at commercial/official data, Brazil seems to be at the margins of global gaming, still lagging behind their Global North counterparts. In mid-2000s and early 2010s, for example, Brazil, much like the rest of Latin America, was still seen as a place with incipient production and with an untapped market potential (Alves, 2015). In that view, Brazil still needed to be included in the global circuits of gaming, and piracy was a considerable challenge to be overcome if that official inclusion was supposed to happen (Aslinger, 2010).

Looking at the local gaming culture, however, it becomes clear that Brazilian players occupy a specific subject position in relation to gaming. This position articulates Global North values – e.g. *knowing* what makes a *good* game (Consalvo & Paul, 2019) – with others that are particular of non-mainstream contexts, such as resorting to mechanisms to access games that would probably be considered illicit in the Global North (Lobato & Thomas, 2015).

My intention here is not to criticise nor to minimise piracy in Brazil, but to reiterate the insufficiency of Global North’s epistemological models to make sense of Global South’s specificities, such as the historical development of gaming in a country such as Brazil<sup>11</sup>, or even piracy as a cultural phenomenon. As Nicoll (2019, p. 98) points out,

Piracy can be understood as a form of theft, a type of creative expression and/or a deliberate tactic of resistance, a means of accessing otherwise inaccessible cultural products, or an indirect way of expanding the formal networks of hegemonic culture industries.

A narrative aligned to a mainstream-oriented epistemology might see piracy just as theft, while more culturally-sensitive ones might acknowledge how so-called unfair uses of copyrighted material can be powerful and inclusive (Messias, 2015), plugging-in the gaps left by global firms’ official distribution networks (Aslinger, 2010).

In a similar vein, the history of videogames in Brazil, if analysed through the Empire’s (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009) traditional epistemological models – which, for instance, equates revenues with pervasiveness – fails to recognise the dimension of gaming as a cultural practice in this context. My argument here is that the history of games in Brazil should be seen as a decolonial project (Messias et al., 2019), one that not only renders visible Brazilian actors, but also Brazil as a space where gaming happens, and from where different forms of knowledge (Mignolo, 2009) emerge from different structures of feeling (Anable, 2018).

This section explored the ambiguous position occupied by Brazil in gaming, one that varies according to the chosen parameters. Historically, in commercial and industrial terms, Brazil can be acknowledged as a minor context; however, in cultural terms, gaming presents itself as a reasonably well-disseminated practice, with local particularities that make such context distinct to – but not lesser than – others recognised as central. This ambiguity indicates the insufficiency of Global North epistemological models to capture the nuances and particularities of gaming within Brazil – and, more broadly, in the Global South.

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<sup>11</sup> Using Brazil as a *single* context, per se, is a limiting approach, considering the significant cultural differences across the country’s regions, but that goes beyond the scope of this paper.

To exemplify the insufficiency of these epistemological models, in the following sections I employ *Zeebo* as an epistemological tool. The *Zeebo*, as I discuss, occupies a somewhat ambiguous position as a cultural project, one that is sensitive to its Global South origins, but that ends up articulating Global North discourses on piracy and consumption.

## Enter Zeebo: contextualising the sole Brazilian original videogame and this essay

The *Zeebo* was a small silver-ish device, with curves resembling Oscar Niemeyer's celebrated Copan building in São Paulo. Compared to its contemporaries *PS3*, *Wii* or *Xbox 360*, the *Zeebo* was indeed a lightweight console, consuming no more than 1W of power, weighting just under a kilogram and measuring no more than 22cm in any dimension (Aslinger, 2010). Designed in conjunction by the Brazilian Tectoy and the US-based Qualcomm and launched in 2009, *Zeebo* was dubbed as the "video game[s] for the 'next billion'" (Aslinger, 2010), being considered not as an open contender to its contemporary consoles, but one that could become a significant actor in the Global South, more specifically in emergent markets such as Brazil, Mexico, and China (Aslinger, 2010).

*Zeebo* was not the first Brazilian console; it was, however, the first and only Brazilian console that was an original project. Differently from its 1980s-1990s national predecessors, it was not a *clone*. The *Zeebo* can be understood as a technologically ambiguous project, combining contemporary trends (such as its gesture-based *Boomerang* controller) with an underperforming chipset (The Enemy, 2020). Its most striking characteristic, however, was the complete independence of physical media, with all content distributed via a 3G connection to a private network, *ZeeboNet* (Aslinger, 2010), established in partnership with the Latin American carrier *Claro*<sup>12</sup> (Azevedo, 2008).

