Pagando para vencer, parte 2: serialização, *power creep* e capitalismo tardio em *Hearthstone*

Paying to win, part 2: serialization, power creep, and late capitalism in Hearthstone

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Resumo: *Este artigo discute o fenômeno de power creep no card game digital Hearthstone (Blizzard, 2012), problematizando-o a partir das perspectivas da midiatização, serialização e capitalismo tardio. O objetivo central é politizar a questão, apontando para os imbricamentos da indústria cultural contemporânea com as perspectives epistemológicas e ontológicas do jogo enquanto chave interpretativa. Nesse sentido, empreendemos o esforço de revisar algumas teorias da midiatização, observando em particular o conceito nos videogames a partir da serialização. Partimos para uma análise empírica exploratória de relatos de jogadores profissionais no YouTube, revelando discursos que nos ajudam a localizar a agência do capitalismo tardio a partir da serialização e da midiatização. Por fim, reforçamos a necessidade de contemplar os pontos desvelados pela pesquisa na compreensão da indústria contemporânea do entretenimento, bem como a necessidade de (re)pensar os entendimentos particulares sobre jogos digitais e suas culturas.*

Palavras-chave: *card games; e-sports; jogo; midiatização; capitalismo tardio.*

Abstract: *This paper discusses power creep in the digital game card Hearthstone (Blizzard, 2012), questioning it from the perspectives of mediatization, serialization and late capitalism. The goal is to politicize the issue by pointing*

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to the overlapping of contemporary cultural industry with game's epistemological and ontological perspectives. We undertake the effort to review some theories of mediatization, observing the particularities of serialization in games. To achieve the main goal, we set out for an exploratory empirical analysis of professional players discourse on YouTube, revealing traces that help us locate the agency of late capitalism and serialization in Hearthstone's power creep. Finally, we reinforce the need to scrutinize the contemporary entertainment industry, as well as the need to (re) think understandings about digital games and their cultures.

Keywords*: card games; e-sports; game; mediatization; late capitalism.*

Introduction

The game, in the widest aspect of the term, is one of the central elements of culture development. The creative drive, the play and the appropriation are powerful agency catalysts, both in the action taken place and the wider structural conditions. These borderless, free game, with no rules; from an impulse that brings us closer to madness, it is indispensable in a more complete analysis of any social spectrum. This discussion presupposes that the understanding of social organizations of contemporaneity shelters an observation through epistemological conditions that privilege the game as a reading key. This rhetoric suggests a deviation of the idea of the game, which, when it presents itself as a mediator for a sociological comprehension, it modifies it. We intent, therefore, to rescue the notion of status of irrelevance conferred to it by the positivist reasoning and by Modernity, contexts that still echo in their representations, and positioning it beside the contemporary epistemological pillars; the keys of reading that we use to understand today's society. It is a wide discussion, a long-term effort about affectations in the weave of social that call a scrutiny of agency and material practices involved in this process.

Therefore, at the same time they seek to enterprise an effort of understanding micro agency dynamics when discussing the phenomenon known as *power creep* and the form it happens in the card game *Hearthstone*[3] *(*BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT, 2012), this article seeks to outline the role of dynamics common to Late Capitalism (JAMESON, 1991) and how they are particularly relevant in the study of the contemporary culture of games.

3   Developed by Blizzard Entertainment and released in 2014, Hearthstone is a digital collectable cardgame. Its narrative contexto integrates the fictional universe of Warcraft – one of Blizzard's most lucrative franchises – exploring the affectionate relationship of gamers with the brand. In Hearthstone, the players compete online through the construction of decks with cards obtained majorly through payment – despite being a game promoted as free-to-play –, as illustrated in Falcão and Marques (2017). Even though it isn't a pioneer in the genre, Hearthstone certainly is one of the most popular games, surpassing the barrier of 30 million active players in 2018 (BAILEY, 2018). It also counts with a heated competitive scenario, with competitions taking place globally and regionally throughouyt the year. Only in 2019 over 4 million dollars were delivered in prizes ((REUTERS, 2018).

