

Paying to win: culture, agency and virtual goods in video games

Volume 36
issue 2 / 2017

Contracampo e-ISSN 2238-2577
Niterói (RJ), 36 (1)
aug/2017-nov/2017

Contracampo – Brazilian Journal of Communication is a quarterly publication of the Graduate Programme in Communication Studies (PPGCOM) at Fluminense Federal University (UFF). It aims to contribute to critical reflection within the field of Media Studies, being a space for dissemination of research and scientific thought.

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TO REFERENCE THIS ARTICLE, PLEASE USE THE FOLLOWING CITATION:

Falcão, T.; Marques, D. Paying To Win: Culture, Agency and Virtual Goods in Video Games Contracampo – Brazilian Journal of Communication, 36 (2), XX-XX.

Submitted on: 28th May 2017 / Accepted on: 16th July 2017

DOI – <http://dx.doi.org/10.22409/contracampo.v36i2.1032>

Abstract

This article focuses its argument on an understanding of the consumption process in contemporary culture through the notion of pastiche by Fredric Jameson. The aim is to question how the dynamics of industrial production of symbolic goods were responsible for creating products whose purpose do not relate to the idea of presenting an identity, but follows a strategy of creation of replicas of an entire pre-established symbolic context. That said, we sought to discuss how societal networks in the videogame Hearthstone are the result of this necessarily contemporary cultural condition that gives rise to design principles that not only enable in-game action but that ensue complex virtual goods acquisition and trade processes.

Keywords

Games; Consumption; Virtual Goods; Hearthstone

Introduction

The last two decades witnessed a crucial transformation in contemporary social experience: from politics to leisure, digital culture has become one of the most relevant phenomena in recent history. This context, which conceives a process of interdependence between the individual and technique in its root, is certainly very relevant in the relationship between the dynamics of consumption and the mediatic compound in contemporary culture. "There is no reason today to exclude the media from consumption studies.," as Jansson stated (2002, p. 6) over a decade ago, "Nor is there any self-evident reason to treat media consumption as a separate case". In this way, it is crucial to recognize, describe and analyze the overlapping processes between technical devices of communication - as well as their own logic of operation - in the consumption networks of the various cultural media products.

Therefore this article undertakes an investigation to address this scenario. We take as a starting point the discussion about the notion of pastiche (Jameson, 1991), fundamental for understanding the flows of consumption in media culture. Hence an effort is made in order to characterize the context in which the object of analysis of this text arises: the emergence of the fictional world of Warcraft, its possibilities of consumption and the idea of the composition of the thick text from multiple intertextualities.

Taking this universe as a background, this article advances in the description and analysis of its empirical object: the consumer network that emerges from the Hearthstone card game (Blizzard Entertainment, 2012). This effort follows the Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005) as methodological inspiration, in the sense that it describes the relations of agency and action among the elements that make up the network itself. From this mapping, the text addresses the characterization of game modes as consumer environments, having the analysis of some possible flows revealed in the observation of the network and its actors as its main focus. This way this article contributes to the understanding of the consumption strategies and circulation of virtual goods in the context of digital games, paying attention to the particularities that they mobilize.

1. One Face of the Prism: Pastiche as Consumption

The central issue of this text is positioned on the understanding that in a certain way studies in media and consumption converge: even though in a previous moment of history the phenomenon of consumption was centered on the dynamics

of accumulating material goods, we have witnessed a transition that places the accumulation of goods in increasingly informational forms. From songs to software, to movies and TV series, every day society is less focused on the fetish of possession in order to access services that free us from material build-up.

Jameson (1991) was one of the first thinkers to point out that the trajectory of humanity in the 20th century was marked by quintessential transitions. In his treatise on postmodernism, the Marxist critic firmly believes that the sociocultural scene of the past eighty years is increasingly structured as a response to the emergence of a cultural production mode. This proposition implies an acceptance of the process of production of symbolic goods as a result of a series of production lines, in which the very notion of authorship is relegated to the idea of pastiche - a parody without grace, imbued with a sense of nostalgia - due to an mitigation of the notion of individuality (Jameson, 1998).

One of Jameson's main arguments (1991) is that postmodernism, a sociocultural phenomenon dating from the second part of the 20th century, is marked by two distinct positions about the context to which it sought to respond. The first (1) refers to a series of "high modernisms", and considers postmodernism as a response to the aesthetic hegemonies found at the beginning of the century. Jameson (1998) argues that we can find as many postmodernisms as modernisms to which they assert themselves in response to, and assumes that this state of discussion does not necessarily facilitate the definition of the phenomenon: "the unity of this new impulse - if it has one - is given not in itself, but in the modernism that it seeks to displace"(1998, p.2).

The second (2) is the erosion of boundaries that were previously important for the various social institutions. In the same way in which an implosion of modern dichotomies is witnessed – and here we align ourselves with French anthropologist Bruno Latour's theories (2005) whom recurrently discusses the narratives of modernity purification – one can perceive a disappearance of the distinction between high culture and mass culture. For Jameson (1998), this academic opening movement refers to the appropriation by the cultural industry not only of classical texts, but also of a pulp aesthetic, the output of sci-fi and horror paperbacks, and neon billboards and displays. "These works do not 'quote' these 'texts' (...); They incorporate them to the point where the line between high art and commercial forms seems increasingly difficult to draw" (Jameson, 1998, p.2).

