

Volume 39
issue 2 / 2020

Contracampo e-ISSN 2238-2577
Niterói (RJ), 39 (2)
aug/2020-nov/2020

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.

#BOYCOTTBLIZZARD: Platform capitalism and the colonization of play

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TO REFERENCE THIS ARTICLE, PLEASE USE THE FOLLOWING CITATION:

Falcão, T; Marques, D; Mussa, I. (2020). #BOYCOTTBLIZZARD: Platform capitalism and the colonization of play
Contracampo – Brazilian Journal of Communication, Niterói, v. 39, n. 2, aug./nov. 2020.

Submitted on: 11/12/2019 / Accepted on: 03/09/2020

DOI – <http://dx.doi.org/10.22409/contracampo.v39i2.38578>



Abstract

This paper approaches the governance and control mechanisms applied by the video game company Blizzard upon its players and consumers. It's based on the controversy between the company and professional player Blitzchung, who expressed his support for the 2019 Hong Kong protests. This tension, in addition to revealing conflicts between consumers and producers, unveils methods and devices of domination employed by the company against its players. Looking at Blizzard as a platform, we analyze the corporation's tools used to keep its gears in stable motion, leveraging discussions about the platformization of society and the overlap between play and work.

Keywords

eSports; Games; Work; Platform Capitalism.

Introduction

The task of further understanding the symbolic and historic contexts surrounding contemporaneity demands particular epistemological positions. The first one is represented by the necessary carefulness regarding the observation of social activities and agglomerations, even though, historically, this may privilege a rationalist, positivist approach to their understanding. Although it had been naturalized in Social and Human Sciences, this implies a perception that should be averted – that particular given social phenomena could be studied in their pure form. Such premise is based on the epistemic illusion that social realms can be dissected. The second position concerns the construction of a thought which considers these phenomena material and historical conditions, hence contemplating the radical qualities from which their organization stems. Therefore, this paper aims at reflecting about play based on these principles.

This preamble has a simple goal: introducing the dimension of the game as one which not only *could* be understood in relation to social forces of labour, but one that consists of an activity which *should* be addressed in the deepest analysis of contemporary social reality. The consequences brought up by such relations were neglected long enough, restricting it to considerations on deviant (Goffman, 1961), childish¹ (Bateson, 1972 & Hjavard, 2012) behaviors or even regarding them as a contemporary dimension, as youth hedonism in the 1990's (Maffesoli, 2001), however lacking a critique on their configuration as resistance or response to the experience of late capitalism (Jameson, 1991).

Another dimension of concern is the disinterest towards *Game Studies* as expressed by the field of *Media Studies* itself, in the sense of contextualizing the study of the relations between play and work, which is the purpose of this paper. In the last two decades, the field of Game Studies has been noticing the need of politicizing the discussion of the videogame medium. In the work of several theorists, this politicization arises amidst the phenomenon of informatization in the form of concerns regarding (i) the rise of various forms of capital (Malaby, 2006; Consalvo, 2007), (ii) a discussion on the ethical principles of design and usage of these systems (Sicart, 2009) or, moreover, (iii) a discussion on the economical forces of a global capital (Dyer-Whiterford & Peuter, 2009) in the *games* industry, which result in the understanding of *videogames* as artifacts that may enact certain conditions of a control society (Mitchell, 2018).

Thus, one can realize that, in fact, *Game Studies* are increasingly concerned with the representation of the political realm, in its multiple aspects, within the phenomenon of contemporary play. This trend, we must emphasize, is not recent, but it assumes particular relevance in a moment when the very creative process of *games* is subverted by forces that colonize their experience, framing it accordingly to spectacular principles (Macey & Hamari, 2019).

Therefore, this work is less interested in a formal perception of contemporary labor relations than in: (1) the ephemerality and instability through which these relations are actively constructed in controlled environments by corporations (unlike service platforms, for instance); and (2) the corrupted conditions through which play itself is articulated within the media spectrum, not only embracing a modern/romantic perception of the utopian idea of play (largely represented in the thought of the classical authors who address the theme – Caillois (2001) and especially Huizinga (2000) -, but also the elusive notion that, somehow, in face of corporate social control strategies, contemporary play represents a form of resistance when those conditions are particularly weakened in benefit of an spectacle that is both aseptic and disconnected from the political realm. In particular, due to its competitive and spectacular dimension, play presents itself as *scape* – a symbolic truce that sterilizes discourses in favor of the homogenization of competition for the sake of competition itself.

In this sense, the emergence of a platform society as a defining paradigm for the contemporary

¹ Despite the affirmative, the argument's intention is not to criticize the dynamics of children's access to the game, but merely to offer a fact: play was framed, for a long time, as an irrelevant subject for social inquiry.

media environment further complexifies the relations between play, labor, and society. Firstly, this happens because the conformation of what is understood as Data, Platform (Srnicek, 2016), or Vigilance Capitalism (Zuboff, 2015) promotes a gradual reconfiguration of contemporary economy, colonizing social dimensions which, *a priori*, are considered to be immune to business models that are data oriented. Thus, the platformization of the Cultural Industry (Nieborg e Poell, 2018), eventually affects the *modus operandi* of games, from their production to their consumption. Secondly, Media and Communication researchers' growing interest in the phenomenon of platformization cooperates with a critical understanding on the experience of play as the corporations responsible for developing and distributing digital games increasingly operate as mediators between professional players, brands, championships, audiences, games, and media outlets, among others (Taylor, 2018; Švelch, 2019).

