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Tribute and Resistance: Participation and affective engagement in Brazilian fangame makers and modders' subcultures

This paper proposes a discussion on particular aspects of production and circulation of Brazilian fangames and mods, in an effort to better comprehend these growing phenomena as actual subcultures in the Brazilian context. Although not limited to the following characteristics, we assume that fangames are game productions that are not directly related to profit purposes; also, the production of these games is mainly based upon successful mainstream games. From this hypothesis, we observe that fangames and mods are essentially the result of today's participatory culture, in which tribute and resistance – two concepts that will be properly treated throughout the paper – are two important engagement forms of the prosumer public.

KEYWORDS: Fangames, Mods, Tribute, Resistance, Brazil.

INTRODUCTION: THE THREE WAVES OF FAN STUDIES

Since the 1980s, when the phenomenon took visible proportions in the academic research, fan studies have been marked by three distinct periods. In the first period, fan studies were focused on the "fan exaltation" as part of a counterculture that was eager to critically respond to the dominant media culture, mainly the mass media communication. One of the exponents within this period was the theorist Jon Fiske, who pointed out the subversion characteristic of the fan culture that operates through re-appropriations of popular culture products (Fiske, 1992).

This approach has been contested ever since. McKingley (1997) affirms that fandom power and resistance would only occur if there were a disruption between the traditional cultural hegemonic values and the ideological canon of media producers. Departing from his gender researches, the author arguments that the values propagated by the media cultural movement are often shared by fans; their consumption is also consistent with the identity of the individuals that are present in the communities around such cultural products. Thus, McKinley's proposition points towards the second period of fan studies, which took place in the 1990's. Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington (2007) argue that this second period (the second "fan wave") was constructed though a sociological bias due to the proliferation of technologies of communication, which resulted in social groupings of fans within communities. This became evident when cultural industries got stronder, feeding those communities in a highly competitive market.

The current fan-related studies have received a wider approach, trying to frame fans within the experience of daily life. In addition, the market deregulation and the media decentralization provided by the proliferation of new network technologies have allowed the cultural productions not only to focus on the traditional media, but especially on the creativity and the reappropriation of the fandom's productions. As a result, the cultural industries conceal these fan productions as part of the cultural circulation process of their products. Therefore, fan studies have not only focused on the social relationships, but also in the cultural and market context that allow us to comprehend the entire system. According to Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington:

Studies of fan audiences help us to understand and meet challenges far beyond the realm of popular culture because they tell us something about the way in which we relate to those around us, as well as the way we read the mediated texts that constitute an ever larger part of our horizon of experience (Gray, Sandvoss, Harrington, 2007, p. 10).

Reinforced by Jenkins (2009), this statement reveals that recent fan studies also try to frame the fan's role as a content producer. The fan's creativity and intense interaction with cultural objects are capable of allowing her to create new productions as a tribute to the "original" product. Cultural appropriations by fans are then considered as a kind of symbolic capital in the participatory culture: a feature of the contemporary media convergence period.

However, the idea of resistance, despite being part of an initial period of fan studies, must not be completely left aside. Sandvoss (2013) arguments that the fandom phenomenon, if approached by the distinction bias proposed by Bourdieu (1984), should not be faced as a subversion behavior characterised by clashes between hegemonic and minority classes. On the other hand, it is possible to analyze this behavior through habitus (Bourdieu, 1984) as a reflex of any combination of social, cultural and economic capital. In this way, the resistance's role in the fandom culture overtakes class empowerment issues to be merged into emotional rewards, as well as its social and cultural relations. The conception of resistance that directed part of the studies was based on the concepts of culture and subculture, especially in the Chicago School and the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies: strands that consolidate this research. Hedbige (2002) defines subculture as "the challenge of hegemony represented by subcultures not directly thereunder; Indeed, if tendentiously Expressed by the style" (Hedbige 2002: 33). For the author, the members of a subculture reject the dominant culture, through gestures, movements, poses, outfits and words, expressions that manifest contradictions and denials by traditional society.