The *power creep*, a phenomenon that happens in games published as a series, is similar to the idea of programmed obsolescence and happens when certain resources within these systems become obsolete and demand a replacement that can only be executed through consumption relations. The issue illustrated by this phenomenon is about the serialization of the experience of media in a wider form, and refers to two processes that are widely discussed in the field of sociology of media: (1) the production of symbolic goods in an industrial scale, discussed through the notion of cultural industry and the derivations of the concept and their problems; and (2) the phenomenon of mediatization, through which institutions and social practices are being modified for communicational ubiquity.

This article offers a continuity to a previous research (FALCÃO; MARQUES, 2017), that connects two aspects of the contemporary experience of a game: one in a social order, wider and more generic, creating echoes and cultural references; and other in a technical order, committed with the internal aspect of media, its materiality. Our proposition is to show how the *power creep* phenomenon emerges as a direct consequence of the process of mediatization experimented by the current games and reaffirming the intention of problematizing the relation between the game industry and marketing dynamics that imply power relations. To do so, it becomes necessary to observe a chain of practices that go from game design to Blizzard's institutional policies, going through the conformation of discursive environments mobilized by the game. We observe these practices from an explorative analysis of YouTube videos on the phenomenon of the *power creep:* stories of professional gamers, commentators and Blizzard employees discussing the theme and its implications. Around the conclusion, we point towards the connection of the phenomenon of obsolescence inherent to Hearthstone to structure of global agencies, to game culture and the market of contemporary entertainment.

Mediatization and the logic of media

The concept of mediatization have been widely being worked in the field of communication during the last decades, producing polysemic understandings about their presuppositions and applications. The studies on mediatization begin after the recognition of the growing overlapping between institutions and social fields – religion, politics, education, etc. with media, its logic and practices (COULDRY, 2004). The different approaches to the theory of mediatization produce particular affectations of the concept. Verón (2014), for instance, begins from the understanding of mediatization under a semiology/anthropological bias, being "an operational result of a nuclear dimension of our biologic species, more precisely, our capacity of semiosis" (VERÓN, 2014, p. 14). This operationalization results into a constitution of media phenomena, that would be the exteriorization of mental processes in form of material devices. Mediatization would consist in, to Verón, the stabilization of these media phenomena as its configuration, use and practice is institutionalized. We create, therefore, "a private space and time around a communication device" (VERÓN, 2014, p. 16). It is important, however, to consider the implication of mediatization theories in the analysis of games nowadays. The experience of "playing" and, consequently, the productive chain – from the design to consumption via streaming – is affected and tensioned by the mediatized environment of the game. In order to a digital game gain commercial success, therefore, it is necessary to appropriate themselves of the mediatized environment where culture objects circulate nowadays. *Hearthstone*, for instance, currently figures as the fourteenth most popular game on Twitch[4], along with other games from Blizzard. *Overwatch* and *World of Warcraft*, other games from the same company, occupy the seventh and eighth place, respectively. These data aren't at all random, and they point towards an intent – *by design* – on behalf of Blizzard in mediatizing their game experiences.

4   It is the most popular streaming platform widely adopted by streamers and professional players. Data and metrics can be found here: https://www.twitchmetrics.net

The pursuit for the mediatization of corporations like Blizzard points towards processes of stabilization treated by Verón, suggesting a particular operationalization that coalesce in the idea of *institutionality*. Under this bias, it is understood that media begins to figure as a social institution whose processes are not only based on established social fields, but it begins to have their own legitimacy and autonomy. It begins, thus, to affect and tension other points of the social fabric. To Braga (2012), the imbrication of media with social fields presupposes the reflection around the concepts of media circulation, mediation, reception, production and ambiance. The research on mediatization, therefore, would work as a type of umbrella term, capable of comprising different communicative logics, mediations, circuits and devices coming from the institutionalization of media and the production of new mediatic environments. This hypothesis come from the principle that we inhabit a mediatized world (BASTOS, 2012, p. 68), marked by the influence of media in the constitution of culture and society. The "mediatization" of the world, therefore, presupposes not only the recognition of the logic of media in social artifacts and institutions, but also the material link of media devices in the structure of contemporary phenomena.