The growth of electronic sports – *eSports* – as a global media phenomenon corroborates that. In sum, the expansion of digital platforms and their consolidation as mediators of contemporary social experiences elicit a turn – the *platform turn* – not only in *Media Studies*, but also in *Game Studies*, especially in the investigation of competitive and/or professional environments. Particularly within the latter, as platformization grows it becomes increasingly evident and relevant for insights regarding the articulation between labor, play, and capital.

In this sense, this paper considers the entanglement between play, labor, and platforms by observing Activision Blizzard (one of the most important contemporary platforms for digital games) platform governance practices. With this aim, we address the controversy known as #BoycottBlizzard in order to examine the growing complexity of the role performed by casual and professional players (*pro-players*) in their relation with Blizzard, as the platform increasingly controls and prescribes relations between labor and play.

Interlude, or, “An Ordinary Day”

October 6th, 2019, has marked the beginning of a controversy involving Activision Blizzard², an American corporation that holds a notable portfolio of important titles in the *game* industry, its Chinese operation, and various social actors involved in these two macro contexts. *Hearthstone's* (2014) Grandmasters Tour finals were marked by a particularly interesting event: during the post-game interview conducted by the hosts (or casters), who in such events usually behave in accordance to the spectacular journalism model as developed by the experience of televised sports (Macedo; Falcão, 2019), the winner Chung “Blitzchung” Ng Wai, a Hong Kong native, seized the opportunity of Blizzard's streaming audience and infrastructure to voice his support to the protests held in Hong Kong since March 2019³, “Free Hong Kong, this is the revolution of our times!”⁴

The gesture caused a series of repercussions⁵ which lasted for weeks. Well known for its politics of zero tolerance with appropriations and transgressions on its platforms⁶, Blizzard decided to exert

² Research work involving Blizzard products – especially *Hearthstone* – are abundant both in the national and international fields of game studies. For more information, see Falcão and Marques (2017).

³ Although it is a highly complex issue, the protests referred primarily to the power struggles between Hong Kong province and China. The trigger for the mobilization was the proposal of the Fugitive Offenders amendment bill, which would allow China to subject Hong Kong to strong political sanctions. The question, however, is historical and there is no way to explore everything at this moment. More information at <https://bit.ly/2Q4NQHU>. Access: March 9, 2020.

⁴ Footage can be seen at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_r7CV7WXf8. Access: March 9, 2020.

⁵ Two days prior, a similar controversy had begun, involving both the NBA and the Houston Rockets, thanks to pro-Hong Kong comments made by the Rockets manager. Apple has also suffered recent criticism, due to data being shared with the Chinese government.

⁶ One of the applications of this policy by Blizzard can be seen at <https://bit.ly/2CA8pUx>. Access: March 9 2020.

its sovereignty over the championship infrastructure, rapidly penalizing the player. Due to his protest, Blitzchung was banned from Grandmasters, losing his cash prize (approximately four thousand dollars), besides being also banned from Hearthstone's competitive scene, therefore prevented from professionally competing for twelve months. The two casters who conducted the interview have also suffered retaliations from Blizzard and got fired.

It is important to stress the fact that such banishment has no simple implications: professional players effectively work within these platforms, performing daily streams of almost eight hours, studying the nuances of complex games and effectively memorizing sets of cards and interactions. To deprive a professional player from interacting with his/her game of choice corresponds to suspend a regular worker without pay, an action which may jeopardize the life course of its target.

Naturally, Blizzard's first official statement issued soon after Blitzchung banishment has a bureaucratic tone, pointing mostly to the championship's official rules⁷ which, among other things, says that:

Engaging in any act that, in Blizzard's sole discretion, brings you into public disrepute, offends a portion or group of the public, or otherwise damage's Blizzard image will result in removal from Grandmasters and reduction of the player's prize total to \$0 USD, in addition to other remedies which may be provided for under the Handbook and Blizzard's Website Terms.

Upon Blizzard's action, one realizes that Blitzchung has violated the rules by defending the protests, hence insulting Chinese players. As to the question "did he hurt Blizzard's image?", our answer – just like many '*media outlets*' – is futile: the decision making falls exclusively under the corporation rule (Blizzard's sole discretion), thus hindering any space for negotiation. At first sight, this perception illustrates that the ways the dynamics between actors are managed in this context fail to be as equanimous as one could argue, considering the dimensions of play or even of collaborative culture, both particularly present within platform environments such as Blizzard. How does this power leaks from the game environment and what are the roles played by platforms in the attempt to regulate it? To what measure does Blitzchung's ability to act as a public figure relies on the modulation of these platforms?

Blizzard is famous for maintaining control over discourses within and about their products. From development to championships, the company is always materially present, mediating the relationship between users, players, and consumers in media audiences and platforms. The firm develops a governance project that not only involves *Hearthstone*, but also other games such as *Overwatch* (2016) and *World of Warcraft* (2004).

Blizzard exerts a growing governance over its own products, not only by designing guidelines symbolically– managing its brand, for instance –, but mainly towards material practices that comprises the whole life cycle of its games. The company usually resorts to partners when there is no choice due to preexisting power relations. Certainly, the firm could design its own streaming platform and become independent from Twitch⁸, but here there is a competition between platforms (Srnieck, 2016) that renders such a decision unlikely. That's what Srnieck (2016) has named "*network effect*": a good part of any platform's political-social-economical power derives from its ability to aggressively monopolize and expand within given markets. Platforms attract users for one another, in a feedback loop that intensifies both party's governance power, hence resulting in monopoly scenarios.