Within the discussion on the relationship between postmodernism and consumption, the notion of pastiche (Jameson, 1998) mentioned above must be emphasized. One of the central criticisms to Jameson's argument lies in the fact that, for him, the paramount relation of authorship has disappeared from the media

spectrum. Instead of great authors – and here we seek an understanding of the notion of author that crosses the media as a whole – that can be recognized by specific stylistic marks, postmodernism offers a context in which the figure of the author loses importance, pointing out a hegemony of models, not style. Thus, a relation is established with the idea that we experience the 'death of the subject' (Barthes, 1968), which must be understood in this case from the fact that 'modernist aesthetics is in some way linked to the concept of a single subject, (...) a unique personality and individuality' (Jameson, 1998, p.6), and that in the age of corporate capitalism the "old bourgeois individual subject no longer exists" (Jameson, 1998, p.6).

The pastiche then appears within this context in which an attenuation of the relations of authorship remains at the expense of imitation. Jameson (1998) explains that pastiche - like parody - presupposes imitation; However, while the parody has a humorous sense, which somehow ridicules the original, capitalizing on its idiosyncrasy, the pastiche consists basically of "wearing the stylistic mask ... without the ulterior motive of parody, without the satirical impulse" (P.6). The proliferation of form thus becomes an ignorant exercise of replication, of form for form's sake.

André Jansson (2002) very effectively problematized this question, assuming that studies about media culture and the dynamics of contemporary consumption occupy two distinct areas when they should not: we should better discuss the movement of creation and composition of an image culture than the separation of contexts so closely related as media and consumption. The question that lies in this understanding is inherited from Jameson's (1991) thought, and is based on a relevant foundation: the industrial production of goods increasingly reinforces needs that are symbolic, rather than functional, utilitarian. These needs are strongly associated with the notion of pastiche and a disappearance of the modernist subject and author - and, above all, the idea that form is replicated only as symbolic rhetoric, as a strategy of identification. Considering the relationship between the media and children's entertainment industries, Hjarvard (2013) offers a historical reading that is particularly relevant: in his treatise on the notion of mediatization - a phenomenon through which, roughly speaking, symbolic and cultural goods overlap with socio-technical infrastructures in order to transform them, starting to compose them - the Danish thinker elaborates a careful analysis of the media context about children's leisure. For Hjarvard (2013), only since the 1980s, and because of the lack of regulation for children's programs in the United States, playful childhood activities have become embedded in the fictional media worlds.

Naturally we do not need to disregard the existence of narratives in jokes or in the infantile imaginary, but to recognize that a scenario in which jokes consisted of emulating adult behaviors has been replaced by televised fictional worlds. For Hjarvard (2013) the point is that we understand that these media products did not give rise to toys that replaced trucks and trolleys, but rather the opposite: animations functioned as products that had as purpose the characteristic persuasion of advertising speech.

At the same time, the 1980s introduced fictional graphic worlds to electronic games. However, videogames were a success before that: as early as the 1970s, these artifacts hit record sales (Soares, 2016) and became nationally famous in the US. At this particular moment, the hardware condition on videogame consoles was not ideal for high-fidelity illustration, and the first games that told complex stories beyond a simple argument like "drive your car to the finish line" contained pixel graphics that eventually became a time stamp, in further allusion to Jameson's (1998) notion of nostalgia. The crucial fact to us concerns the games that, even at such an early stage in its history, already showed evidence that its construction allowed a multimedia experience. The main way in which this manifested itself in the titles of the late 1980s and early 1990s was through complex histories (Aarsson, 1997), inspired from countless subcultural contexts (Soares, 2016) of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, that would support the narrative experience of electronic games as we know it today.

2. Playful Fiction Worlds, Warcraft and Hearthstone

In order to get to Hearthstone - the object of analysis of this article - we need to make a brief digression on the history of the franchise administered by Blizzard. The path that brings us to the card game experience runs through World of Warcraft (Wow) (Blizzard Entertainment 2004-), an MMORPG¹ whose fictional world dates back to the early 1990s. In 1994 Blizzard inaugurated the franchise (Figure 1) by launching the game Warcraft: Orcs and Humans. Warcraft I, as it is known, employed a very important gameplay genre during the 1990s, the real-time strategy (RTS)².

¹ "An MMORPG is, roughly speaking, a game that simulates a world, aggregating a multitude of goals and activities. Users are encouraged not only to play, but to live with(in) the environment, a practice with which, in fact, they engage" (Falcão, 2014).

² In RTS games, the player controls creature armies in a simulating environment, and fights other armies controlled either by the computer or by other players.



Figure 1 – Warcraft franchise major games
Source: Blizzard Entertainment

The way the Warcraft franchise is structured is symptomatic of the question raised earlier about consumption and production in postmodernism: game after game, regardless of their distinct gameplay genres, Blizzard continues to bring back themes and performances that have been used in the past, which are referred to in a movement of appeal to nostalgia, both in temporal and stylistic ways, making certain themes that are not necessarily significant to the core experience return. Moreover, we need to recognize that this question points to a phenomenon of homogenized experience of the media, as the notion of pastiche is recognized as the main operator of the production of these goods.