In a mediatized world we would no longer be capable of analyzing social fields, their processes and products separated from the action of media: it is a complete and indelible hybridization. In the game industry, generally, it is possible to verify the presence of this hypothesis. More and more, the game design seeks the integration of processes of mediatization. This imbrication is deep and materially observable, moreover, in contemporary consoles. Joysticks of consoles such as PlayStation 4 and Nintendo Switch have buttons dedicated to content sharing (Image 1), and the operational systems of these consoles tend to seek an integration with platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitch. Material changes, therefore, in the physical structure of consoles and in how their operational systems and interface works points towards the

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naturalization of the phenomena of mediatization when we consider its presence on game design.

Image 1 - Buttons of content sharing on consoles

There is always a negotiation between what the authors call the logic of media to other institutional logics of culture and society. It isn't only about admitting a superposition or colonization of institutional logics by the media but understanding that the formation of new media environments produce affectation as much in media and in the other fields. An interesting example is documented by Turtiainen *et al.* (2018), who evidences the "sportification" on e-Sports, as defended by Falcão and Marques (2018), in a way to approximate them from the logic of traditional sports. The authors (TURTIAINEN *et al.*, 2018) create an analysis on the coverage of Overwatch World Cup 2016, comparing it to FIFA World Cup 2014, exposing similarities and differences in the way both phenomena approach practices related to media.

On one hand, the *modus operandi* of sport events – *sportification* – appears in the effort of Blizzard Entertainment to approximate Overwatch

World Cup's format to championships and sports competitions tradition-
ally recognized as such, in order to facilitate the practices of reception
and circulation of the audiences involved (BRAGA, 2012). That is mate-
rially verified on the championship structure, in the formation of teams,
uniforms, division by countries, phases, methods of classification, etc. It
also makes us feel the logic of media – mediatization–, as there is a wide
effort in approximating the transmission of Overwatch World Cup from
other mediatic products in the field of sports. The format of studio, the
enunciation of hosts and commentators, the graphic-visual interfaces of
presentation of moves and scores, etc. This format of broadcast is also a
result of the hybridization of logics of media with logics of sports.

The path through the theories of mediatization help us understand
that it isn't about a techno deterministic phenomenon: understanding
the mediatization presupposes observing its institutionalities (HJAR-
VARD, 2014), its semiotic character (VERÓN, 2014), the daily social
practices (HEPP, 2013), and the hybridization between society and
technique (COULDRY; HEPP, 2016). This polysemic view helps us
understand the social – as well as communicative – phenomena in a
contextualized manner, observing the configuration of mediatic envi-
ronments and mediatized worlds in its materiality.

Mediatization and game and play experience

Stig Hjarvard, in The mediatization of culture and society (2013),
spends one chapter talking about the discussion on how play[5] was medi-
atized, both directly and indirectly, which implies in the notion that the
act of playing was transposed to a horizon where there is no conditions
of doing it away from the media. What is interesting to us is to make a
criticism on how the author suggests the videogame is experienced in a
hegemonical level, to the point of its consumption be compared to the
practice of play per se. We reflect on Hjarvard's argument through two

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5   Play, in the original, which is a word without a simple translation, having more meanings than
     the Portuguese language can condensate. See Juul (2005) and Falcão (2010), regarding the
     "problem of language".

positions that are certainly imperative to the reduction undertaken on playful activities.

The first is about a dimension of representation and is related to the way how, nowadays, products for children are always related to the sphere of mass media. We can observe this phenomenon, even, amongst products commonly addressed under the name of *geek*, designed for an audience that Hjarvard considers *adult*, even though they *remain young for longer* – ASYL[6] □ and outlines, for example, that "toys nowadays hardly resemble objects from the real world" (2013, p. 167) and "belong in a fantasy world" (p. 168), in a movement that ignores both the historical construction of game practices, in its wider aspect, and recent discussions around the materiality of it. It is necessary to consider that the relationship between play and fictional attributes is not particularly new, or even, a product of the process of mediatization: it subsist on mimicry, representations and dialogues with contemporary audiovisual franchises, but we cannot forget that we always were, in our plays, pirates, astronauts, knights.