Monopolization is always platforms' ultimate goal, considering that it directly translates into the ability to modulate and mediate the behavior of the actors involved. This is evident in Blizzard's case, since the platform has the ability to exert control over players, casters, the championship's structure, the game's

⁷ Retrieved in March 9, 2020, from: <https://bit.ly/2K8NP1K>.

⁸ Live video platform similar to Youtube, but focused on live streams (streaming) and mostly gaming.

architecture (both in its *metagame*⁹ and material conditions), among other things. Governance's ability and platform's monopolization impose important considerations, since competing in *Hearthstone* became synonymous with submitting to Blizzard's interests.

After Blitzchung and the casters banishment, a strong opposition movement to Blizzard's response rapidly took form. Majorly organized throughout forums and social networks –, the movement known as #BoycottBlizzard gained momentum, mobilizing both professional and amateur players, *streamers*, *casters*, media outlets and North American politicians. We shall return to the imbroglio later.

Platform Capitalism and the Platformization of Society

What does the platformization of society look like? The phenomenon is described by Van Djick *et al.* (2018) based upon the growing mediation power that contemporary digital platforms – as capitalist entities – begin to exert upon social, political, economic, and cultural phenomena. Majorly, platforms function as organizers of the models of production and consumption that are present in contemporary digital products, attempting to expropriate and colonize aspects of the social life which were not priorly touched by digital media. To what extent, for example, is sociability mistaken by mediated interaction through platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram? In what measure is it possible to separate, today, the urban experience from platforms like Google Maps and Waze?

Generally, as dominant online platforms present themselves as purely intermediaries – merely facilitating the connection between specific stakeholders –, researchers and critics attempt to clarify the ways in which they produce specific mediations when connecting subjects, institutions, and algorithmic systems for the accomplishment of tasks. Morozov (2013) qualifies the advertising discourse from Silicon Valley as solutionist, in the sense that it promotes the perception that digital media are able to offer practical, innovative solutions for contemporary life problems.

This phenomenon manifests in different forms within the games industry, since contemporary game experience has become increasingly platformized. The phenomenon of *streaming* (Taylor, 2018), for instance, has transformed platforms like Twitch, YouTube, and Mixer in significant agents within the gaming market, since they organize the relationships between streamers, audiences, developers, and sponsors, thus consolidating as essential means for the maintenance of eSports' spectacle. Developers and eSports organizations, in particular, began developing games and play experiences increasingly more adequate to the streaming model, pointing towards a game design process that is platform-oriented.

As we discuss further ahead, this new interplay of power relations involving several actors from contemporary gamer culture also affect the nature of labor. Platformization as a broad social phenomenon aims at producing new, qualified public discourses that justify the emergence of these forms of mediation. It materializes in terms and expressions meant to rhetorically soften the market breakthrough, describing this new economic era as a purely beneficial process such as the fourth industrial revolution, sharing economy, gig economy, attention economy, and app economy. Although they may vary, all of them refer to the same phenomenon: data-gathering and platform oriented capitalism. According to Couldry & Mejias (2018), social life comes to be configured as something intended to prescribe (Latour, 1992) for subjects the condition of continuous production of platform capitalism's main resource: personal data provided by social activities and interactions, including those from play activities.

We can describe this phenomenon based upon those capitalist endeavors which increasingly rely on digital technologies and data extraction to implement their business model (Srnicek, 2017). As indicated by Morozov (2013), this rhetoric seeks to legitimate contemporary capitalist practices in order to produce

⁹ In strategy games, the metagame is a broad set of decisions and responses made by different players in a specific scenario. It encompasses a multidirectional understanding of viable play dispositions, designating advantages and disadvantages in the tactical scope adopted by the parties.

a socially accepted reality that, despite apparently new and innovative, reinforce classical capitalist ideals:

The digital economy is becoming a hegemonic model: cities are to become smart, businesses must be disruptive, workers are to become flexible, and governments must be lean and intelligent. In this environment those who work hard can take advantage of the changes and win out. Or so we are told

The main argument proposed by Srnicek (2017) focuses on (a) the centrality of data and the (b) platformization process as fundamental characteristics of what came to be known as platform capitalism. Personal data collection, treatment, and analysis rapidly became contemporary media conglomerate's major asset. If data is the new raw material to move contemporary capitalism forward, the digital platform becomes the great apparatus creating the conditions for its collection, processing and value extraction. At this point, it is necessary to observe play activities' platformization process, considering the continuous colonization of ludic practices by capitalism.

Srnicek (2017) sees platforms as the materialization of the full systemic operational capitalist model that enables an endless process of data production/collection/analysis to achieve market hegemony. Therefore, platforms such as Google, Facebook, Amazon, Uber, AirBnB, and others, are designed to articulate monopolization and dependency, imposing forms of capital accumulation and the restructuring of the labor market, jobs, and corporate organizational structures.

Hence, what we understand by platformization is the growing mediation of several social, economical, and political segments and activities by digital platforms. These digital platforms, by their turn, seek specific agendas through the organization and management of cultural, political, and socio-economical interactions. Consequently, digital platforms are algorithmic apparatuses (*dispositifs*) (Cheney-Lippold, 2017; Danaher, 2016) developed to mediate power relations between users, content producers, institutions, and so forth. Their functioning depends on a broad and systematic process of collection, processing, analysis, and monetization of activities in the form of data. Observed in a broader context of digital culture, the platformization process integrates what Lemos (2020) defines as PDAP: Platformization, Datafication, and Algorithmic Performativity.