The experience – both narrative and gameplay – that players have earned in three franchise titles – Warcraft: Orcs and Humans (1994), Warcraft II: Tides of Darkness (1995), and Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos (2002) – was reconditioned in a new game, in which the character controls an avatar. In World of Warcraft the experience becomes more personal, since micro constructions of strategy games become "real"³ size constructions, and the player now inhabits these virtual cities (Klastrup, 2003). The story told becomes experienced history, and specific elements of strategy games are commonly evoked with nostalgia: they are not needed in the composition of the game practice, but appear as a reference to other titles.

Tanya Krzywinska (2009), while discussing the argumentative element of the franchise in question, states that a particularly relevant reason why MMORPG players are so intimately involved with such games is the amount of multiple references to the domains of culture they carry with them. They act in the creation of something that she identifies, appropriating Roz Kaveney's notion (2005), as a thick text.

The argument behind the thick text idea is relatively simple: considering that no work is ever finished (Lunenfeld, 2000), and that there is always a series of

³ The proportional relation of size that a *Wow* avatar presents to a building or to a vehicle is very similar to the one we experience in our day to day life.

forces behind a product that are not always visible to the final consumer, the text becomes thick when its intertextuality relations are brought up relevantly: "in other words, a text rich in allusions, correspondences and references" (Krzywinska, 2009, p 123).

This aggregation of references engenders the emergence of a geek aesthetic in which every experienced text is taken, *a priori*, as if it were a thick text: the viewer will always look for connections between that textual aspect with another context, history, character. Of course, any text can be read as thick text as references and intertexts are sought, but for Kaveney (2005) certain texts evoke this kind of behavior about them – they are prepared with this intention.

There remain two ways in which the notion of pastiche (Jameson, 1998) is worked: on one hand, (a) we can identify a link from the moment the game is self-referential. Not only as a continuation of a franchise or textual elaboration based on the fictional chronology, but in evoking texts that do not make sense except as marks of nostalgia, texts that aim at addressing the previous relationship between the other game and the player. In addition to this, (b) pastiche is drawn when certain narrative situations unfold in a similar way to the cultural industry specific narratives. The world of Warcraft has quite literal references to the figure of Indiana Jones and the Lucasfilm franchise, to give just one example (Krzywinska, 2009).

Here underlies the question of geek aesthetics being actively consumed, in the sense that the viewer pursues the content: he or she works to find it. The spirit of a movement such as that of the geek aesthetic, for Kaveney (2005), lies on the hobby, the deliberate consumption not only of one dimension of the media products, but of their context and environments, of the interim in which they transit. This idea is very similar to the propositions about the culture of convergence (Jenkins, 2006), which corroborate the fact that the spirit of culture consumption is not passive and individual, but active, social and flowing. These adjectives imply the search for information and texts attached to the works that consumers appreciate.

Krzywinska (2009) believes that MMORPGs operate according to this arrangement: her proposition, along with Kaveney`s (2005), is useful for us as it addresses the question of intertextuality not as a mere genealogical inheritance but as a structural feature, which gives us ground to believe that thick texts can be seen as agency devices, since the point for both authors is that such a characteristic is responsible for an effect on the subject in contact with a text.

The idea of thick text is quite interesting if observed from the lenses of Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005). Particularly because in this case the text acts to drive action: conditioning its consumption from the structuring of its associations

and boosting its consumption flows. Not only can it be said that the intention, in a case like this, is born in the figure of the human. Instead both the media consumption agencies the text (in its interpretation, in the sense given to it, in the mechanisms of production that obey the procedural logic and are increasingly concerned with the opinions of the public), and, mainly, the text agencies its consumption.

The Actor-Network Theory helps us to better understand the agency of technical devices in the conformation of the networks emerged from it. In accordance with the comprehension of the thick text, in Latour's perspective (2005), it is necessary to observe the social phenomena from the action, from the formation of networks. For Latour (2005), the scrutiny of any phenomenon is based on the identification, description and analysis of the networks that it mobilizes, the actors involved and the action that the phenomenon itself engenders, whether these actors are human agents or not. In this context, actor and network are devices that build and deconstruct dynamically, from the mediation relationships they draw between themselves and with others. The ANT, in this sense, proposes a symmetrical relationship between the agency potential of humans and nonhumans. Although this theoretical apparatus is historically unorthodox within the social sciences, the focus on technical aspects is fundamental to the understanding of actor networks in digital technologies.

It would not be different with the texts. Each pastiche and thick text is configured as a network, because it needs action by others to exist, while at the same time it acts as an actor, since it participates in the formation of several other networks by linking its own actions. The understanding of thick text therefore requires the understanding that the formation of expanded intertextuality presupposes a flow relationship between medium and individual: the individual searches for what the text calls him to do - and this process imbues itself with the industrial logic of cultural production that Jameson's (1991) notion of Late Capitalism implies.

This confluence of works, aesthetics, genres and individuals imbued with interest presents itself as the network which we approach, with which we associate when we come into contact with a device such as the Warcraft franchise. To what extent are references discerned? This is a question for analysis, different from the one that deals only with the articulation of distinct arguments and with a research object full of complexity. The Warcraft franchise displays a body of thick text virtually impossible to map: only in MMORPG there are more than 100,000 lines of text about the game, with references ranging from popular mass culture to philosophy, through literature, art, religion and folklore (Krzywinska, 2009).

In 2014, with the official launch of Hearthstone: Heroes of Warcraft (Figure 2), a new chapter begins in the expansion of this universe. It is a free digital multiplatform⁴ game of collectible cards. Set in the fictional universe of Warcraft, the founding idea of the game assumes the duel between players in one-against-one combats from combinations of cards.