Taking this concept of subculture, and recognizing the particularities surrounding each game production in favor of a resistance to the mainstream market, we intend to explore game's productions made by Brazilian fans and modders, focusing on understanding the phenomenon as a whole, in its social, cultural and economic contexts. Three distinct periods marked the production and distribution of games in Brazil, alongside its own social and economic history: the 1980's decade and the origin of Brazilian modding culture through the production and appropriation of foreign software and hardware; the Brazilian "commercial opening" in the 1990's and its intense economic and industrial relation to the Brazilian game market; and, at last, the beginning of the 21th century, which was marked by the customization of products to supply the market's demand, adjusting to the necessities of a specific niche.

In order to achieve this goal, we shall first elaborate a taxonomy that comprises not only the fan as part of the phenomenon of fandom culture, but also analyzing the thin distinction between fan-game-makers and modders.

FAN-GAME-MAKERS AND MODDERS

Fiske (1992) proposes an initial classification about the fans' participation modes, distinguishing these modes in three different productivity forms: semiotics, declaratives and textual. The semiotics productivity describes the creation of meaning in the reading process and, thus, occupies an intrapersonal space. The declarative productivity regards the forms of social interaction that are cultivated by means of fan consumption. It also includes the verbal as well as the non-verbal communications as, for instance, the use of collectibles to show some kind of affection towards the cultural object. At last, the textual productivity, according to Fiske, describes materials and texts created by fans that act as forms of physical manifestations. Echoing Fiske's thought, Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) recognize the different forms of fan productions, gradually differentiating these productions by analyzing their consumption and production levels, in which fans act not only as mere consumers, but also as small producers. Between these three poles, we can find three different fan groups: common fans; the "cultists" and the enthusiasts. The first group is the consumer of a particular cultural product through the general media. According to the authors, these consumers are part of a fragmented public and are not related to one another in an organizational level.

The second group, the "cultists", is comprised by consumers of specialized media and tends to relate to other people who share their same interests, yet in a non-complete organizational level. The enthusiasts, by the other hand, bring forth the very textual activity and production as the essence of their fandom. They consume very specialized texts, made by other enthusiasts, and relate to one another through their own organizational structures. These three groups search for ways of corresponding to the fans' wishes and motivations. Thus, the power relations inside the fandom community are based on the capacity of those productions of articulating the fans' identities, as well as their objective and subjective position within the society.

Departing from this categorization, we shall propose a taxonomy for video games' fans, based on what Abercrombie and Longhurst would call enthusiasts, that is, fans whose relation with the cultural object overtakes the consumption regime for the production scale. In this category we face two distinct modalities: fan-game-makers and modders.

For mod, abbreviation for modification, we consider any alteration made in any game element. There are several communities in which modders – the individuals who make mods – build their own subculture, with their specific groups who develop and share their mods to other players.



Figure 1 - CounterStrike: source and Jail: similarities and differences beyond gameplay

Within the modder category, there is a subcategory that upholds a consolidated tradition: the rom-hackers. Rom hacking is the rom edition practice, with the purpose of fixing game bugs, but mainly of making game translations. In fact, the practice of rom-hacking is very common in the Latin-American context, since many games are not published in Latin-American languages. Despite being a practice that is considered a copyright violation, many groups get organized in order to translate those games, searching for software that make this work easier.

In our understanding, the act of making mods is a practice that alters some game elements, and it comprises including something new in its structure or mechanics (add-ons), improving the game aesthetics, or even including new game levels and game contents. As pointed by Olli Sotamaa (2003), it is not only the enthusiasm of amateurs that drives the phenomena of modding. For the author, the phenomenon goes beyond the entertainment or the intention of reaching a place of production in the gaming market. Modding combines the true hacker spirit with commercial interests.

Besides mods, there are also the fangames. Fangames are games developed by fans that can be started from a scratch or with the help of game development tools. Usually, fangames are based on an already developed game – usually a known and successful game – and can be seen as a tribute to that "original" game, although it is also known as a copyright infringement.

Thus, at this point, we would like to raise a specific question: if a mod can add contents to a game and a fangame is a game based on an already developed game, which also adds or alters elements of that game, what would be the differences between those two practices? To what extent the modding practice cannot be also considered a fan practice?