Operating within the scope of PDAP, platforms employ strategies of datafication, data commodification, and the selection/customization of interactions, aiming beyond facilitating given social relations in order to increasingly organize different social segments. As suggested by Van Dijck *et al.* (2018), platforms should not be simply understood as infrastructures that enable social interactions, but as performative entities that guide interactions based upon specific purposes that were previously deliberated. The perception of this trait, besides conducting us to an understanding of performativity within these contexts/actors, also offers us knowledge that, under the emblem of platform capitalism, each activity under its infrastructure will consequently be subjected to its operational conditions. Moreover, this observation illuminates how the videogame industry has organized itself lately. Mostly based upon an ethical framework that subverts the principles of ludic activity, it seeks to colonize play experiences by negotiating and adopting mediatization dynamics in several different levels. And, finally, this new logic restricts ludic spaces for escape and resistance, transforming them into spaces at the disposal of the specific policies of certain business models.

Interlude, or, "Dangerous Liaisons":

Certainly, an interesting approach to the conflict between Blizzard, China, and Blitzchung is attempting to draw some particularly fruitful narratives to interpret this event. For the purpose of our analysis, these narratives are concerned with the relations established between the company, individual actors, and social network metrics. Here, our aim is not to elaborate a social network analysis nor develop

a large-scale data collection¹⁰, but problematizing the questions previously mentioned to produce a narrative in a few steps that, by its turn, reveal nuances about this relationship.

This persists in a broader context, where this specific situation lies and is studied through a longitudinal observation effort employed by the authors, who identify and document controversies on the matters related to the experience of *eSports* amidst contemporary conditions. This observation effort was not based in a positivist perception that broadly registers online networked interactions, applying metrics and extracting general considerations, but it is rather an attempt at constructing particular meanings and illustrating contradictions while developing a critic reading on the facts that, day after day, construct *eSports'* everyday practice. This perception draws from several theorists who make use of observational strategies, as it seeks to understand this social field by pursuing a methodological articulation that combines observational rigor and social commentary that are vital for understanding the problem.

In order to compose this narrative, a tweet data import was performed using ATLAS.ti software commonly used for computer-assisted qualitative data analysis. Since its latest version (8), ATLAS.ti offers automated tweet data mining by using indexers such as hashtags and keywords. Although this may seem an excellent point of departure for mapping controversies, it is important to consider that ATLAS.ti is not a proper data mining tool and, consequently, we can't support the following interpretation based on statistical validity. The data collection was made along the unfolding of the controversy (from October 18th, 2019 to November 4th, 2019), comprising somewhat 1,300 tweets. After building the initial data set, we studied the *corpus* in an attempt at perceiving correlations and correspondences between immanent narratives threads. In this sense, we shall highlight some tweet fragments that, from our perspective, best represent the most relevant discursive threads which have emerged as the controversy unfolded.

The first narrative thread (i) addresses the sudden acknowledgement of Blizzard as a necessarily capitalist organization. Many Twitter users seemed to realize, only after the Blitzchung incident, that Blizzard has goals which are particularly oriented towards the capitalization of their actions, and not meant to protect the players' rights:

Vawus @badbuddah – 08/10/19 13:03 @GodsUnchained @Blizzard_Ent @blitzchungHS *Blizzard are cowards for this. They would have done the same thing if they existed in the 1940's, letting Jews be gassed if it meant t'hey could make an extra buck. Shame on you blizzard. #boycottblizzard".*

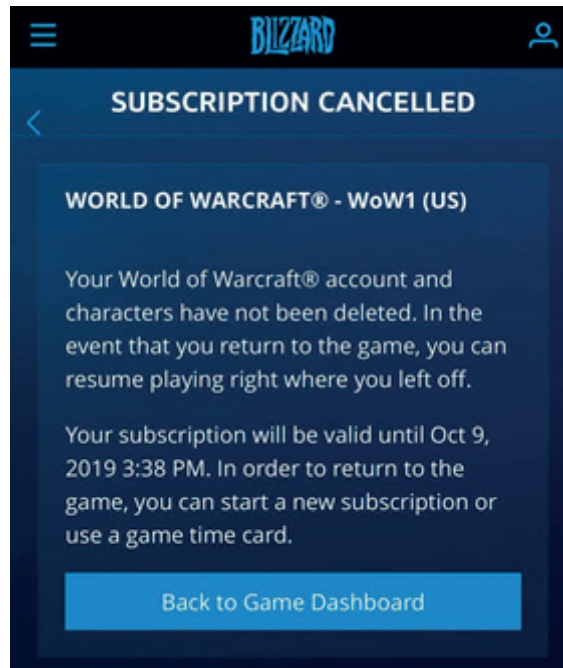
Count Storpula @Storple – 08/10/19 11:21 *This whole thing stings so much more having grown up on Blizzard's original lineup, but I guess corporation is a corporation regardless if they are formative part of your childhood. #BoycottBlizzard".*

These statements reveal, rather than Blizzard's capitalist nature, an affective dimension respectively hurt: the relationship between some users and the platform is clearly mediated by symbols that not only concern its instrumental use, but attest to an affective life. Similar notions were perceived by Yee (2007), for example, when discussing the use of virtual worlds, or even by Castronova's (2006) ideas about a migration to commodified environments.

This bitterness quickly turns into a perception of (ii) betrayal: there are many accounts that point to an investment of time, money and affection over several years. This kind of statement, stressing the duality between love, hate and disappointment, usually come with pictures and screenshots that exemplify the player's speech.