The second position is about a reading that identifies, in Hjarvard (2013) reasoning, what Bruno Latour (2012) classifies as purifying thought. Despite the given argument is expressed in a factual form, as a reading of a specific social context, it is sensitive a clear urgency in categorizing the relationship between work and leisure on the author's argument. It is not fortuitous, for instance, that he discusses his analysis of the process of mediatization of play through an idea of expectation associated to the specific age group listed. Being aware of these positions is essential so one can rethink the place of the game as an object of communication. The issue here says less about the formation of outlines to a field that is relevant to games, and more about the need of recognizing that one of the big accomplishments of late capitalism (JAMESON, 1991) was to rearrange boarders and perceptions regarding what we perceive, today, as dichotomies of modernity. Thinking this way implies recognizing that the speed and immediacy which we experience

6   Acronym for Adults staying Young longer.

contemporaneity is a direct consequence of the form how the dynamics of capital spread through all spheres of social life.

Thus, the urgency in noticing how the game becomes an imperative object for epistemologies compromised with the interpretation of social lies in the simple fact that this dominion, previously *free*, in the sense it was not mandatory; *separate*, as it is circumscribed to a limited time and space; *uncertain*, because its course cannot be determined and *unproductive*, because it doesn't create goods or wealth, today is presented as one of the many contexts colonized by the capitalist reasoning. Hjarvard (2013)'s argument, when he performs the same purification found in authors of early 20th century, underlines the market aspect imbued in the game experience when simplifying its relation and the form how this is a powerful agency vector in today's society.

Hearthstone, for example, at the same time it makes use of characters and stories weaved through decades by different products of the *Warcraft* franchise (Blizzard Entertainment, 1994-2018), it is projected as a product of continuous use and frequently updatable. This type of mechanic seeks to transform the game's experience not in a moment of consumption, but in a longitudinal experience in which the player is, somehow, always dialoguing with the product. Blizzard has a series of strategies that give way to this behavior, enabling the production and circulation of the game through a relationship created along with the community. This behavior is prescribed by the company, in other words, it integrates their program of action (LATOUR, 2012). Furthermore, it uses the materialities produced by the spreading of the phenomenon of mediatization, as we've previously discussed. The relationship that particularly interests us in this study, however, is one with a more direct order: the relation established between the player and the game in a more systematic way, not contemplating the paratextual possibilities, narratives embedded in the product, but which belongs, too, to this movement of commercial mediatization.

We take back our hypothesis, however, that the *power creep* experienced in a game such as *Hearthstone* is a direct consequence of the serialization imposed by late capitalism dynamics, and that the most

adequate form of understanding this phenomenon and its repercussions is to notice how, in this relationship between game and player, is performed a dynamic that is easily recognized as mediatization.

Interlude: on serialization

Hearthstone, as discussed in Falcão and Marques (2017), is a card game published and continuously updated by Blizzard Entertainment since 2012, which offers the player a collection of hundreds of cards that can be acquired through forms ruled by solid economic relations between game time and *pay to play* dynamics, to, later, organize 30 of them into a deck, and, then, be able to compete with other players. It is a competitive game (*agôn*), whose objective is victory through a series of strategic movements, but it has different elements of randomness (*alea*) into its gameplay, which level the decisions, strategies and philosophies of the game itself.

Each expansion of *Hearthstone* transforms the game just *a little bit*. Enough so that the change can be felt, but not so as one can say it's another game. This logic on *game design* creates a very strong connection between *Hearthstone* and other dominions of the cultural industry. The game does not only dialogue with Blizzard franchises, but it connects to a whole cultural spectrum, establishing a rich dialogue with game culture, with mass culture and with their own history. When it appropriates of the fictional world of *Warcraft*, discussed by Falcão (2014) and Aarseth (2009), among others, *Hearthstone* gains a rich universe that, little by little, is being worked on through different nuances which (1) paratextualize the game experience and, finally, (2) offer a narrative support to what could be only a simple game of cards.