Here my goal is not necessarily to discuss *Zeebo* as a technical artefact, but how it articulated particular discourses about the Global South to position itself in the "constellation" of gaming platforms (Nicol, 2019, p. 27). Through this exploratory work, I aim to discuss how *Zeebo* stemmed from a particular structure of feeling (Anable, 2018), being a product of the socioeconomic context where it was envisioned and produced. *Zeebo*, as I will argue in the following sections, can be understood as a decolonial project, since it gives visibility to Global South players and destabilises the simplistic narrative that defines innovation flows as unidirectional from Global North to Global South (Medina et al., 2014). This was, however, an incomplete decolonial project, since it did not challenge the dominant, universalist epistemological structures set by the Global North.

In order to further develop this argument, I will resort mostly to what Nicol (2019, p. 29) dubs as "discursive" archives of media history, using existing materials – e.g. interviews, press releases – to identify how certain discourses (about the platform, about players, about the spaces *Zeebo* wanted to occupy) ended up being articulated through and around the platform. To explore how these discourses became part of the platform, I rely on the principle of underdetermination, outlined in the Critical Theory of Technology as the insufficiency of technical properties to recognise the values behind a particular design (Grimes & Feenberg, 2013). Underdetermination, therefore, helps me to discuss how a particular view on piracy, one constructed within the context where *Zeebo* was developed, ended up being imprinted in the console, having direct consequences to *Zeebo*'s life and the subsequent challenges to its preservation as a cultural artefact.

Since *Zeebo* is both a *minor* (one that has practically flown under the radar of mainstream gaming circuits) and a *failed* (a commercial failed product) platform, finding archive material can be challenging. In this particular paper, I rely mostly on two data sources: retrospective accounts by key actors involved

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<sup>12</sup> *ZeeboNet* went down in 2011, when *Zeebo* was discontinued.

in *Zeebo's* constitution as a platform, publicized in a short documentary format produced by *Omelete* and *The Enemy* (2020); and interviews, news articles and other materials published in specialist local news outlets (e.g. *UOLJogos*, *Gizmodo Brasil*). Some materials are now only accessible through cached snapshots in platforms such as *The Internet Archive* – a small indication of the challenge posed to those interested in preserving the histories of digital technologies<sup>13</sup> (Newman, 2017).

Some of the console's characteristics, such as the independence from physical media, make *Zeebo* a difficult object to preserve and study. In this paper, I discuss the relationships between some of these design decisions and the discourses produced through *Zeebo*, but a more encompassing investigation of the platform, in relation to its technical/creative elements – more aligned to a traditional platform studies approach (cf. Montfort & Bogost, 2009) – while relevant, is beyond the scope of this paper.

Before moving forward, however, I must disclose an important fact: I have a considerable personal interest in this topic and, more specifically, in looking at *Zeebo* as an epistemic tool. I was a Tectoy employee throughout all *Zeebo's* life and, for almost two years, I was part of the development team responsible for increasing its game catalogue, through either original in-house productions or *portings*. Writing about *Zeebo* is, to some extent, writing about my own history as someone interested in games, as a game developer, and later as a researcher.

Therrien and Picard (2016, p. 2336), when discussing the challenges in writing about videogame histories, remind us that “at the very heart of our engagement with video game technology lies a deep affection for the devices that have given us so many gratifying experiences”. *Zeebo* works here then as an “affective archive” (Anable, 2018), not only in an individualised position about myself as someone deeply connected to videogames throughout my personal and professional trajectory, but also in reminiscing about *Zeebo* as a product of a particular structure of feeling during a more optimistic period of the recent Brazilian history.

## “Emergent countries play, too!”: Piracy and the positioning of *Zeebo* as a platform

To understand *Zeebo*, we must return to mid-2000s Brazil: the country was under a general optimistic mood, sustained by economic growth and a noticeable expansion of middle class under the Workers' Party government with Lula (Biancarelli, 2014). Lula was acknowledged as a successful global leader; *The Economist* made Rio de Janeiro's Christ the Redeemer statue take off in an iconic cover, and Brazil's moment was recognised in small tokens such as being picked as host for 2014 FIFA World Cup and 2016 Summer Olympics (Barrinha et al., 2014). It was possible to identify a shift in the country's global image, based on the idea that emergent countries – such as Brazil – could become the next powerhouses of global capitalism (Barrinha et al., 2014). While the idea of an established new economic global order was still in debate in relation to digital games, it became clear that central economic forces began to look differently at these Global South spaces.