¹⁰ The dataset, which has about 1300 quotes from the hashtag #BoycottBlizzard, is openly available at <http://bit.ly/2Q8InQn>. In it, you can see that the selection we have made here, though somewhat arbitrary, is faithful to the general discourse. Access: March 09. 2020

Figure 1 – A movement toward users’ accounts cancellation



Sengames @mrdudecal – 08/10/19 12:52 *I've been a fan of blizzard for much of my life. I can not and will not support a company that bows down so quickly.. #BoycottBlizzard*
Evan King @Evan_Doo – 08/10/19 12:43 *Believe it or not, a part of me was considering buying @PlayOverwatch for the Nintendo Switch so I could play one of my favorite games oN tHe Go but now it looks like I won't be playing one of my favorite games very much at all anymore. #BoycottBlizzard*".

Matthijs Gillot @MMaRs – 08/10/19 12:16 *@DaftLimmy I know you love Overwatch. I did as well. In fact I've loved #blizzard games since I played WC2 as a small child on a personal computer. I hope you stop supporting this trash company who obviously has no respect for basic human rights and democracy. #BoycottBlizzard*".

Source: Data collection/The authors’ dataset

At this moment, it emerges a dimension that is not only associated with the affective relationship between users and Blizzard as a brand. Rather, it is entangled within the broader context – as though the interactional membrane (Goffman, 1961) was pierced and allowed the entrance, within the video games experience dimension, of broader socio-cultural matters. It is relevant to emphasize the tension experienced within the relationship between the US and China (iii), what implies a patriotic feeling mixed with the disappointment regarding the testimony showing sympathy for the Chinese government by a North American firm¹¹. Given this context, one of the users’ interpretative arguments is that Blizzard is submissive in regards to the Chinese government interests, against which Hong Kong inhabitants were protesting. Blizzard’s position also comes to be interpreted within a larger context, where other North American firms and institutions suffer harder from the pressures of the Chinese government. In several occasions, also, the American’s feeling of love for their country come together with repulsion and hate for

¹¹ It is important to note that 5% of Activision-Blizzard belongs to Tencent, the biggest technology and games conglomerate of China. Besides, China, if not the biggest, is one of the most representative Blizzard markets outside the USA.

China:

Figure 2 –Blizzard’s logo/Chinese National flag



Bree @BrizzleMcFizl – 08/10/19 12:06 Time to #BoycottBlizzard”.

omega @donekapu – 08/10/19 11:19 @Neleimour @LifeatBlizzard @Blizzard_Ent has chosen to side with The Socialist Chinese Dictatorship over America. @Blizzard_Ent has no value of Freedom, Justice nor Our God Given Rights. They support Communism. Therefore I no longer Support Blizzard. #BoycottBlizzard”

Source: Data collection/ the authors’ dataset

Many players portray Blizzard as hypocritical, emphasizing an alleged moral discrepancy between how the brand frames itself on its products and services, game narratives, LGBT and other minorities’ representativeness through characters’ design, and so on. This is the fourth narrative thread (iv). Historically, Blizzard, attempts to associate its brand to progressive agendas, what is materialized, for instance, in character design that is representative of social minorities:

Figure 3 – Title

Irish Ninjah @IrishNinja – 08/10/19 08:38 @Blizzard_Ent @Activision @PlayHearthstone *Blizzard will parade all the pride flags in the world, and all that corporate focus tested activism. But when the Chinese market is threatened, their real colors come to the front. And that color is green. #BoycottBlizzard”.*

Source: Data collection/the authors’ dataset

The protests and rallies intensified between October 8th and 10th as alternative protesting strategies emerged. One of them was the effort to associate Mei, a character from *Overwatch* (a different game from Blizzard’s portfolio), to the Hong Kong protesters in the attempt at pressing China to ban the game within its borders. Such banishment would hurt Blizzard significantly, considering the proportion of the Chinese market and the profitability of the game microtransactions. A different strategy named *GDPR-doxxing*¹² emerged at Reddit. It consists into forcing Blizzard to mobilize a great amount of time and resources to meet legal guidelines mandatory in the EU. On Twitch, spamming strategies were used as protest against Blizzard’s decision¹³.

These latter forms of protest signal the amplitude of Blizzard’s governance network. They are

¹² For more details, see: https://www.reddit.com/r/hearthstone/comments/df0zx5/upset_about_blizzards_hk_ruling_heres_what_to_do/. Access: March 9, 2020

¹³ For more details, see: <https://www.theverge.com/2019/10/18/20921301/blizzard-bans-hearthstone-twitch-chat-pro-hong-kong>. Access: March 9, 2020.

forms of resistance to the platform's infrastructural control. In the first case (framing Mei as a Hong-Kong protester), the goal is to influence China to ban Overwatch, materially preventing Blizzard from reaching one of its major consumer markets. The second one (*GDPR-doxxing*) attacks Blizzard from a juridical standpoint, for every firm must reply to users' requests concerning the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)¹⁴, although it is a long and expensive process, and onerous fines may apply to companies if requests are not met. The third case (*spamming*) employs the structure of another platform – Twitch – as a means to upset Blizzard's official broadcast, especially the ones following Grandmasters Tour.

Even though these narratives, in their most obvious sense, merely intended to confront Blizzard's official position, they seem to produce more than it can be implied. They give visibility to an array of tools built to regulate discourses, symbols, and narratives, thus preventing them from threatening the platform's operation. In times of crisis, they come into play to appease the storm – but under regular conditions, they work with as much intensity, modulating play practices and trespassing the boundaries of what is usually perceived as "ludic".