Figure 2 - Hearthstone: Heroes of Warcraft
SOURCE - Blizzard Entertainment -

The gameplay mechanics of Hearthstone (HS) is experienced through cards. The accumulation of a great number and variety of these items allows the construction of competitive decks, an integral part of the player's experience which allows him or her to achieve victory against the challengers (Figure 3). For this, the game design provides to its community several systems and game modes based on obtaining virtual goods that, for the most part, play a fundamental role in improving the performance of players (whether competitive or casual).

In addition, the narratives and aesthetics of the Warcraft universe manifest in different ways: Many cards allude to characters and events of the narrative, while the scenarios in which the battles are staged emulate representative locations of this universe. Many of the Adventures - special mode of play that will be detailed ahead - are directly related to events in World of Warcraft, for example. On the other hand, as Hearthstone becomes a commercial success in itself - with around 50 million registered players in 2016 - new narrative aspects are exploited independently to the world of Warcraft.

⁴ Currently available for Mac and Windows on computers, and iOS, Android and Windows 8 on smartphones and tablets.



Figure 3 – Hearthstone game environment
SOURCE - www.2p.com

In terms of design, it should be considered that Hearthstone was designed with multiple layers of complexity. These, in turn, allow the game to present itself as a fast, fun and accessible hobby for players with a casual profile, while at the same time offering greater depth, strategy and complexity for competitive and / or professional players. This variation in terms of the deepening of the experience is directly related to the mechanisms used to stimulate the consumption flow of the virtual goods offered by the system.

3. Environments and Consumption Flows: The Hearthstone Economy

In Hearthstone virtual goods are fundamental to the mechanics of the game as they enable players to interact optimally in combat. The amount of items that can be obtained / accumulated / purchased is large and highly varied as the system is designed to serve a heterogeneous community of players.

The key to understanding the problem that we want to address lies in the management of the Hearthstone environment: a parallel with a more basic strategy game - chess, for example - can be helpful so that we can understand how the cards and the game behave. Let's look at the pieces with which a player starts a game of chess. The first thing to know is that the Queen is the most important piece in terms of winning the opponent's board - she moves in every direction as many houses as she wants. Although the King constitutes the condition of victory, it

has no relevance in a strategy of attack, consisting of a piece around which to compose the game.

Therefore, it is necessary that we understand that there is an inherent rarity to the pieces: there is only one Queen, while there are eight pawns and two bishops. This is a rarity perspective that is native to the game. In the case of Hearthstone - or card games in general - this rarity is constructed from the availability and price of certain cards. This can be verified if we consider that in a game like Magic: The Gathering (Wizards of the Coast, 1993) different quantities of a card are printed according to their rarity, and how much is invested in packs of cards (booster packs, in jargon), the more chance you have of finding a rare card of higher power level, which would be the most comparable to a queen, for example.

Except that Hearthstone is not printed, and thus it does not have a materiality that justifies relations of supply and demand. In an environment such as an MMORPG, which emulates a social construct, "virtual goods ... gain social status value in the same way that consumer goods do in physical environments" (Lehdonvirta; Ernkvist, 2011); but in a card game, that is to say, a game that has very attenuated social purposes, the question changes figure. An especially powerful card is relevant in matches, especially in a context guided very directly by the spirit of competition, and usually rare: And the rarer, the less possibility of acquiring one of these goods naturally as opening a booster pack.

Thus, it is necessary to describe how the consumption network of virtual goods is structured in Hearthstone (Figure 4). This mapping is productive because it helps reveal symbolic relationships, business strategies, and hidden game appropriation flows in the system, as well as its intertextual relations in the consumption of texts inside and outside the universe of Warcraft.

In the present study, all the elements that to a certain extent involve processes of management and consumption of game goods were listed as points in the network (see Figure 4). This scrutiny allows us to delineate the following general categories: A) Game modes, dedicated to obtaining goods (with green background on the map); B) Goods or Items that work as currency or resources (with red background on the map); C) Goods or Functional items, which directly impact the gameplay (with blue background on the map) and; D) Hybrids, that is, elements of the game that assume several of the roles listed above depending on the environment it occupies and the flow it engenders.

Unlike other card games, Hearthstone takes advantage of its digital statute to establish specific ways of obtaining goods. While the acquisition of cards in Magic: The Gathering, for example, is conditioned exclusively to processes of exchange and / or purchase and sale of such goods, in Hearthstone this is given

exclusively by interaction with the software processes (Manovich, 2013), that is, in their game modes.