This Global South, as discussed by Penix-Tadsen (2016), had always been *gamely* exploited by central contexts, either textually – often culminating in stereotypical in-game depictions – or as cheap labour. The aforementioned economic growth in certain Global South countries such as Brazil and Mexico, however, was registered by global circuits of gaming, with the rise of a new group of potential consumers attracting the attention of mainstream actors. This attraction is noticed in the *Zeebo* project, framed by Aslinger (2010, p. 16) as “a conscious attempt by Qualcomm [a mainstream actor] and Tectoy to promote games to a more global audience”.

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<sup>13</sup> Most of *Zeebo's* online presence, either institutional (e.g. the official portal [zeebo.com.br](http://zeebo.com.br)) or fan-based (e.g. [zeeboclub.com.br](http://zeeboclub.com.br)) suffered the same destiny, being only accessible through cached versions.

Among the strategies adopted to capture this *more global audience*, distribution was one of the most innovative elements in *Zeebo*. The use of private national 3G networks as the sole means to distribute games, without subscription or an independently paid internet connection, was seen as a way to allow players in any place with mobile coverage in a particular country to download games. That, in a country with continental dimensions such as Brazil, seemed like a good idea, since it bypassed possible issues with physical distribution.

Here, however, underdetermination (Grimes & Feenberg, 2013) becomes a useful concept: merely looking at *Zeebo*'s technical capacity to download games through a 3G connection is not enough to explore this so-called inclusive stance towards a global South audience. To explore these values, we need to understand where *Zeebo* was conceptualised, and how said context's values influenced such design. It is through these lenses that piracy becomes noticeable as a conceptual driver for *Zeebo*'s design.

Brazil, like other Latin American countries, had historically been seen as a place where piracy was rife (Penix-Tadsen, 2016). The default stance adopted by major companies until mid-2000s was to refrain from officially distributing their products there, since that operation was seen as commercially inviable (Aslinger, 2010; Pase, 2013; Penix-Tadsen, 2016). This relationship between piracy and commercial viability was articulated in different ways in *Zeebo*: in an interview to *UOL Jogos* in 2008, Fernando Fischer, Tectoy's CEO, argued that "Zeebo was developed bearing in mind emergent countries, where piracy is a big problem [...] this business model is completely innovative, being the first true antipiracy initiative in games market" (Azevedo, 2008).

An anti-piracy stance is, by no means, a new position within the videogame industry, with several strategies adopted in different moments (Holm, 2014). Tectoy's articulation of an anti-piracy stance through *Zeebo* was, however, different from that sought by Global North companies. Tectoy's place as a capitalist company in a globalised world – e.g. unable to compete for Global North markets where piracy was a smaller issue – carved a specific position where a simplistic response, such as that offered by Global North-based companies, claiming operational unviability (cf. Aslinger, 2010), and removing itself from these contexts, was impossible. In other words, Tectoy still saw piracy as a *problem*, but it articulated a different response to piracy, considering it mostly as a result of lack of accessible official means of distribution.<sup>14</sup>

It was, however, by recognising that piracy is not simply a moral (Messias, 2015, p. 155) problem that needs to be eradicated at all costs, but an activity that can fulfil particular cultural functions – in this case, promoting informal networks of distribution – that Tectoy's anti-piracy discourse manifests itself. This antipiracy stance becomes ingrained in *Zeebo* in the way content circulates and can be accessed by players. To undercut piracy, Tectoy adopted a mixed strategy combining online-only content – since there was no way to obtain *Zeebo* games outside *ZeeboNet 3G* – and facilitating access to legal products via a perennial free connection<sup>15</sup> and cheaper games<sup>16</sup> (Holm, 2014).

Here, I am not interested in discussing strategies to protect copyright, but on how that understanding of piracy as a problem culminated in specific cultural outcomes for *Zeebo*. Firstly, while the centralisation of a distribution network in *ZeeboNet* indeed undercut piracy, it also undercut other types of legal informal distribution networks historically common in Brazilian gaming culture (cf. Ferreira, 2017). This type of online-only distribution led to a more individualised experience for *Zeebo* players, with users unable to trade or borrow/lend games among themselves.

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<sup>14</sup> This view is articulated, for example, by André Penha, Tectoy Digital studio manager: (The Enemy, 2020) – "at that time [2008], you either had games illegally imported, or you did not [have games to play], so it was really difficult to play videogames legally".

<sup>15</sup> In Brazil, *Zeebo* was fitted with a *Claro* 3G SIM card and had directly access to *ZeeboNet* without any extra paid subscription – contingent on Claro's network signal strength in the area.

<sup>16</sup> Game prices ranged from R\$9.90 to R\$29.90 (Azevedo, 2008) - R\$18.90 to R\$57.10 in current values.