Reflecting on Labor in Game Studies

As shown by the examples, the apparently obvious boundaries between labor and leisure, as well between fun and effort, grow increasingly blurred in Game Studies. As soon as in the seminal *Cybertext*, by Espen Aarseth (1997), the idea of effort (*εργον*) is hidden in the very core of the definitions for "cybertext" and "ergodic literature" – games, as well as texts, demand a non-trivial effort in order to be explored, a kind of labor that is rewarded by the machine through new challenges, new symbolical expressions.

This relationship, which Aarseth does not extend to the world of formal labor – as well as Blizzard's labor/affective platformization –, gradually gets nearer to the unavoidable realization that, under the right conditions, the boundaries between playing and working can vanish. The progressive accumulation of capital by Blizzard, for instance, relies not only on formal economical and labor support, but is pervaded by affective and ludic investment from different kinds of players involved in its network. As stated earlier, a significant number of players felt betrayed, meaning that their investment – of time, economical capital, social capital, and affect – were taken for granted by the decision of the company. Such situations show the increasing blurring of the boundary between play and labor since, in face of the expansion of platformization and platform capitalism, the act of play comes to produce more and more value (data, behaviors, interactions) for capital.

Besides the Blizzard case, the relations between play and labor are multiple and diverse. An extreme example can be found in the work of the *gold farmers*, players who devote several daily hours – sometimes reaching up to twelve hours a day of work time (Toscano, 2007) – performing repetitive activities at online games. The purpose of repetition is performing an action within the game that produces valuable items to the game's internal economy.

The word *gold* refers to golden coins, while *farming* corresponds to devoting time and effort to a task that does not offer challenges nor ludic pleasure, but is essential to move forward in the game, after all, gold buys new equipment and similar items. In moderate measures, any player of games like *World of Warcraft* and other massive multiplayer games have already engaged in *farming* activities. Often, this is a condition prescribed in the game, as the player needs to obtain certain goods to move forward, or, in the case of *eSports*, to succeed in championships¹⁵. Here, the difference lies in the emergence of a

¹⁴ Operative since 2018, it is the most representative international legislation on privacy, internet, and personal data in force at the moment when this paper was written. Although GDPR is a legal mark specifically of the European Union, its influence is felt around the globe thanks to the globalization of personal data flows and the influence from similar laws passed outside Europe, such as the General Law for the Protection of Personal Data, in Brazil, and the California Consumer Privacy Act, in the US.

¹⁵ The acquisition and negotiation processes of virtual goods is a relevant point, but it won't be explored

digital working class devoted solely to the production of virtual coins, which are to be sold afterwards – that is, transformed into economical capital (Bourdieu, 1983) – in channels that are not regulated by Blizzard. Although the firm sticks to the policy of banning attested cases of *gold farming*, the mechanism is somewhat infrequently used, even though this activity is far from concealed.

Despite relatively deep studies on the precarious condition of the *gold farmers* (Dibbell, 2016), it is necessary to emphasize the subordination of this kind of labor to the functioning of the platform where the game is embedded. This effectively and materially depends on the platform's available architecture, upon which Blizzard holds governance. Within the context of Game Studies, however, there seems to be a naive fascination toward the emergence of autonomous and self-regulated communities¹⁶. It is not about doubting their existence, but such spontaneity may mask control and governance strategies that are invisible at first sight¹⁷. The risk of unbalance as brought up by the *gold farmers* (inflation within the game) is efficiently confronted by strategies aimed at modulating the game's economy (Dibbell, 2016).

Thus, Blizzard does only fight this practice if the confrontation does not mess with the stability of World of Warcraft's dynamics. The production of virtual coins is steady enough, so steady, indeed, to the point of attracting Venezuelan workers encouraged by the high value of the game's virtual money in relation to their country's hyperinflationary currency¹⁸. It is a market that is stable enough as to be used as penal labor in Chinese prisons, hence reinforcing the racialization of this practice and the ensuing conflicts in the game, as, for instance, between North-Americans and Asian players (NAKAMURA, 2009). Ultimately, these extreme cases depend on the framing of the ludic activity within the logic of labor involving conventional players as well:

Yet, there is another, less-recognizable sort of labor hidden in gold farming's shadow: farming completed for no monetary compensation at all, which comprises the majority of farming in MMOs. Convention requires that we call this unpaid effort 'play', but given its stark similarities to what gold farmers do all day, it is worth asking exactly why it is not a job. And if that question bears asking, then so does another: why not call what the gold farmers do a 'game?' (Dibbell, 2016, p. 422).

Therefore, it is a structure that depends both on paid and precarious digital labor and on what Tiziana Terranova calls *free labor* (Terranova, 2000). In this sense, the connection between Blizzard and a secondary actor – Twitch – is crucial. In what follows, we analyze some kinds of this labor and the manners

here. In Falcão & Maques (2017) it is possible to assess how virtual goods circulate in Hearthstone, as well as the impact of this economy based on players competitive aspirations, a phenomenon popularly known as pay-to-win.

¹⁶ Still, it is possible to consider that such fascination is not an exclusive aspect of Game Studies as a field, but which is also present in different moments of Media Studies and, more specifically, digital media. Although it is not our aim to reanimate a debate between apocalyptic and integrated, we must observe that influential theorists from cyberculture studies - like Pierre Levy, Manuel Castells, and Henry Jenkins - to some extent, pointed toward a democratic and participative development of cyberspace, what, in practice, has not happened. Particularly in the case of game studies, critical studies have historically addressed problems concerning consumption, whether drawing from researchers who associate games and violence or works showing toxic behaviors and misogyny at game environments. Our scope addresses the broader context - the one of late capitalism, neoliberalism, and platform governance - where these interaction and consumption relations develop. It is not our aim to reduce the agency of the subjects involved in these phenomena, but rather further understanding the agencies and mediations promoted by the platforms that structure contemporary ludic experiences.