By being subscribed into a serialization dynamic, *Hearthstone* publishes, every three months, new cards, which, at times, make other cards obsolete about the competitive participation of the player in the context of the game. It is important to consider that the competitive dimension is strongly prescribed by the phenomenon of mediatization of *Hearthstone*, *streamers*, *youtubers* and other *digital influencers* of the game are,

commonly, *pro players*. This dimension would be interesting on its own if discussed only from the design perspective; and when you add a layer of political problematization – here discussed through how the game is consumed, it becomes a legitimate and imperative issue to the understanding not only of the relationship between game and player, but a social nuance that involves legitimate power relationships that are deployed through decisions that affect the status of the game, and, thus, agency behaviors around it. From now on, we will discuss this dimension in a more systematized manner.

Methodological procedures

This study, thus, in addition to establishing an epistemological discussion about current practices of contemporary game, it is based on an explorative theoretical-methodological bias. Our observation was performed through a descriptive analysis of content which take as a cut-out videos published on YouTube that have the terms *"power creep"* and *"Hearthstone"* as keywords. Although an initial search revealed a larger amount of videos, we chose to analyze only those with, at least, 40,000 views and recorded in English, which offer, in our opinion, a bigger consistency to the sample, once it concentrates in a content with bigger relevance to the users. It is possible to view the complete list of videos on Board 1.

Board 1 – Analyzed videos

TITLE	VIEWS	USER	PROFILE	DURATION	DATA
Power Creep in Hearthstone - What It Teaches Us About Games - Extra Credits	643.448	Extra Credits	Informative channel with content about games, history, sci-fi and mythology.	07:08	Set/15
[Hearthstone] Ben Brode & Kripp On Bad Cards	624.337	Kripparrian	Streamer and commenter of HS. And, currently, one of the most popular in HS on Twitch.	30:46	Jun/15
[Hearthstone] How I'd Improve HS	319.814	Kripparrian	Streamer and commenter of HS. And, currently, one of the most popular in HS on Twitch.	21:12	Dez/15
[Hearthstone] Power Creep & Buffing Bad Cards	255.012	Kripparrian	Streamer and commenter of HS. And, currently, one of the most popular in HS on Twitch.	14:22	Ago/15
[Hearthstone] Doing Your Best With Trash	230.379	Kripparrian	Streamer and commenter of HS. And, currently, one of the most popular in HS on Twitch.	17:27	Jan/17
Designer Insights with Ben Brode: The Dark Side of Releasing New Content	195.986	Hearthstone	Blizzard's oficial profile with content on HS.	6:53	Set/15
Hearthstone: Trump Talks - Card Design, Power Creep & The Grand Tournament	159.275	Trump	Professional player and streamer of HS.	13:03	Ago/15
POWER CREEPIN' MY HEARTHSTONE	76.564	Noxious	Former HS professional player. Currently Works with MTG Arena.	17:30	Ago/15
Thoughts on Power Creep in Hearthstone	41.064	Noxious	Former HS professional player. Currently Works with MTG Arena.	26:08	Nov/14

Source: Author's study

The analysis didn't begin through already established categories. On the contrary, our analytical objective lies on the observation of which positions these video producers – in their majority, professional gamers and analysts of *Hearthstone* – take on regarding the *power creep* phenomenon, In other words, which general meanings these subjects attribute to the phenomenon? How does this production of meaning help us problematize aspects of the politics of production, circulation and negotiation of virtual goods on *Hearthstone*? And, beyond that, how does these speeches help us locate the agency of late capitalism through game serialization and mediatization.