While the modders' work is somehow interdependent on the "original" game and has among its goals the inclusion or improvement of game elements and, in many situations, is endorsed by the original game developers, a fangame has a referential relation to the original game, being completely isolated, in terms of development, from the original production, having its own and complete structure, being, most of the times, unknown by the game market. In fact, there is not only a refusal to the fangame practice, as there are, sometimes, lawsuits against fangame makers, for having violated copyright issues. That is to say that the fangame maker practice – either a work driven by an affective feeling towards the original work or in order to build of a personal portfolio – can be turned from a tribute to a crime, no matter the commercial practices involved in the distribution of the fangame.

We consider mods and fangames as a facet of the current participative culture, in which tribute and resistance are presented as two important engagement forms of the consumer-producer public. Thus, we intend to explore the Brazilian scenario on the video games' customization practices, either mods or fangames, searching to observe the economic and social contexts throughout three important periods that marked the Brazilian economy.

MODS, FAN TRANSLATIONS AND FANGAMES: ON THE DAWN OF THE BRAZILIAN GAMER CULTURE

In Brazil, we can identify the modder culture as a phenomenon that dates back to the 1980's decade, when the first personal computers (home computers) were launched in the country. Those computers were manufactured by Brazilian companies that borrowed and "copied" foreign hardware, launching those very same computers with different skins and names, but with appearance that resembled their original counterparts. Later, those computers would be called clones. At that time, the MSX platform brought two of the clones that most

circulated throughout the Brazilian marketplace: Expert, made by Gradiente, and Hotbit, made by Sharp/Epcom. Unlike IBM PCs, these computers afforded a specific use towards game programming and game playing. This happened, to a great extent, due to their very configuration as, for instance, native TV, video and audio outputs, game controller ports and cartridge slots: features that are commonplaces in the majority of videogame consoles. However, all those companies - and this is important to point out - didn't have the official permission to launch their computers with the MSX label: the entire manufacturing and distribution process was taken on without the consent of the MSX Association, the owner of the MSX mark. We can indicate this phenomenon as a kind of resistance, by those Brazilian companies, to the obstacles that were imposed by the Brazilian Market Protection Policy that was ongoing in the country during the 1980's decade. Besides computer cloning, those same companies were also responsible for the beginning of the game cloning scenario, through the activity of copying and selling game cartridges without the permission of the companies that developed those games as, for instance, MSX Konami's games.

THE MSX STANDARD

The MSX was a computer standard announced in 1983 by Kazuhiko Nishi, who at that time was the vice-president of Microsoft Japan and CEO of ASCII Corporation (currently ASCII Media Works) – a huge software developer company (games included) during the 1980's decade. Nishi's intention was the creation of a computer standard (hardware and software) that could be manufactured by any company. It is not by chance that, when the MSX standard was launched, several Japanese companies started to manufacture MSX computers, as Sony, Sanyo, National, Panasonic and Yamaha, but also European companies, such as Philips, and even a North American company, Spectravideo. One of the main purposes of the MSX platform was the alleged interchangeability and its capacity to be expanded (hence one of the explanations for the MSX name: Machines with Software EXchangeability), as we can notice even nowadays, with new homebrew accessories been produced around the world for the platform by the MSX community, as IDE/CF/MMC/SD interfaces, Flash Cartridges, Graphic Cartridges, Sound Cartridges, and so on.

The MSX platform was launched in Brazil at late 1985, through two electronics companies: Gradiente and Sharp/Epcom. Before long, many Brazilian teenagers and adults would be interacting with MSX computers, largely in order to "replace" what at the time was the main game platform in Brazil: the Atari 2600 (including its clones). One of the reasons for this replacement was the fact that the MSX platform had graphic and sound capabilities far superior to the Atari 2600, besides being used as a personal computer. It is not by chance that many home computer users at that time had their first contact with computer programming through a MSX. Due to the same Market Protection Policy mentioned above, it was very rare that original game cartridges (usually made in Japan or in Europe) arrived in Brazil to be resold. This fact opened a space to those Brazilian companies (Gradiente and Sharp, for instance, but also other smaller companies, like GranSoft) to import original cartridges and "clone" the software "recorded" in its ROM and then launching them into the Brazilian Marketplace, in the same cartridge format (and also in floppy disks and audio tapes), but without any mention to the game developers (they used to remove the developer logo from the title screen as well as from the game playfield). We could consider this practice as the beginning of the modding activity for the MSX platform, made not by individuals, but by huge electronics companies.

