GLOBAL PROJECTS, LOCAL HISTORIES: TRADITION, ACTIVISM, AND RESISTANCE IN THE INDIGENOUS ESPORTS MOVEMENT IN BRAZIL

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Introduction

A phenomenon whose popularity has grown in Brazil and around the world over the past century (Jin, 2010, 2021; Macedo, 2023; Taylor, 2012, 2018), electronic sports (esports) represent a form of competitive gaming that uses on specific platforms, such as computers, consoles, and mobile devices. The increasing consumption of smartphones, combined with the development of competitive games designed specifically for portable devices, has provided fertile ground for the global esports industry and for local gaming communities in peripheral regions to thrive.

Due to their compact structure, mobile esports have rapidly gained popularity and a global following, particularly among young people from areas perceived as "peripheral" and lacking in digital infrastructure. In countries of the so-called Global South, such as Brazil and China, mobile esports have become institutionalized due to the relative accessibility of smartphones compared to other gaming platforms, such as computers, laptops, and consoles.

Against this backdrop, the recent COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of esports on smartphones have enabled the emergence of aspiring Indigenous teams across different regions of Brazil. Many of these collectives play Free Fire (FF), a mobile game developed and published by Garena, publisher based in Singapore. Released in 2017, FF is a free-to-play game with relatively flexible access that has gained a considerable audience of players in the country, especially during the pandemic (Macedo, 2023).

In this context, this study presents the preliminary findings of an ongoing ethnographic research project examining the knowledge practices and gaming approaches of Indigenous FF players from four different ethnic groups in Brazil: Apurinã, from the

northwestern Amazon region; Ava-Guarani, from the western part of Paraná state;

Mbyá-Guarani, from the southern region of Rio de Janeiro state; and Xakriabá, from northern Minas Gerais.

Methodology

The methodology integrates the theoretical-epistemological dimensions of experiential ethnography (Fabian, 2001; Goulet, 2011; Taylor, 2022) and Oral History from a decolonial perspective (Cusicanqui, 1987, 2021; Júnior, 2019). Furthermore, it draws on a decolonial proposal for studying digital culture in Latin America (Gómez-Cruz, Ricaurte, & Siles, 2023) and incorporates conversations, experimentation, and epistemic encounters. Complementary, the study examines the Instagram profiles of these players. Specifically, we discuss how these players negotiate their roles as activists for Indigenous rights, how their communities engage with video games and esports within their specific contexts, and how they perceive the reception of their presence within the broader Brazilian FF community, which has traditionally been oriented toward non-Indigenous players. The literature used to discuss these knowledge practices and initiatives draws on critiques of the modern/colonial world-system and the decolonial option (Bernardino-Costa & Grosfoguel, 2016; Mignolo, 2003, 2009; Quijano, 1992), while also acknowledging Indigenous knowledge systems and the multiple local mediations (Martín-Barbero, 2001; Orozco, 1994, 2000) that shape players' experiences.

Esports as a Decolonial Tool

Although FF operates within the totalizing framework of platform capitalism (Van Dijck, Poell, & De Waal, 2018), preliminary findings from this research suggest that Indigenous gamers actively create alternative pathways that challenge this structure. Their knowledge practices and strategies demonstrate a deliberate appropriation of gaming spaces to promote self-communication (Oliveira, 2017), redefine digital platforms, and advocate for their rights. These practices serve as tools for resisting systemic and intersectional oppressions (Esteves, 2022) that shape their ways of being, existing, good living, and gaming. Thus, by participating in esports, Indigenous players assert their presence in a domain historically dominated by non-Indigenous actors (Gray, 2014; Murray, 2018; Trammell, 2020) while reinforcing their cultural identities.

Through Instagram profiles, individual players, teams, and exclusively Indigenous competitions engage in networked activism to oppose political projects that threaten their rights. One such project is the "temporal framework" thesis, which underpins Brazil's Law 14.701/23. Championed by agribusiness-aligned politicians from the Agricultural Parliamentary Front, this law restricts Indigenous land rights to territories occupied or contested before the promulgation of the 1988 Brazilian Federal Constitution. During the intense debates over this legislation in 2021, our interlocutors

actively used their personal, team, and tournament profiles to publicly criticize the proposal and raise awareness about its implications.