We believe the analysis of the content offers an important understanding on how the power creep phenomenon is perceived by the community of users, which help us problematize their role on content politics and Blizzard's political-economic strategies. In this sense, we believe that this work expands and complements the research effort previously performed (FALCÃO; MARQUES, 2017), because it clarifies another dimension of circulation of virtual goods in *Hearthstone*. As well as in the previous work, we understand *Hearthstone* and virtual goods coming from this device as network-objects (LATOUR, 2012), whose agency and mediation is felt beyond its immediate materiality, even though it is inseparable from it.

Power creep in Hearthstone

The phenomenon of *power creep* is not exclusive to *Hearthstone*. It's about a process that tends to affect every digital game that go through cycles of updates and expansion. The process, however, becomes more critical in games that have focus on a *multiplayer* competition, since the power difference only begins to be felt regarding the performance of other players. In the case of *Hearthstone*, it is possible to see the occurrence of *power creep* when the release of new cards makes players give up old decks and cards with the goal of remaining competitive. A clear example of power creep can be seen on Image 2.

Image 2 - Example of power creep in *Hearthstone*

Source: Adapted from Blizzard Entertainment

Both cards have the same basic attributes: five attack points and four life points, in addition to the taunt skill. However, it is possible to perceive that the first one – *Evil Heckler* (EH) – requires one mana cristal less than *Booty Bay Bodyguard* (BBB) to be played. This difference makes EH objectively better than BBB in any possible scenario of the game, since it needs less resources to be activated. In case the player has both carts and wants to fit any of them in their deck, EH is the obvious choice. The crucial difference is in the following aspect: while BBB composes a collection of basic cards of the game, which players can have access to without mobilizing financial resources, EH integrates a paid expansion (*The Grand Tournament*, released in 2015). Either with money or with monetary resources within the game7, the acquisition of

7   The process of obtention, circulation and negotiation of virtual goods in Hearthstone was widely discussed in Falcão and Marques (2017).

EH will demand time and effort of the players. Although none of the cards discussed above are used in a competitive scenario, the example helps us understand the phenomenon and illustrate some issues. The monetary barrier is one of them, as Noxious (ex-pro gamer, analyst and commentator of *Hearthstone)* points out:

> An argument that is brought up very frequently when I read people defend the power creep that happen over basic cards (…) People are like: "Booty Bay Bodyguard is a free card, Evil Heckler is not a free card so it's fine if it's a bit better than the free card because than you realize that free cards are not the best". Well that has nothing to do with the game balance itself! (NOXIOUS, 2015)

> On the receiving end of the design, they basically throw cards that obsolete older cards. They have it thrown in my face, especially when there is a monetary barrier between BBB and the 5/4 with taunt. (NOXIOUS, 2015)

The relationship pointed out by Noxious between free and paid cards is established, as we've said, through the system of expansions. This system corroborates so that the game environment is in constant update, with new decks and competitive strategies coming and going. Here is the first clue to view the phenomena of mediatization and, consequently, serialization in *Hearthstone*. The monetary barrier described by Noxious is surrounded by a media shell produced by Blizzard in a way of darkening the processes of monetization involved in the acquisition of new cards. In addition, it isn't about, as Noxious points out, issues of balancing the game, but rather the philosophy that rules the modulation of *Hearthstone*'s environment.

The mechanic of expansions contributes to a device, a network that mobilizes Blizzard, the team of *Hearthstone* and the community of players in different practices. An effort of communication and narrativization – term coined by Hjarvard (2013) – is performed so that new expansions are desired: releasing promotional videos on YouTube, partnership with popular players to reveal new cards, releasing new comics and short stories that contextualize the narrative universe of the next expansion, etc.

There is a strong link of what is recognized as media logics and the expansion system. This effort is recognized by *streamers* as Kripparrian:

> Blizzard is actually doing a really good job pushing up content. This expansion has 132 cards and well, at regular expansion time (…) What is that like, an average of like 3 or 4 cards a day? They are popping up pretty big time. (KRIPPARRIAN, 2015a)

Kripparrian explores this argument when he proposes a way out for the problem of *power creep*: updating old cards, increasing their power (buff). According to him, players would be mainly interested in the introduction of new cards, which, in turn, produce new types of deck and game strategies: either by new cards or old cards that were redesigned and/or improved. Following his argument, this result would be easier to reach through the increment of power in old cards that may have fallen into oblivion. While doing so, argues Kripparrian, Blizzard would propel the dynamic of the game, since the realization of quality increase (*buffs*) or decrease (*nerfs*) in the power level of certain cards would help produce this "chaotic" and "creative" environment which Kripparrian is referring to.