While in terms of gameplay experience, several of the games produced exclusively to *Zeebo* tapped into the consolidated imaginary of collective play in Brazil<sup>17</sup>, the platform itself did not support the construction of informal networks of players, since one would necessarily have to buy a game to play it. That was a considerably different situation from that encountered by players in other platforms, such as the still popular at that time *PlayStation2* (Penix-Tadsen, 2016), since one could trade or borrow games from friends. We can then speculate that, differently to what happened in late 1980s-early 1990s, when informal networks of distribution helped the popularisation of gaming platforms (Ferreira, 2017), the online-only model adopted in *Zeebo* undercut these popularisation strategies, hindering *Zeebo*'s viability as a widespread platform.

The impossibility of trading games, however, cannot be necessarily seen as the main reason for *Zeebo*'s underperformance as a commodity. While pinpointing the reasons why *Zeebo* was a commercially failed platform goes beyond the scope of this paper, *Zeebo*'s position in relation to its contemporary gaming consoles and the implicit articulation of ideas about Global South players can also be discussed as a contributing factor to its underperformance. Since early days, *Zeebo* was always envisioned as a less powerful platform: as mentioned earlier, it was seen by Tectoy as a contender to the *PS2* (Aslinger, 2010; The Enemy, 2020) and that was also clear in its pre-release materials. Azevedo (2008), writing for *UOL Jogos*, remind us that "Zeebo is not a device that targets gamers, in other words, fans, enthusiasts of electronic entertainment. The device does not get even close to consoles such as PlayStation 3 or Xbox 360, reaching, at most, PS2's potential" (Azevedo, 2008).

As discussed in previous sections, Brazilian players, even if by Global North standards were not acknowledged as included in videogame circuits, were familiar with contemporary gaming ideals. Brazilian players, for instance, often subscribed to the same hegemonic aesthetic values<sup>18</sup> as their Global North counterparts, such as quality of graphics or difficulty as markers of *good* games (Consalvo & Paul, 2019). Convenience and the possibility of *official recognition as consumers* – reifying, in certain ways, Canclini's (2001) idea of consumption as the sole means of participation in contemporaneity – were the main values articulated by *Zeebo* as a gaming console.

These ideas, centred around a general view of consumption – compatible with the Brazilian social policies at the time (Biancarelli, 2014) – missed a greater connection with what was already consolidated as Brazilian gaming practices. The idea of inclusion through consumption sold by *Zeebo*, alone, was not capable of carving out a space for *Zeebo* within Brazilian homes, and when the promised quality was not delivered<sup>19</sup>, the project faded and ended up discontinued in 2011.

As a Global South project, therefore, *Zeebo* articulates particular views of the Global South. It recognises piracy as a direct result of the absence of official distribution. Rather than ignoring the Global South player, it adopts a strategy to remediate a perceived problem. It sees the Global South player as an individual who plays collectively – hence the prevalence for party/group games in the catalogue – but still as an individual consumer, undercutting other types of content circulation such as trades. Finally, it sees the Global South player as one who wants to become an *official consumer*, one that wants to be recognised as such.

Canclini (2001, p. 20) argues that "[...] when we select goods and appropriate them, we define what we consider publicly valuable, the ways we integrate and distinguish ourselves in society, and the ways

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<sup>17</sup> Games that are part of *Zeebo Extreme* and *Zeebo Sports* series, for example, were produced targeting local multiplayer as the main game experience (cf. Andre Penha in The Enemy, 2020).

<sup>18</sup> This phenomenon is not only limited to aesthetical values, but also to several problematic aspects related to so called *game culture*, from online abuse to links to the rise of extreme right (cf. Bezio, 2018).

<sup>19</sup> Different factors, from the unreliability of 3G connection in early 2010s Brazil, to last-minute change to a less powerful chipset, are pointed out as possible contributors to this commercial failure (The Enemy, 2020), a discussion that goes beyond the scope here.

to combine pragmatism with pleasure". *Zeebo* offered an official recognition as consumer – an alternative to piracy – but what seems to be forgotten here is that this recognition was only worth if what was being consumed was considered “publicly valuable”. In that sense, the idea of including players through a less powerful videogame might have underestimated the specificities of gaming in Brazil, especially after the promised quality benchmarks revealed unattainable. But why bother with *Zeebo*, one could still ask. Why reflect about an almost forgotten, obscure platform that never made it big anywhere?

## Final remarks: waiting to be found... by whom?

Even if the *Zeebo* ultimately fails, I would argue that the blogosphere buzz and developer interest around this console signal the desire for new histories of gaming and electronic media industries, new cultural histories of play and leisure, and diverse and competing genealogies of gaming that are of use to diverse player populations, gaming communities and industry professionals. In February 2008, Edge writers termed South America “the lost continent” due to high piracy rates and the lack of interest displayed by the big three console manufacturers. If nothing else, the *Zeebo* shows that Latin American players were never lost; they were just waiting to be found. (Aslinger, 2010, p. 24).

