

**ZAGALO, N. (2013). VÍDEOJOGOS EM PORTUGAL:
HISTÓRIA, TECNOLOGIA E ARTE. LISBOA:
FCA EDITORA DE INFORMÁTICA.**

Artur Coelho

RESUMO

Enformado por uma perspetiva feminista, o presente artigo analisa as representações de género que emergem nas *newsmagazines* portuguesas, incidindo particularmente na sua interseção com o perfil temático deste tipo de *medium*. Os resultados indicam que estas publicações tendem a privilegiar paradigmas representacionais que são congruentes com o “sexismo benevolente”. Enquanto os homens surgem como detentores de poder e agentes de influência, as mulheres figuram como indivíduos que dependem da mentoria dos seus congéneres homens para o exercício da liderança. As *newsmagazines* portuguesas invisibilizam, assim, a diversidade de identidades e experiências, favorecendo a perpetuação de valores androcêntricos e relações de poder desiguais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Newsmagazines; representações de género; estudos feministas dos média

INTRODUCTION

Lately I've found myself quite busy trying to conquer moorish lands. After realizing that houses with servants to cultivate fields and merchants to transport grain to markets to generate wealth were sorely needed, I dedicated myself to train an invincible army. Bands of horsemen reinforced the explosive mixture of crossbowmen, swordsmen and knights Templar. Priests ensured the high morale of the troops and in place of artillery a force of powerful catapults left the enemy's defenses in ruins. My forces quickly took the field, slaughtering the hapless Moors. I've only floundered at the Alcazar, when I realized that the effort to defeat it would consume me another couple of hours. *I have so much to do, I so much more to do*, I thought. But how to resist the retro-gaming urge of *Soure 1111*, a Portuguese game developed in 2004 which, emulating the gameplay of RPGs such as *Age of Empires* or *World of Warcraft*, brings us to the birth of the Portuguese nation? This is one of many surprises to be found in Nelson Zagalo's interesting history of computer games in Portugal. Did you know that Portuguese computer games existed, and there were developed by designers that over the decades accumulated talent, experience and some international successes? Personally, apart from some contemporary exceptions, I've never suspected this to be possible. This surprising book traces, with an high level of detail, a history of the development of computer games in Portugal, captivating the reader for its wide scope, critical view, and bringing to the contemporary memory forgotten elements of an amazing story.

Before tracing the book's underlying historiographical portrait of the book, Zagalo takes us to the very beginnings of videogaming, focusing on the concept of computer games not as mechanical toys but as technological devices that allow interaction. The first experiments with video game technology emerged in academia, intended to arouse curiosity in the possibilities of computers, spreading later to commercial arcade games and consoles. Zagalo gives special attention to the British experiment with Sinclair computers, created for a BBC educational initiative which intended to encourage programming, creating a market for cheap computers, and encouraging a generation of creators to create from scratch what became a fertile culture of game creation boosted by specialized magazines that shared code. This contrasts sharply with the US, where game development was early on developed as consumer product.

Focusing on the Portuguese case brings us early on some big surprises. The first is discovering that in the pre-IBM PC era a personal computer, ENER-1000, was developed and marketed in Portugal. Another semi-forgotten fact in the history of technology is the manufacture by Timex Portugal of the legendary ZX Spectrum, the machine that sparked a whole generation to computing, who built computers for sale in Portugal and for the American market. These relatively low-cost machines enabled a dynamic computing culture with reflections in video-games. Programming Spectrum machines inspired a whole generation, and from here came the first gaming experiences created in Portugal. Some were rudimentary and quickly forgotten, others very complex, even coming within range of Artificial Intelligence. Some games even achieved national success and began to penetrate the also incipient but more vigorous international market for video games. Zagalo shares a lot screenshots of these games, detailing their design and gameplay. From my standpoint as an ICT teacher, the most interesting artifact reproduced is the manuscript schematics and diagrams of the very first game created in Portugal, a naughts and crosses game firstly written on paper and later implemented on the Spectrum by José Oliveira. This very interesting artifact solidifies the mental processes behind programming. Through this detailed portrait Zagalo lays the foundations of what became a fruitful game programming culture that achieved some successes in the foreign markets, taking into account the small size of the community and the country.