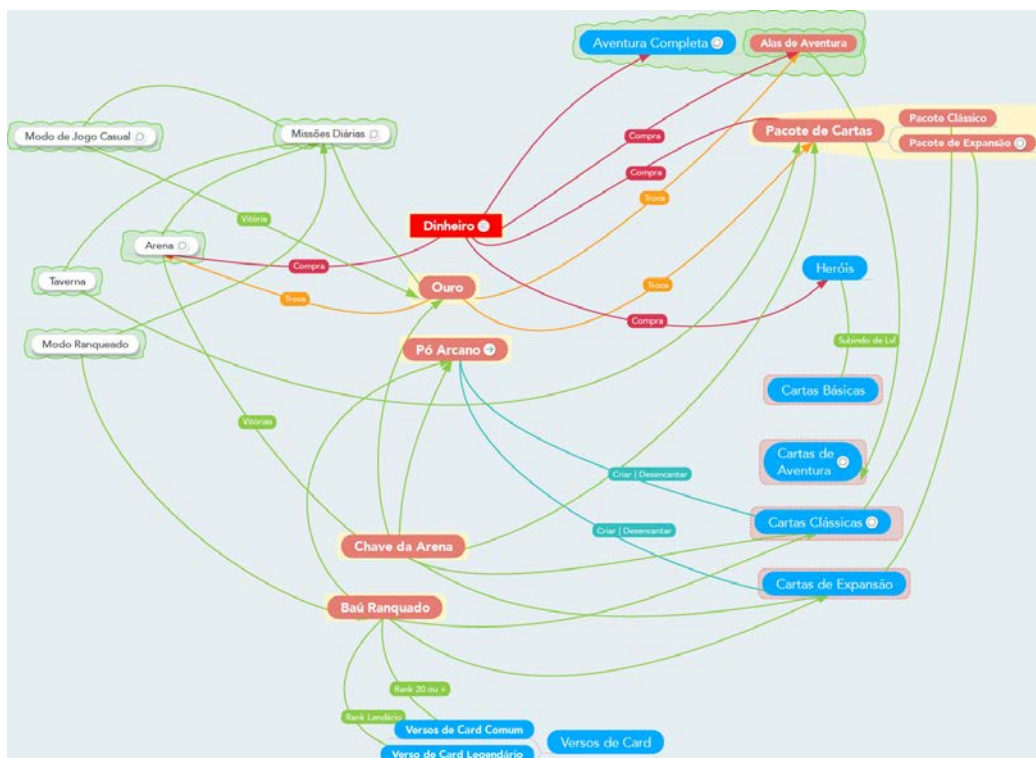


Figure 4 – Hearthstone virtual goods network

The game modes are important elements in the consumption network. These are the ones that effectively compose the playing experience. They are characterized, in our network, as the starting points for obtaining the great majority of goods. In this sense, they end up giving players a continuous and infinite cycle, since players need to acquire the virtual goods so that the game modes become more interesting, thus enabling a performance improvement.

Each of the game modes has specific propensities concerning the ways in which the notion of competition is conceived: if all of them are necessarily agonizing (Callois, 2001), certainly there is a differentiation between what is designed as a casual competitive and what has professional aspirations. However, the conception of game experience obeys dynamics that are well known of all social experience found in the notion of game, especially with regard to the promotion of championships: one can play in an league, but one can play a quick match in between one's activities.

The differentiation in player profiles will directly influence their consumption practices and the addressing of their agencies. Thus, the way players act within the network ends up producing particular environments. This allows us to think of a specific environment that emerges from the consumption flows engendered by

casual players and a different one for competitive players. Taking into account the recent growth of the global and national e-sports scene (Taylor, 2012), as well as the professionalization of players, on this initial study we will focus on the tracking and analysis of brokerage flows that surround competitive and professional consumption in Hearthstone.

3.1. The Circulation of Virtual Goods in Hearthstone: A Matter of Flows

While Game Modes present themselves as the primary mechanics for obtaining, circulating and generating demand for resources, the goods category is precisely about the artifacts that players can accumulate in Hearthstone.

Some of these goods are represented as currency (due to narrative, aesthetic and procedural aspects), others are characterized in order to reinforce the idea of randomness in obtaining new items. This is a form of reward widely used in videogames: the idea of loot.⁵ Most of the bounty mechanics (Figure 5) engendered by Blizzard seems to revolve around the idea of luck: A) the key of the Arena⁶, B) the Chest, performance award in Ranked Play⁷ and; C) Card Packs. All of these are pragmatically redundant to the system, that is, they function only as intermediaries between the mechanics implementation and the obtaining of the resource. The system could easily offer the rewards directly to the player. However, the player receives a Chest in which rewards are stored. As a representational object, the Chest reinforces the idea of mystery, discovery - it's the thick text in action. As a procedural object, the opening of the Chest corroborates this idea since direct interaction with the mechanics of discovery is common to several other games.

The Key of the Arena and the Ranked Chest evoke a medieval fantasy: they are part of the theme from which the game is built. They are an infantile-juvenile trope, as well as the Card Packs, which comes from another strand - dialogue with the inheritance of card games from the random collection of new cards through boosters. In first or second instance, in Hearthstone all game modes offer as reward goods that act as intermediaries to obtain other goods: Gold. Another typical allusion to the theme of medieval fantasy, where in many fictional worlds

⁵ The most appropriate translation is asset; The jargon of videogames, however, uses the word loot to address acquired rewards through enemies defeat.

⁶ Competition mode similar to the bet: the player pays to enter and can win big prizes depending on both his ability and luck, taking into account that here the composition of the deck is made from random choices.

⁷ The Ranked mode features a ladder of 25 decreasing levels in which the player must win stars - from the defeat of a random opponent - to become legendary. At the end of each season, which lasts a whole month, each player receives the prize money for their result. Less than 5% of the approximately 50 million players, according to game interface data, can achieve a high rank (between 5 and 1). Most players are ranked 20 to 10.

the prevailing currency is the precious metal, not a specific one, gold in Hearthstone serves many uses.