The quote above is the last paragraph from Ben Aslinger’s paper about *Zeebo*, the sole academic output I could find that discussed this obscure Brazilian videogame platform in-depth. Aslinger remarks the desire for new histories, histories that recognise the multiplicity of gaming beyond mainstream spaces. While I, like other authors, echo this desire and second much of Aslinger’s arguments throughout his paper, it is a bit ironic that such closure places us, Latin American players, in a similar position to how colonial historical perspectives painted the Americas: as a rich continent in a passive position, *waiting to be found*. Should we necessarily wait?

*Zeebo* tells us an important history since it challenges this narrative. Being a failed commercial product is not the most remarkable element about this platform; after all, failed platforms are not a matter of why, but one of to whom they fail (Arsenault, 2017; Nicoll, 2019). *Zeebo* is relevant because it articulates a different view of what the Global South is. It reinforces the “radical contextuality” of platforms (Nicoll, 2019, p. 13), challenging the idea that platforms can be seen as static, stable black-boxes (O’Donnell, 2016). The final moments of *Zeebo*’s life, pivoting to a low-cost *ed tech* device (Martins, 2011), for example, indicates the instability and ephemerality of this (and, by extension, any) platform (O’Donnell, 2016), completely contingent on its context.

Here, however, I argue that at least as important as recognising these particular contexts, is to recognise how these processes of development do not happen in isolation, or through unidirectional flows, with the Global North innovating and the Global South *catching-up* (Medina et al., 2014). While in late 2000s *Wii*, *PlayStation 3* and *Xbox 360* – all consoles that coexisted with *Zeebo* – “started to fully leverage the affordances of digital distribution” (Nieborg, 2021, p. 307), *Zeebo* was adopting an extreme version of that model, exploring it as the sole means for distribution<sup>20</sup>. This extreme version of the platform model is, at the same time, what made *Zeebo* an object of (minor) interest beyond Global South (cf. Aslinger, 2010), and why it can be seen as a (partial) decolonial project, since it was the recognition of its local context that led to that experimentation.

*Zeebo* represents, in some ways, an idea that the Global South does not necessarily need to wait to be found by someone else. Mignolo (2009), for example, discusses how non-mainstream actors tend to look at mainstream spaces as inspiration:

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<sup>20</sup> See Nieborg (2021) or Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter (2021) for a critique of the platformisation of gaming, especially in relation to contemporary centralised distribution networks.

Granted, there are many locals in developing countries who, because of imperial and capitalist cosmology, were led to believe (or pretended they believed) that what is good for developed countries is good for underdeveloped as well because the former knows 'how to get there' and can lead the way for underdeveloped countries to reach the same level (Mignolo, 2009, p. 15).

As I discussed throughout this paper, *Zeebo* articulates an ambiguous position in relation to decolonial projects. On one hand, it is undeniable that it is result of a particular structure of feeling (Anable, 2018), when emergent countries felt that they could stand and speak for themselves rather than wait for solutions or opportunities from the Global North. This structure of feeling, grounded on a period of noticeable economic development – therefore, not challenging capitalist assumptions – led to a situation where, even if non-mainstream actors were *speaking* for themselves, the *language* spoken – the values they articulate – while sensitive to contextual factors, was still mediated by a global capitalist rationale, one that is stacked in favour of Global North (Mignolo, 2009). In that sense, *Zeebo* can be seen as a partial decolonial project, one that recognises the South as an actor, but not necessarily challenges the epistemic values set by the Global North.

It is only possible to speculate what would have been of *Zeebo* if the values it mediated – is it be possible to imagine a console beyond a capitalist structure anyway? – and conditions through which it was constituted as a platform were different. There is still much to be explored here, from the South-North relationship between Tectoy and Qualcomm to the unfulfilled promise of revolutionising local game production in Brazil (cf. Aslinger, 2010); from the experimentation with different types of interfaces<sup>21</sup> to the challenges the methods of circulation pose to memory and preservation efforts, both in relation to the artefact itself and to how it was (and still is) played and talked about (Newman, 2017). What we can say, however, is that *Zeebo*, as a historical artefact, is an important element to remark that staying put, waiting to be found, might not be all that the Global South has to offer.

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<sup>21</sup> *Zeebo* supported two main controlling systems: traditional gamepads – *Z-Pad* and, later, *Dragon* – and a motion controller – *Boomerang* (The Enemy, 2020).

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