The lack of references to the game developers was not limited to the "external" game components (boxes, labels, manuals, etc.) but, as mentioned earlier, also to the games' "interior" elements. Developers' logos, such as Konami's, were replaced by the more generic MSX logo (this was the case of the games distributed by Gradiente; maybe the company didn't chose to put her logo in the game in order to avoid legal issues), or even by the Brazilian "publishers" logos (it was the case of the aforementioned GranSoft), with no "shame feelings". One example of this type of mod is the Konami's Hyper Olimpic game series (1984). In Brazil, the game was "published" by Gradiente and GranSoft (let alone other smaller companies). In the Gradiente version, Konami's logo was extracted from the game title screen as well as from the game scenarios and replaced by the MSX logo. Besides, the game title (Hyper Olimpic) was replaced by a Portuguese translation, Olimpíadas, both in the game external assets (boxes, manuals) and in the game title screen. In the GranSoft version, the game was almost completely translated (only the game title remained the same), and the Konami logo was replaced by GranSoft's.

Unlike what happened to many computer platforms of the time, the MSX platform is still "alive" and has a huge and loyal user community in countries as Brazil, Spain and the Netherlands. Many of these users develop "updated" hardware and software, which are commercialized through mailing lists or discussion forums, as is the case of the MSXBR-L mailing list, the biggest MSX related Brazilian mailing list, which counts for almost 2000 posted messages each month¹.

Besides mods, some MSX Konami games received fan translation and fan games versions. Among these games translations is Snatcher (Konami, 1988), a cyberpunk themed game developed by the famous game designer Hideo Kojima, and *Shalom* (1987), also known as *Knightmare III*, both translated to Portuguese. Without these translations, it would be almost impossible for the majority of Brazilian players to have any interaction with those games, for their texts originally came only in Japanese. Regarding fangames, maybe the most known MSX Konami Brazilian fangame is *Knightmare Gold*, developed in 2005 by a team headed by Daniel Caetano.

1. Available at: http://listas.amplus. com.br/pipermail/msxbr-l/ *Knightmare Gold* is a tribute to the 1986 Konami game *Knightmare (Majou Densetsu*, in Japanese), one of the most acclaimed MSX games ever. Knightmare Gold has graphics that are very similar to the original game, but comes with a remastered CD quality soundtrack.



Figure 2 – Boxes of the game *Hyper Olympic 2:* on the left, original Konami. On the right, Gradient's clone.

OKanami 1984	HYPER 2 BLYMPIC MSX 1984
PLAY SELECT	PLAY SELECT
PLAYER with JOYSTICK	PLAYER with JOYSTICK
2PLAYERS with JOYSTICK	2PLAYERS with JOYSTICK
1PLAYER with KEYBOARD	1PLAYER with KEYBOARD
2PLAYERS with KEYBOARD	2PLAYERS with KEYBOARD

Above: Figure 3 – Images of the main menu of the game *Hyper Olympic 2*.

On the right, Figure 4 – original Konami; on the right, Gradient's clone; below, GranSoft's clone with text translated into Portuguese



BRAZILIAN'S MARKET ADAPTATIONS IN THE COMMERCIAL OPENING

The 1990's decade was marked by significant changes in the Brazilian exterior commerce policy. This period was characterized by the "commercial opening", initiated in Fernando Collor's government: part of a globalization process within the new world order (Vigevani; Oliveira, 2008). The Brazilian market, suffering with the inflation process since the 1980's, established international agreements for fiduciary loans, in exchange for liberation measures for the entrance of foreign products into the internal market. Such measures culminated in disagreements in the internal economy in many sectors, and just postponed for a while the return of the inflation. That liberation process brought on the entrance of products from developed countries, which changed radically the relations of the national industries. In opposition to the competitive scale expected by the commercial opening, the consequence was a regressive insertion of the capital's goods, since "the productivity increase is associated to a small production growth, to small investment levels, to a growing unemployment and to a modest increase on the technological and organizational improvement process" (Gonçalves, 2001, p. 89).