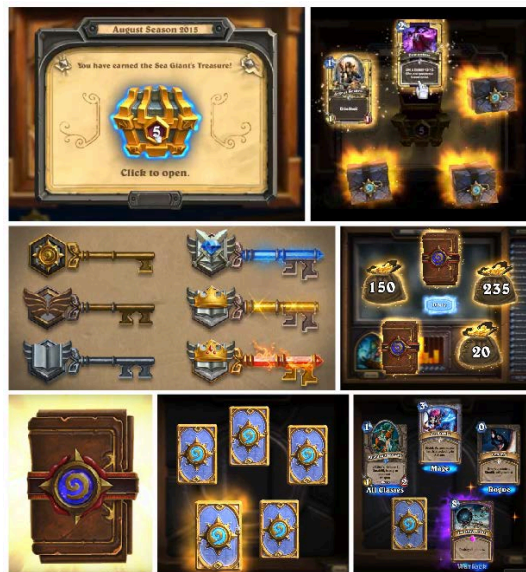


Figure 5 – Main reward strategies

More important than conceiving the uses of Gold in the game is to understand that it can be gained from interacting with the mechanics of the game (Figure 6) without paying. A casual player can spend years without having to use real money as long as he or she invests time in the game. However, the flow is very slow: for every three wins the player receives 10 gold pieces, and any significant activity costs at least 100 pieces. The reward is simple: those who do not have the time or do not want to spend hours on the game can buy their progression.⁸

Instead of offering goods that have a purpose in them (cards, for example) as a reward for game modes, the player is given the possibility to manage their resources from their profile. While professional players will focus their resources on getting specific cards to compose and improve their decks, casual players can focus more on buying card packs or entering new adventures for entertainment purposes.

⁸ This relationship implies a considerable social imbalance in the game audience, and although this subject is not developed in this article, certainly it is drawn as of our interest.

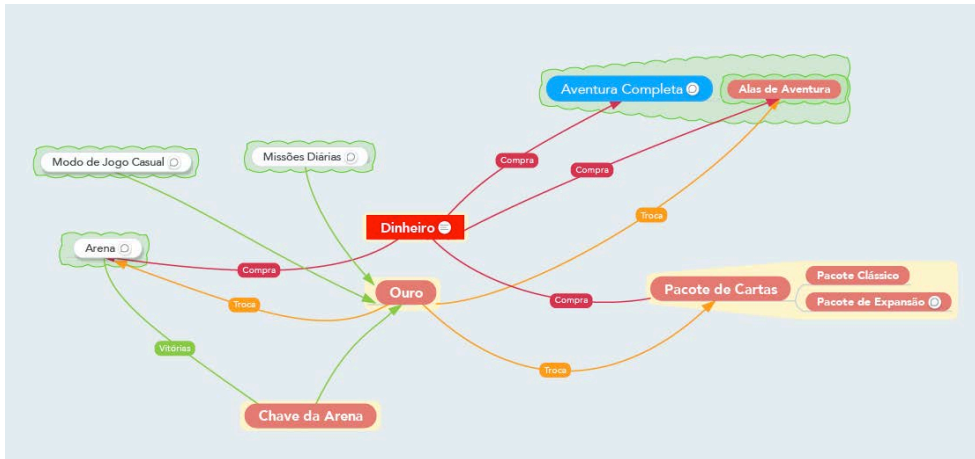


Figure 6 – Gold graph within the network

3.1.1. Flow I - Currency, Resources, Pay-to-play

It is possible for players to have access to a number of facilities from the real money investment (Figure 7). This is done in two main ways: the purchase of tickets to the Arena and the purchase of Cards Packs. Taking into consideration that even in the best possible scenario the return will still be based on luck, in this case assessing the quality of the investment is a complex activity. Only 0.65% of the players manage to obtain a 100% performance in the Arena proving that it is also a risky investment. In this case, money can be set up as a shortcut investment (the investment to enter is low: R\$ 4.50), which makes the Arena attractive thanks to the promise of winning.



Figure 7 – Money relation with other virtual goods

Another flow that allows a productive analysis is the purchase of a Card Pack with money (Figure 8). We can analyze it from two perspectives: 1) the purchase and use of the cards themselves and; 2) the purchase and use of cards as raw material. In the first case the process is very simple, by using Money the player can access the Hearthstone Store and purchase Card Packs. The purchase can be made in several quantities, the higher the volume the better the cost benefit. The player is free to use the cards obtained in any way he or she chooses, whether to compose his or her current decks or to get Arcane Dust by a process named Disenchantment.