The technological advances brought by the higher computing power of personal computers, and the CD-ROM as a support for storage and sharing, allowed for greater ambition in game development. Zagalo analyzes platforms and authoring software available at the time, and focuses on the Portuguese experience in the genre. A strong emphasis is put upon the importance of competitions organized by genre publications to promote and give visibility to PC game developers, impacting the quantity and quality of the games available. As for the possibilities brought by CD-ROM, its use gave rise to a kind of national mini-industry, developed at the confluence of three forces. First, the important support given by the committee established for the commemorations of the 500 years of the Portuguese discoveries to multimedia software, which enabled the creation of a pedagogical RPG based on the Bartolomeu Dias travels. This educational package also included the game creation engine Prometeu, available free of charge to teachers.

This ambitious experiment happened in a time where the number of computer in schools and among teachers was very low and clearly not enough to meet its possibilities. As an aside, I should mention that for me the idea of having a game engine that allowed any teacher to create educational games seems a terrible waste. We could have had earlier the interesting educational possibilities that are brought today, safeguarding the proper distances, by programming with Scratch in schools. There was also a semi-official bet in educational games, with titles designed directly to the educational market. From this comes the ambitious collaboration between the University of Coimbra, Ciberbit and the municipality of Soure to develop a game whose structure, similar to Age of Empires recreates the battle of Soure, pointing to the potential of entertainment games created either academically or with commercial ambitions. This is a game that still remains captivating today, as can be measured by the first paragraphs of this recension.

The concept of community is fundamental to the development of both creators technical skills and an industry as a whole. Enabling sharing of ideas and experiences, gives everyone who wants to begin creating a valuable learning resource. This is especially relevant in an era where there were few, if any, formal training courses. Disseminating working experiences also increased the qualitative level. When you see something that intrigues and inspires, you want to do more and better. Within this focus, the development of national communities will prove to be a very strong driver for growth. But first, Zagalo tells us about game engines, the technology underlying the development of interactive experiences, detailing the engines behind classic games and analyzing various portuguese projects that have developed their own game engines. These independent efforts achieved results close to the state of the art at the time, and the majority of programmers who developed these applications were later hired by leading international game creation companies. Returning to the field of communities Zagalo notes the importance of the GameDev.pt as a community of practice that facilitated sharing information, tips and tutorials for all those interested in learning the various aspects of game development. This sharing culture expressed itself in forums, tutorials, and a learning package, available to everyone, becoming the genesis of our contemporary national gaming industry. The GameDev community actively supported the development of fully national games of high quality, generating critical mass to establish a true community of creators. Zagalo also highlights the failed initiative of APROJE, and notes the growth of academic interest in game development which translates into a growing number of dedicated events and conferences.

Game development for mobile platforms, before the consolidation brought by the Android and iOS operating systems, had a high degree of potential explored by a nascent domestic industry. Zagalo notes that Portuguese game creators achieved international success on different mobile platforms and underlies the commitment of Ydreams, a company devoted to create advanced gaming experiences with the available technology at the time. Despite the accumulation of small successes, a great success was elusive. Ydreams could have become a major mobile gaming development engine, with repercussions for the national community, but gave up the field just before the rise of iOS.

Highlighting some successes in this new platform, the emerging pictures shows a lost opportunity with the departure of Ydreams, which could have allowed for a network of mobile game developers anchored in its dynamism.

Web gaming platforms have been a major development vector for the Portuguese gaming industry. There are global hit games created by Portuguese developers, which comes as a surprise for those who do not know this field very well. The availability of web technologies such as Flash or Unity, making web publishing of interactive content easier, a lot of creativity and a good deal of luck enabled these successes. Most Portuguese companies dedicated to game development work to this day in this field, focusing on mini-game portals, MMOs, casual games, puzzles, strategy and RPG, or multimedia tie-ins.

The visibility of the Portuguese gaming industry began to assert itself on the console market, conquering niches with small teams of creators and high quality products. Developing games for this market is a difficult process, requiring high levels of investment often outside the financial capacity of small teams and businesses. National game developers distinguish themselves by the capacity to adapt to the demands of what Zagalo calls the most elitist side of the industry, being able to overcome technical challenges and, with few resources, creating quality products with worldwide impact. Still, given the large investments required few were the Portuguese console games materialized into products available on the market. Many floundered, even though having drawn the attention of the press and industry. This also emphasizes the increasing professionalization of the gaming industry, which began as something created by knowledgeable amateurs and evolved into a professional process, despite our reduced national dimension and the difficulties to reach global markets. These aspects were pointed out in the chapters dedicated to the growth of PC, mobile platforms and web gaming, but becomes more prescient thanks to the aura of prestige in the world of consoles.