This position seems interesting to us, because it dislocates the attention of players from a narrative connection with the universe of the game – and, consequently, the strategies of serialization of the fictional content – for the sensation of novelty, having redesign cards on display at the moment of building the decks. An argument in favor of buff in cards with low level of power, therefore, disregards narrative aspects mobilized by new expansions:

> (…) I think that most players who play Hearthstone in the long end don't really care if the expansion introduces new cards like Ragnaros or Nefarian, they only care if new cards are being introduced (…) I think that would be very easy to do by just changing bad cards. (KRIPPARRIAN, 2015b)

In response to this argument, Ben Brode – former CEO of *Hearth-stone* – problematizes the idea that improving an old card would be easier and/or simpler than producing a new one. Ben Brode's argument implies that if there's a new interesting design feature for the ecosystem of *Hearthstone* – mechanical, skills, gameplays, etc. –, Blizzard prefers to introduce this element as a new content. New cards that integrate new expansions, therefore, make the environment and ecosystem of the game consistently grow. In other words, to Ben Brode, it would be more interesting to expand the total amount of content available for players instead of reorganizing old content.

This dispute between Blizzard and Kripparrian helps us understand a few issues. It seems to us that both Blizzard and the player community have interest in maintaining *Hearthstone* a flexible, creative and organic environment, in which game strategies are always being developed and being modified throughout the time. However, while Blizzard defends this process through the constant release of new content, Kripparrian and other interlocutors (such as Noxious and Trump) suggest that changes in old cards would produce similar effects, in addition to creating a smaller economic deterioration on behalf of players.

It is clear that the implementation of *buffs* and *nerfs* does not corroborate with Blizzard's economic strategy: capitalize through serialization. At every new expansion released, there is a big investment on promotion and commercialization of promotional packs, through which players can have access to exclusive content, a bigger amount of new cards, cosmetic items, etc. Nonetheless, we perceive processes of naturalization of *power creep* by Blizzard: we can observe the phenomenon as materialized in the game design philosophy of the company. Thinking this way implies conceiving that there is an agency relation with great strength, considering how important Blizzard is as an actor in this sociotechnical network.

In this sense, it is clear that Blizzard blurs its marketing interest, involving it in a discourse geared towards the technical aspects of game design and the idealized well-being of the game community. At times,

Ben Brode's arguments verse about material aspects of the object (balancing, narrative content, new mechanics, etc.), at times it verses about the player's perceptions and their satisfaction with the state of things on *Hearthstone*. On the other hand, we never see Ben Brode mentioning the impacts that new cards and expansions produce in the scenario of the game, establishing, thus, a system of demand for more competitive cards. Kripparrian clarifies this point:

> There are some things that really prevents new players from playing Hearthstone and one of those things is the amount of money and the amount of commitment you really need to get to an acceptable level to play somewhat of a fair game of Hearthstone. This is something that Blizzard constantly overlooks with every single expansion. With much more cards to get, with the cards being hard to access in different types of card packs (…) With every single expansion every single player that plays Hearthstone will have a harder time catching up, a harder time meeting an adequate level of fair play. It really sucks for them. (KRIPPARRIAN, 2015c)

Beyond thinking of power creep as a phenomenon related to the balancing dynamic of the game, we need to politized it, problematizing it through the economic strategies of the developers. This point is absent on Ben Brode's discourse, the design defines power creep through a purely mechanical perspective:

> Power creep means when we either make a card that is better than old cards, it is just more powerful, or we make a card that kinda increases the overall power level of the game and make old cards better. For example, when we released Grim Patron, all of the sudden Warsaw Commander and Battle Rage, underplayed cards before (…) became more powerful (HEARTHSTONE, 2015)

Ben Brode doesn't mention that the release of more powerful cards doesn't only produce an effect of increasing the power in the game, but also mobilizes the creation of new decks with high performance and competitivity. As it becomes clear in the *Extra Credits* video, the release of new cards forces competitive players to buy new expansion packs.