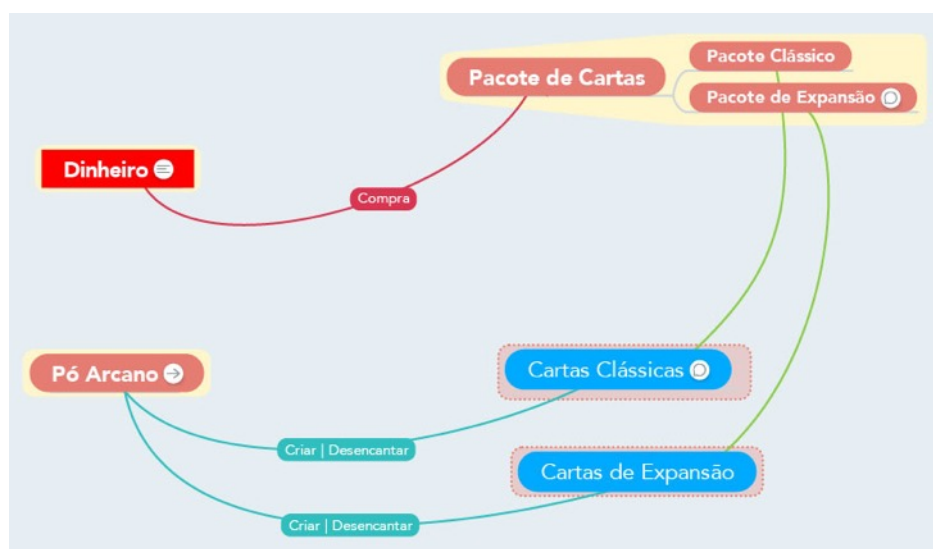


Figure 8 – Card packs buying process using money

The Arcane Dust consists of another type of resource used in Hearthstone. Using it is simple: with an amount of Dust, the player can create a card that he or she doesn't have. This is the only direct way to get specific cards the player needs. If the player wishes to compose a competitive deck with a specific selection of cards, he or she invariably will have to invest in obtaining Arcane Dust. Each card, depending on its rarity, has a different demand for Dust: while creating an ordinary card costs the player only 40 of Dust, creating a legendary card - rarer and stronger - takes 1600. Getting dust is simple: In an allusion to the same mechanics in World of Warcraft, a card can be disenchanting and turned into Dust, but the player usually loses in this process. While a rare card needs 100 of Arcane Dust to build, its disenchantment only generates 20 - a 20% return on investment. In this way, with a very disloyal dynamic, Blizzard conditions the player to play more or spend more - the two activities that can generate resources in the game.

Players, therefore, depend on getting cards through Card Packs, Ranked Chest, and Arena Key. As the quality and quantity of the cards obtained in the Arena and the Ranked Chest depend directly on the performance of each player, it is a higher risk investment. Thereby, the purchase of Card Packs ends up being a safe investment for those who wish to disenchant cards in order to obtain large amounts of Arcane Dust.

Given that it is also possible to use Gold as a virtual currency instead of money, the system ends up making access to goods more flexible for those who are not willing to invest so intensely. However, the processes of obtaining Gold are often time consuming and difficult. It is important to realize, therefore, that by creating barriers for players to obtain fast and efficient resources, the process of emergency supply and demand of virtual goods is part of the game design. Without Gold the player will not be able to enter the competitions in the Arena, nor to try the Adventure Mode. In a broader perspective, the lack of Gold will also lead to less competitive decks, since it is a central element in the process of producing and acquiring new cards. This intentionality in design allows the structuring of a powerful monetization system. It is important for Blizzard that there is a shortage of Gold and obtaining it is a difficult job: Players need to invest money (pay-to-play) to get the in-game resources required for a better performance.

Considering the dynamics of monetization in Hearthstone, the most obvious way in which the notions of thick text and pastiche are manifested is in the garb of resources. Gold and Arcane Dust, respectively, are virtual goods imbued with a symbolic layer that positions them not only as elements of great interest within the analyzed game, but also denotes a relation with the history of videogames and medieval fantasy. Its mechanics are closely linked to the Warcraft franchise itself, allowing the enjoyment of the game not only through an understanding solely based on the notion of competition⁹, but symbolically positioning it in the domain of nostalgia: a Hearthstone player is, first and foremost, a devotee of the World of Warcraft. The symbols and flows triggered during the game - and by the game, it is important to highlight - become motivators of the user's action towards the system, conditioning their experience, making them do, but also among the action of the users themselves.

3.1.2. (Counter) Flow II - Tracing hybrids

A peculiarity in the Hearthstone network is the presence of hybrid elements, that is, components that do not fit only one of the categories previously mentioned.

⁹ Which is certainly the case for some players.

This phenomenon adds a new layer to the analysis of the consumption system in the game as it takes into consideration that the process of resource management requires a high level of understanding - by the players - of the different roles that their items may occupy.

Thanks to the presence of hybrids on the map it becomes easier to identify the consumption flows of casual players in counterpoint with professional players, as well as unveiling the design strategies built to meet the needs of each category. While some elements have a clearer¹⁰ public delineation, it is in the hybrids that we can identify the subtlety and complexity of the functions in relation to the players consumption profiles, both symbolic and utilitarian.

Adventure Mode (Figure 9) is a good example: it can occupy the position of Game Mode as a mere vector for obtaining cards, and also of good in itself - evoking contact dynamics within the narrative. As a game mode, it differs from Hearthstone's basic player-versus-player context by attributing a single player gameplay in which the player will face opponents controlled by the software in different matches. Each adventure has its own narrative, identity and theme, having its stylized cards, conceptual art and music oriented in that direction.