Mobile app stores leveled the playing field for developers, ensuring security, distribution and reliability that have been well used by creators. According to Zagalo, the app store environment is very well suited to the Portuguese business ecosystem, with flexible and small sized teams able to quickly take advantage of market niches. This is the case in the markets for Android, iOS and Windows Phone apps, with Portuguese games able to reach the tops of downloads, especially those who follow a transmedia marketing strategy through partnerships with established brand images. It is perhaps here that resides the core of a Portuguese gaming industry, with innovative and quality titles, attractive to a global audience but fundamentally creatively and flexibly exploring niches in a very competitive market.

At the end of this book the question remains: is there a computer games industry in Portugal? It clearly exists, although strongly influenced by the small size of the country and the ultra-competitive characteristics of the gaming market. We have the ability to create top-level content with low costs, with technical skills and creativity that have generated independent hits on the web, AppStores and PC and console gaming markets. There has been a consistent bet on content development, especially in the use of intellectual property in transmedia settings. There are development teams and investors. It

is not an industry at the highest levels of the games ecosystem, but keeps surviving with quality products in a hypercompetitive field. Zagalo points out that many of the Portuguese developers who worked in independent games or its underlying technologies were eventually employed by the largest companies in the global market. One gets the feeling that much more could have been achieved, but much has already been achieved with great commitment and creativity from the Portuguese developers.

This dynamism is visible in the wide variety of games, listed exhaustively at the end of the book. Since the time of precursors such as *Laser* and *Paradise Café*, the evolution Portuguese game creation games brought us titles such as *Elifoot*, a football management game that to this day still has supporters, the first international bet of *Gambys*, the didacticism of *Viagem de Bartolomeu Dias* (with the Prometeu game engine) and *Soure 1111*, the advanced experiments of YDreams and others in the mobile world, online gaming portals, MMOs such as *Orion's Belt*, *Picma's* casual pictograms, the console projects of *Miffy's World*, *Pet Hospital* and *Under Siege*, and the never fulfilled promise of *Ugo Volt*, just to quote a very narrow selection of a quite large list.

This picture of constant evolution, with its success stories and comprehensive listings may create the idea that the development of games in Portugal and the birth of a creative industry was something that evolved naturally, building up stone by stone. Zagalo stresses that this vision is far from our reality. The story described in this book shows a pattern of constant starts and stops, made of promising moments that cause conceptual explosions that fade after a while, forced down by market pressures or technological developments. This is what Zagalo refers as the inconstancy in a medium that showing the ability to create at the highest artistic and technological levels, cannot sustain this on a long-term vision. The author points out three structural factors influencing this state of affairs. Education, which despite the heavy investment in recent decades, has not generated a sufficient number of graduates and technicians capable of generating creative and technological critical mass, a factor that the attention given to multimedia and digital is very recent in academia contributes. Production, since creating a game involves high development and marketing costs, and the existence in Portugal of few institutional supports, difficulting to creation of products that require substantial investment in a market that does not guarantee local financial return. Finally, distribution, noting that in a globalized space the diversity of choices is vast and requires well-defined and financed strategies to attract the attention of players for specific products in the huge variety of choices in the digital world.

I'd like to further highlight the conservation aspect of the historical memory of a recent past. Immersed as we are in a world of constant novelty, we quickly forget today what yesterday seemed to us fresh, new and important. It maybe that the biggest surprise of this book is not the knowledge of the historical evolution of the development of computer games, which was born out of the hands of amateurs and became a professional space, but the myriad details forgotten by the collective memory that Zagalo brings back in this fascinating read. Discovering some of the technologies and games that are covered in this book will be for many readers a complete surprise. I suspect that even the

most knowledgeable within this field will have something to rediscover. And now, if I may, I will once again try to tear apart that Moorish castle. Fortunately I do not own a playstation. If I did, I would be sighing, dreaming about playing that science fiction game set in the ruins of a post-apocalyptic Lisbon shown in the mouth-watering demos of *Ugo Volt*. ✍

BIO NOTE

Artur Coelho is ICT teacher and systems manager at Agrupamento de Escolas Venda do Pinheiro. With a master in Educational Science - Educational Technology (UCP), works with 3D modeling, VRML and 3D printing with students in elementary education. Fascinated by Science Fiction, writes about books at aCalopsia and in his personal blog.

E-mail: f575@aevp.net

Agrupamento de Escolas Venda do Pinheiro Quinta do Mucharro, 2665-650 Venda do Pinheiro, Portugal

* Submitted: 30-11-2014

* Accepted: 15-3-2015