It is important to underscore that although the high level of piracy in Brazil could be explained by a lack of capacity, by game developers and publishers, to respond to the market demands, the modding of software and hardware cannot be explained only by those factors. As mentioned above, the difficulties faced by Brazilian companies forced them, to some extent, to make their own game versions. These modified versions firstly appeared in open markets where, more than price accessibility, individuals looked for the games' localization. It was very rare to find games that the public could fully understand, due to the translation problem aforementioned: the majority of titles would come only in English, with a few exceptions where official (authorized) modifications/translations could be made, as is the case of Brazilian console game manufacturer TecToy, which manufactured many of the SEGA consoles in Brazil.

The "non-official" translation practice was most common during the "cartridge decade". Even when there were not Portuguese translations of those games, Brazilian users were pleased with Spanish translations due to the proximity of this language with Brazilian Portuguese. On the other hand, the localization problem is not unique to the South American game market. During the 1980's and 1990's, many games that were produced in Japan came to the North American market also without being localized. In this context, the modding practice can be seen as a measure to answer to a specific social demand, having as one of its consequences the illegality, due to the failure of game development and publishing companies to respond to those needs. Thus, while observing the existence of mods, hacks, cracks, skins and add-ons, it is possible to say that the consumer of fictional works is encouraged to take part as a collaborative agent regarding the products for which she has some kind of affection, meaning, also, a non-passive relation to the overall gaming context. Nevertheless, there were also "legitimate" enterprises of game modding. This was the case of the above mentioned Brazilian company TecToy, which acquired the rights to publish worldwide known games, but modified to serve Brazilian consumers. Two examples are the cases of the games: *Mônica no Castelo do Dragão (Monica in the Dragon Castle)*, which portrayed well known Brazilian comics characters created my Maurício de Souza, and *Chapolim vs. Drácula*, which portrayed the Mexican TV Show Super-Hero *Chapolim Colorado*, which has been aired in Brazil since the 1980's decade and has gained great reception by Brazilian viewers since then. Although these games were "original" games, all their mechanics was based on well-established games like *Wonder Boy*, which was also launched in Brazil by TecToy. These cases show a facet that is often forgotten when treating the piracy subject: more than the simple translation of a game, companies like TecToy afforded cultural contextualization, as is the case of the games mentioned above, fulfilling, to a certain extent, local demands.



Figure 4: Monica at the Castle of the Dragon

Although companies like TecToy had venture into the work of turning things a little easier to Brazilian consumers, by translating and developing contextualized games, this was an exception to the overall situation, leaving to users the role of translators and modders. One of the greatest examples resides on the sport/soccer game genre, for its success within the Brazilian culture.

Answering to this specific demand, many soccer games versions/mods were made, to almost all the videogame platforms that were available to Brazilian consumers. In a time when there were not games like today's *FIFA* or *PES*, with Brazilian teams and soccer players, users had to implement these features by themselves. Titles like *Ronaldinho Campeonato Brasileiro 1998* ("Ronaldinho Brazilian Championship 1998"), a non-official mod for the Super Nintendo game *International Superstar Soccer Deluxe* shows this movement.



Figure 5: Ronaldinho and the hacked version of International Superstar Soccer Deluxe.

The practice of modding soccer games had a continuous growth during the 1990's decade, due, among other aspects, to the proliferation of Internet access to the Brazilian population. This practice was intensified when the videogame storage media turned from cartridges to CDs and DVDs, when patches with updates were released every year, as soccer players moved from one team to another. Those patches also contained localized voices, taken from Brazilian TV soccer commentators. Besides, they were not only distributed by Internet but also sold at newsstands, with appellative covers made by modders.

GUITAR HERO BRAZIL

It is known that Internet has changed entertainment business in the 21th century. Companies face a turnaround from the passive customer to an active content user and producer, which can easily pass on to others a customized product via Internet. As discussed in this article, the customization of products to serve a local niche demand began before the Web 2.0.