¹⁷ That is noticeable in the study on the game EvE Online (2004), a persistent virtual world inhabited by an average of 400 thousand active players, who organize themselves into rival corporations, fighting battles both economical and warlike. The emergent and autonomous appearance of game economy, though, is constantly seasoned with accurate actions from CCP, the firm that develops and maintain the game- for instance, the creation of the virtual coin PLEX in 2012, an attempt to make players pay a little more in order to achieve resources and items (like spaceships and weapons) faster. Thus, the firm has leveled the field for new players, once they are willing to pay extra cash.

¹⁸ See more at: <https://www.polygon.com/2017/9/10/16283926/venezuelan-gold-farming-runescape-targets>. Access: March, 9, 2020.

how they amplify Blizzard's platform power – and how they demand new governance and control methods from it.

At Twitch's main page, web crawling algorithms search for content producers, showing those who are considered relevant. This selection takes into account not only the user's consumption history, but also the platform's interests: some games and *streamers* are prioritized at the expense of others. There are thousands of producers streaming simultaneous game sessions. Big *streamers*, like Summit1g and shroud, respectively draw 4 and 6,5 million followers to the platform, with an average of 15 to 20 thousand simultaneous viewers per streaming¹⁹.

Although there are no accurate estimates on these streamers' income, it is reasonable to assume that their return is about hundreds of thousands of dollars per month each, what doesn't include the Twitch platform own revenue derived from advertising, sponsorships, and players subscriptions – a model through which the user pays monthly fees in exchange for access to particular functionalities (emojis, chat special permissions, among others) during live videos from specific streamers²⁰.

Notwithstanding, under the superior layer of the mega *streamers* lies a multitude of wannabes, working long hours and getting bare or no income at all. Besides, as suggested by Taylor (2018), many other layers of affective labor are developed there: channel moderators, who often work for free; designers and developers devoted to produce *plugins* and *addons* intended to expand the spectatorship experience during streaming; *fandoms* of given *streamers* which engage in the production of *fan-art*, *fanfics*, and other goods inspired by their cult object, among others. Here, we argue that, historically, *game studies* have ignored the role played by the platforms that organize these mediations as important actors, especially in the context of platform capitalism and its corresponding labor relations. This is not about denouncing negligence in specific environments, but the understanding of a spirit and the strategies for employing these environments by virtue of a philosophy for the organization and validation of sociotechnical behaviors. It is necessary to emphasize, then, that the growing platformization process (as a macro social phenomenon) is not unnoticed by *games studies*. As platforms such as Twitch, Steam, and YouTube grow in popularity, as much as since developers started to act – and monetize this agency – in platform modes, researchers from the field also began to observe platforms²¹. However, usually the players – professional or not - are under the spotlight and their agency is seen as determinant for the success or failure of a given game. As already mentioned, consumer practices (in the broad sense of the term) that emerge from platforms certainly own the active and creative abilities of their users, but not only this. The emergence of the platform business model gives more visibility to the entwining between the act of playing and the effort to produce capital and labor.

The researchers Mark Johnson and Jamie Woodcock, by means of interviewing 39 *streamers* with low popularity, managed to show the kind of labor involved in the construction of careers at the Twitch website. The process involves the search for partners such as Twitch, for after the *streamer* reaches a good level of popularity, the firm shares part of the advertising revenue with the content producer. Although it promotes the producer to a fairly stable level of work, simultaneously, the reach generates the precariousness of labor that, in this specific research samples is close to 70 or even 90 hours of work per week (Johnson; Woodcock, 2017). Add to it the equally hard work in which non-partner streamers engage in order to obtain the partnership:

Understanding that rewards are distributed in an extremely top-heavy fashion,

¹⁹ More information at: <https://twitchstats.net/>. Access: March 9, 2020.

²⁰ According to the website <https://twitchstats.net/>, the most popular *streamers* have up to 30 thousand subscribers at their channels who can pay approximately from 5 to 25 dollars a month; an income that is shared equally between the content producer and Twitch. Access: March 9, 2020.

²¹ By means of illustration, one should consider seeing Švelch (2019) on the mediatization process.

streamers were both aspiring to reach those heights and reflecting back with varying degrees of criticality upon what they thought it would take in order to obtain those goals. [...]. There was, therefore, also clear neoliberal subjectivity presented in the interviews, through which streamers argued that hard work, in streaming, is automatically rewarded (Johnson; Woodcok, 2017, p. 16)

A similar process occurs within the *eSports ecosystem*, where the top of the pyramid is occupied by a small group of successful athletes, with millionaire contracts, being treated as stars. Although they are the face of the market, they hide an army of aspirants, tournament organizers, content producers, and many others. This ecosystem is strongly connected to Twitch, since both athletes from the superior layer and aspirants resort to daily streaming to transform the competitive game into their main source of income. The powerful exposition from the top of pyramid and successful careers of teams sponsored by firms such as Cloud9, G2 Sports, and Team Liquid, “renders invisible hugely precarious, unequally rewarded aspirational labor (Jenson e Castell, 2018, p. 14). Hence, it is unsurprising that these players constantly appear on Twitch’s landing page, as well as at spectacular championships live videos and other contents show the potential of the platform to facilitate the journey toward success for the aspirant player.