To Ben Brode, it is fundamental that more powerful cards are released throughout time, otherwise Blizzard's commitment of keeping the game always exciting, doesn't occur.

Noxious positions his discomfort with Blizzard's posture, treating the problem purely as a balancing on game design. According to his line of thought, in a digital game, there wouldn't be any difficulty in altering an old card, contrary to analogic card games. The release of EH (paid card), for instance, makes BBB (free card) indefinitely obsolete. Certainly, Blizzard's decisions on the release of new content are not taken only from a balancing perspective. As the own Noxious points out, the phenomenon derives from an intentional instruction on game design:

> (…) a creeping increase in power level in content related to older content. (…) As new content is released, older content becomes obsolete. This can be design for or against. Or sometimes it's an unintentional result of game design, somebody tries to make a piece of content that is supposed to be so awesome, but it renders everything else obsolete (…). (NOXIOUS, 2015)

The multiple voices put in perspective different layers of power creep. It is evident that Blizzard mobilizes a powerful media apparatus for the naturalization of serialization in its logic of expansions, at times narrativizing the problematic, on other times, treating as issues of balancing. The fluctuation of the *metagame*, however, helps us locate the *power creep* in a material dimension, inscribed in the game's game design, but it's something that politicizes Blizzard's philosophy and the own idea of serialization. The gamers and comentator's discourse, in turn, reveals clues that escape the hegemonic argument postulated by Blizzard, in a species of resistance to the corporation marketing practices. The revelation of agencies and materialities that produce the power creep, therefore, is fundamental for the politicization of the practice.

Final Considerations

Researches on the relation between consumption, virtual goods, highly competitive game environments (e-Sports) and late capitalism already

begin to arise internationally (GIDDINGS; HARVEY, 2018). Even though they are still scarce in Brasil, it is possible to locate other studies that go through this discussion. However, many still occupy themselves in treating the phenomenon through a bias of symbolic consumption (MACEDO; VIEIRA, 2018), highlighting, thus, the role that virtual goods fill in the construction of meanings through the coupling gamer-game, or offering an initial taxonomy for treatment of virtual goods in competitive games (MACEDO; VIEIRA, 2018). However, we believe that still there isn't a general preoccupation in politicizing the machinations that, first of all, give origin to the so-called virtual goods. In this sense, the mapping developed before (FALCÃO; MARQUES, 2017) was fundamental to reveal the traces that gave origin to this article.

We believe, therefore, that this research presents some general contributions for game studies, as well as for studies in mediatization and consumption. First of all, we sought to politicize the cultural industry of entertainment nowadays, locating the action of agency structures of late capitalism. The competitive and professional scenario of videogames is in its infancy, as well as the political-economical strategies that underlie this market. This fact makes urgent the localization of the structures of agencies and material-discursive devices (BARAD, 2007) which enable the action of late capitalism. It is certain that the phenomena of mediatization and serialization gain new outlines in the field of videogames, being the new power creep one of their conformations. It is also necessary to illuminate and politicize other practices, such as systems of microtransactions, loot boxes, payment through streaming, etc.

Finally, it is important to point out that the present research corroborates not only with the issue of videogame consumption but comes from a bottom-up perspective that produces issues on the ontological and epistemological status of what we consider a game. The conformation of this network of consumption, appropriation and technique in games puts in cause (a) what is perceived as game/non-game and (b) how we have access to these phenomena. Unfoldings and effects of this network are felt with more and more intensity, either on mass dismissal

of workers, in boycotts performed by professionals to championships and social movements in favor of the unionization in the industry. These clues point towards the urgency of the politization and problematization of the issue.

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