However, the possibility of digital distribution and the ease of finding products have allowed the free replication to be a common phenomenon, even when most of the times those products are copyrighted. Chris Anderson (2008, p. 11) explains the economics of abundance: "what happens when the bottlenecks that stand between supply and demand in our culture start to disappear and everything becomes available to everyone". The author also defends that consumers are becoming active producers because of low costs and population of technology, removing the control of content off the big corporations. It is a time when games made by fangames and mods are easily available to the mass of niches. Therefore, Brazil continues the products' customization in the 21th century.



Figure 6: Pirated version of the game *Winning Eleven 8*.

The *Guitar Hero* series (Harmonix Music Systems, 2005-2010) is a successful American game based on Konami's *GuitarFreaks* (1998). They both have similar gameplay, consisting in combining coloured buttons with the colours displayed in the screen, in order to accumulate points and animate a simulated audience in a concert. *Guitar Hero* is played with a joystick shaped as a guitar, one of the main attractions of the game. In this sense, *Guitar Hero Brazil* is an example of customizing a product to a local culture, adjusting to its demands. The mod was designed by a musical producer and an engineer, which created a new repertory, based on Brazilian bands. Instead of mainstream American or English songs and bands, the Brazilian version has local popular bands, such as Raimundos, Mamonas Assassinas, Legião Urbana, Pitty, and others.



Figure 7: Game cover made by a fan.

Discouraged by big companies and their copyrights policies, the abovementioned modders believe in the game's content improvement as fans and players of *Guitar Hero* who studied the game's programming code and re-recorded it with Brazilian songs. While companies worry about money loss, modders usually don't aim for profit, but for an intimate experience with the game. According to Nobre (2010, p. 1), today's piracy is different from the pirates of XVIII century, because when it happens in the cyberspace, it does not mean to leave someone without, but to leave someone with something more. Although they are both against the law, today's cyber piracy is not restricted to sea brigands of the Mediterranean like in the Middle Age, but to those who have a computer and certain knowledge of the machine.

In an interview to a show called PlayTV, Daniel Monteiro, one of the creators of the mod *Guitar Hero Brazil*, enlightened:

And we always thought, but we can't distribute the game, right? Because, anyway, it is piracy. And it was always this issue, and now, how do you do it? Anyway, until now we don't do it. We don't have any contact to the game's producer, and it is only here, at home, in fact. We made it only for us and we are the owner of the original game and we substituted this in the game and we play².

From this statement, Monteiro seems uncomfortable with the piracy subject. In Brazil, the Law 10.695/03 typifies a violator behavior of the copyright policy, although after browsing for a few minutes on the Internet it is possible to find a kind of "law infractors" searching for entertainment, improving creations in a process that can be called "customization" (Messias et al., 2012, p. 46).

2. Interview with the creators of *Guitar Hero Brazil* available at: http:// www.youtube.com/ watch?v=9pRdZjiU5ps. Accessed: July 2nd, 2013 This customization process, especially the *Guitar Hero Brazil* case, points out to a local demand. Most of the comments from YouTube videos showing the designers team playing the *Guitar Hero* mod are positive, and many look for the game as if it was available by the modder/producer. Although Monteiro affirms that the game is not distributed, it is easy to find download pages to have access to the *Guitar Hero Brazil* content, with step-by-step explanation on how to record and use the game. Even if the mod discussed is not a demand for gamers all over the world, Brazilians found a way to add new content for a niche's pleasure, not aiming for profit.

Some mods are encouraged by the original game's producers, like the case of *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2011), but until now *Guitar Hero* has not shown interest in producing content for specific places other than United States, where the game was developed and cradle of the mainstream culture, that is either seen as straightly directed for the market or seen as "culture for everybody" (Martel, 2012). In any case, it is an antonym for "niche's culture", therefore, still not interesting for the companies, even if it's interesting for a local niche.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this paper was to reflect upon the barriers between the definition of mods and fangames through a historical bias within the Brazilian context, regarding two different phenomena that are related to each other: tribute and resistance. Those two types of media production cannot be isolated, due to the historical moment and all the social and cultural issues that allowed their development, either by the use of specific platforms or by the motivations that are implied within these productions.

Despite having their own subcultures, with their internal social regimes of coherent groups or dispersed individuals that, however, share the same ideological feeling, it is possible to identify an important issued that is therefore put in evidence: local cultural resistance acts against the global context.

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