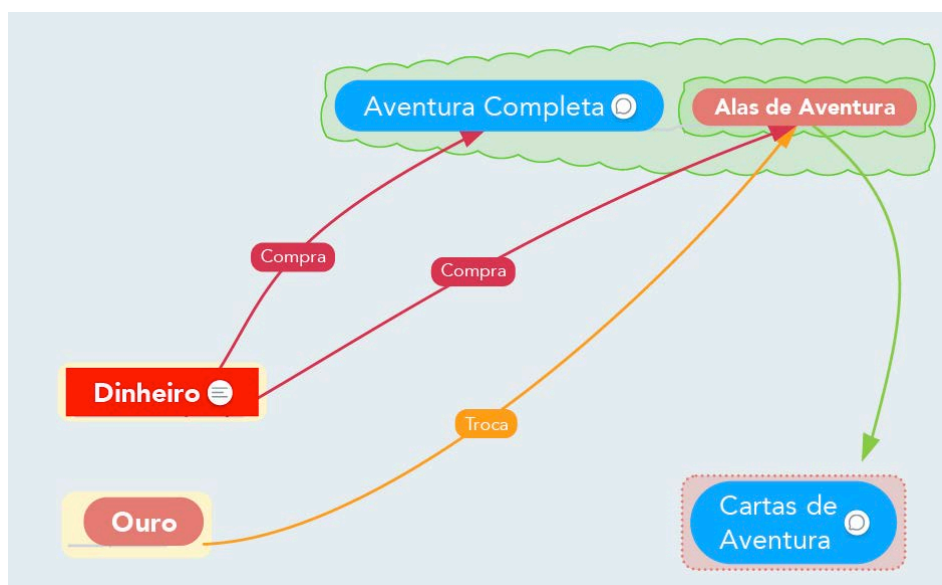


Figure 9 – Adventure mode graph

This narrative positioning allows us to identify points of connection between each item and its counterparts. In this case, however, the connections between games and media elements are much more tangible. In these terms we believe that it is far more reasonable identifying H. P. Lovecraft's bestiary- referenced in an

¹⁰ As previously discussed, we can consider that Ranked Play and Ranked Chest are more targeted to competitive players.

Adventure as Whispers of the Old Gods - than recognizing that the notion of Gold links Hearthstone to the medieval fantasy tradition in some way.

Each adventure is divided into Adventure Wings composed of an average of four matches that can be unlocked by investing money or gold. In each match the player will face a different opponent using a deck specially prepared for the occasion, thus maintaining an intense relationship between the mechanics explored in the adventure and the narrative unfolded.

As Game Mode, Adventure is relevant to Hearthstone's economy in terms of its access and reward policies. In order to gain access, one needs to invest a significant amount of Gold or money - 700 pieces of Gold or \$ 6.99 per ward. On the other hand, it is clear to the players what rewards will be obtained from that investment: the cards. Therefore, Adventure Mode behaves mechanically as a Game Mode, also assuming the role of exchange currency or of good in itself depending on the context.

It is possible to identify Adventure as the currency of exchange when the process of incursion is carried out with the ultimate goal of obtaining cards. This scenario becomes clearer when the process of getting the Adventures happens when money is used. Unlocking a Complete Adventure requires, on average, 3,000 Gold pieces, a difficult task for most players. The need to keep the deck up-to-date end up leading to the need for real money investment in some cases.

This drastically changes when we look at Adventure Mode as a good itself, in a context of association with casual players. Taking the Adventure Wings through the use of Gold as a starting point for flow analysis, the process becomes much slower. The players start to have as objective not only access to new cards, but also appreciation of the new experiences of gameplay and narratives that the Adventures provide. Due to this different investment process - by Gold - we can consider that in the context of the casual players the Adventures are configured as good, considering that the intentionality in the investment is based primarily on the differentiated experience of the game.

A comparative analysis between the two aspects - Adventure Mode as an intermediary and as an end - reveals distinct forms of emergence of the thick text. In the first case, the player is encouraged to invest in this mode thanks to his or her need to obtain specific cards for the composition of game strategies. The action vectors, in this case, extrapolate the limits of the software and come from social networks, YouTube channels, discussion forums on the game, places where the user finds pragmatic information on how to act in order to succeed in Hearthstone ranks.

The enjoyment of Adventure Mode for narrative purposes finds relations of intertextuality both in the composition of the fictional universe of Warcraft as in other texts. The League of Explorers Adventure, for example, maintains meaning relations with Warcraft when using locations of Azeroth, as well as it evokes several references to Indiana Jones and other exploration films. At the same time, it was this Adventure that introduced cards with the "Discover" mechanics, which generates new referencing vectors from the moment these cards are used in other game modes.

Final considerations

From an articulation between discussions about contemporary culture, consumption and videogames, this article has discussed issues about consumption in contemporary culture, considering a still unexplored medium in communication studies. Taking the notion of pastiche as symptomatic of the processes of production of goods in cultural industry as a starting point, we focused on the Hearthstone game trying to reveal how its internal structure - symbolically subscribed to this process - is capable of forming networks of agency that demand consumption processes prescribed both in the design of the software and in its structure of competition.

This reflection is very pertinent because at the same time that it problematizes the effectiveness of creation of pastiche strategies by the industrial logic of cultural production, it also offers a testimony that the field of communication, in its profusion of themes and media, establishes itself as one in which the effort to cross, translate and communicate becomes complex as it delves into the subcultural aspect of the research object.

Perhaps the most valid reflection from this discussion is that we deal with a consumption dynamic that not only appropriates the symbolic aspect in the industrial production of cultural goods, but creates, *ex nihilo*, a system of acquisition of goods that has no materiality, but has both function and form. From the moment that a system like Hearthstone is recognized as an entire network mobilizer, it is necessary to glimpse it in order to understand sociotechnical processes that are important for the discussion about the dynamics of consumption in contemporary culture.

The article certainly has gaps, since it seeks a solely structural analysis of the processes involved in the context discussed: the next steps in terms of research questions should focus on how networks of individuals are articulated around these

processes, mainly analyzing them from their face-to-face and in social networks contact, and contemplating in their sociological discussion, the competitive aspect inherent to these networks.

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