Their engagement of these players with esports challenges the notion that video games serve only as escapist spaces detached from political struggles, feminism, class struggle, and responsibilities (Burrill, 2008). As one Apurinã player explains, "beyond being players, we are activists. We are born activists. It is something that comes with us from birth. That is why I always say that our team is not just an esports team—it is also Indigenous activism, both on social media and in spreading accurate information, because we see that much of the information is not properly shared." By using online platforms, these players establish networks of solidarity and promote a shift in resistance and its meanings, aligning themselves with the broader Brazilian Indigenous Movement that defends the rights to land, environmental justice, and self-determination (Esteves, 2022).

One of the most significant aspects of this decolonial engagement is the way esports function as a space of knowledge production. Through gaming, Indigenous players construct and disseminate their own narratives, contesting stereotypes that depict them as disconnected from contemporary technologies. Their participation in esports is not just an assertion of digital literacy but also a disruption of the colonial gaze that has historically sought to confine Indigenous identities to the past. As an Ava-Guarani player notes, "Non-Indigenous society still holds the belief that Indigenous people are not part of the world of technology, that we are not in online gaming. [...] With this visibility, we take the opportunity to showcase our struggle for our rights, because this also helps us a lot."

Furthermore, the incorporation of esports by Indigenous communities challenges the Western notion of technology as separate from Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Rather than viewing gaming as an external influence or a potential threat to cultural traditions, these players integrate it into their daily realities, demonstrating that being Indigenous and participating in digital culture are not mutually exclusive. As one Xakriabá player affirms: "Gaming also shows non-Indigenous people that Indigenous people are present in this field, that we are not just in the forest, and that our participation in these spaces does not make us any less Indigenous."

This reinforces the idea that digital technologies, when appropriated on Indigenous terms, can be aligned with decolonial practices that center Indigenous agency, rather than perpetuating assimilationist logics. These statements illustrate how Indigenous gamers use esports as a platform for visibility and resistance, disrupting stereotypes and asserting their presence in digital spaces historically dominated by non-Indigenous players (Gray, 2014; Murray, 2018; Trammell, 2020).

Preliminary considerations

Previous literature has already highlighted the Internet's crucial role in Indigenous

resistance movements over the past decade, particularly through youth and women-led initiatives (Esteves, 2022; Oliveira, 2017; Pereira, 2012, 2013). While this argument has been widely addressed in discussions on digital activism and Indigenous net-activism, the role of esports and video games in these movements remains underexplored.

The use of gaming spaces as a decolonial tool challenges dominant narratives that position video games as apolitical environments of escapism (Burrill, 2008)—or even as industries governed solely by Western logics of competition and commercialization (Macedo, 2023). Instead, Indigenous players in Brazil are actively redefining the role of esports in their communities, using gaming to resist epistemic erasure, assert Indigenous presence in technological spaces, connect with other ethnic groups, and challenge colonial structures that continue to marginalize them (Mignolo, 2003; Quijano, 1992; Trammell, 2020).

In this sense, esports function as a decolonial tool not because they inherently resist colonial power structures, but because Indigenous players actively transform them into spaces of negotiation, resistance, and empowerment. Their participation in competitive gaming is not merely about entertainment or economic opportunity; rather, it is a form of digital sovereignty, in which Indigenous presence in gaming spaces becomes an affirmation of existence, resilience, and political struggle.

Despite this, it is necessary to recognize the subordination of this set of practices to the functioning of gaming and social media platforms, from which these indigenous experiences are produced. Playing and sharing this knowledge depends intrinsically and materially on the architecture provided by the platforms, over which these corporations exercise direct control and influence. After all, they are the ones who set the rules, whose changes have immediate effects on the content, business, and sociocultural practices of their users. This reveals that the phenomenon of platformization (Van Dijck, Poell, & De Waal, 2018) involves a new form of socio technical regulation, in which companies establish the terms of participation, circulation, and visibility of their environments—capable of impacting even different resistance movements articulated in networks.

Even so, this study contributes to rethinking the gaming space through an ethnic-racial lens, challenging its underlying structures and demonstrating how Indigenous players use esports as a decolonial tool to assert their agency and resist systemic oppression. Ultimately, this epistemological movement paves the way for the construction of another conception of politics and opens new fronts of digital activism for Indigenous peoples.

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