Consequently, the emergence of streaming as a contemporary cultural phenomenon and the platformization process reconfigure the historically tenuous line between playing and working. What seems to emerge is the consolidation of a business model – a platformization of play – based upon which key platforms (like Blizzard and Twitch) encourage their users/consumers to produce a great and varied amount of capital – affective, economic, social, and cultural, among others. This production presupposes the precariousness of labor and the advent of new labor activities involving digital games and a broad negotiation between multiple stakeholders: Blizzard, Twitch, professional streamers, moderators, algorithms, audience, aspirant streamers, fans, and so on. To underestimate the agency of platforms within this landscape – by following the narrative according to which these are mere intermediates – presupposes erasing the relations of governance and power, the guidelines prescribing the precariousness of labor within this field and regulating how capital is extracted and monetized by these firms. s

Status Quo: Toward Reorganization

One week after the protests reached the peak, on October 12th, Blizzard issued a new announcement, altering Blitzchung’s penalty in the attempt to appease the community²². Here, the ideas of affection for the game and game space as entertainment space are central. It is not by coincidence that the terms *gaming* and *entertainment* appear in recurring and correlate manners along the account. Specifically, on Blitzchung’s attitude, Blizzard states that: “(...) the official streaming must focus on the tournament and be a place where everyone is welcome. In support of that, we want to **keep the official channels focused on the game**” (Regarding, 2019, p. 1, bold in original). This point is reinforced by a third part of the message: “We have these rules in order to keep the focus on the game and the tournament in benefit of a global public, and this was the only consideration for the actions we’ve taken” (Regarding, 2019, p. 1).

After Blizzard went public, altering the penalties, Blitzchung also officially manifested his position about the case²³. Generally, his speech shows gratitude to Blizzard for reducing his penalties, as well as acknowledging the streaming space as “devoted to the game”:

People from Blizzard had explained this to me through a phone call and I really appreciate that,

²² The central argument of this new statement is similar to Kibler, Kripparian, and Riot’s: the space of broadcast needs to be focused on the game and nothing else. The complete statement can be read at: <https://bit.ly/36UIYlf>. Access: March 9, 2020.

²³ Retrieved March 9, 2020 from https://www.twitlonger.com/show/n_1sr1jn4.

and I accept their decision on this part. (...) I will take this time to relax myself to decide if I am staying in the competitive hearthstone scene or not. Hearthstone changed the way I live; I really love this community. Blessing to all the players out there and blessing to Blizzard. (Mcgregor, 2019, p. 1)

Blitzchung's resignation seems to indicate some directions: it reinforces Blizzard's governance and colonization over its games' activities by acknowledging that penalties are fair and that the game itself is the focus of the championship, besides exposing the confusing role performed by *pro-players* within eSports communities. These players' power as scene influencers is undeniable, but we question the amplitude and reach of this power. Finally, Chung's position shows Blizzard's control apparatus exert dominion over its *play activities*, in a way that few actors achieve conditions to escape this power structure.

After the latest statements from Blizzard and Blitzchung the controversy came to a halt, all while the community waits for the repercussions of BlizzCon 2019, the particular corporate convention, quite similar to many others held in the pop/nerd scenes. Although the #BoycottBlizzard movement was powerful and representative, it is possible to question what shall be the legacy of the protests. There doesn't seem to be any unfolding in terms of Blizzard's position or its governance structure. This points toward a massive unbalance of power between users and platforms that, even in face of such a show of arbitrariness, the platform stands in total control over its users.

(Somehow) Final Considerations

A few days after the surge of the controversy, there was a Reddit post where, regretful for having deleted his Blizzard account, a player asks whether it would be possible to recover it²⁴. The central argument: the wish to play Overwatch with his friends. The problem: the social pressure exerted by the #BoycottBlizzard movement had led him to cancel his account. This intriguing case exposes how powerful the governance structure provided by platformization is. Two platforms enter the scene, Reddit, by serving as an articulator for the movement's organization, inflating the reactionary attitude of the players through its architecture for content organization; and Blizzard itself, to which the player must submit in case he/she wishes to engage with a significant part of contemporary game culture.

In this sense, by means of this paper, we sought to expose the internal dynamics of social maintenance as undertaken by the Blizzard platform and how it organizes vectors of dominance around the practices of fun it affirms to prioritize. This set of tools comprises both the discursive guerrilla, fought against the (un)organized Twitter users and also against the corporate media, and the patronal connection between the firm and the professional player, who is disciplined by his/her unsettling opinion.

Such connection hides a myriad of threads joining modes of effort and labor disguised as play, which produce value for the firm – this being used to intensify and perfect its subtle forms of influence over the users' behaviors. Therefore, a positive feedback cycle emerges, adding more and more value to increasingly effective platform mechanisms, which generate more capital on a cycle of constant (re) production. As reinforced by Couldry and Mejias (2018, p. 3): "(...) The platform, we argue, produces the social for capital, that is, a form of 'social' that is ready for appropriation and exploitation for value as data, when combined with other data similarly appropriated".

The moments when this logic is upset, as in the case of Blitzchung, tend to disturb the system's stability of a platform like Blizzard. Still, however they fuel contention and stimulate the circulation of dissident narratives, these are rapidly erased by the massive interference of the platform – considering the subsiding of the controversy after Blizzard announced the games Diablo 4 and Overwatch 2, on November 1st 2019²⁵. The study of the platformization of play practices must expose not only the forces

²⁴ Retrieved March 9, 2020 from https://twitter.com/tha_rami/status/1191264893141282816?s=12.

²⁵ Retrieved March 9, 2020 from: <https://www.techradar.com/news/diablo-4-news-release-date-trailers-rumors>

and regulation power of the conglomerates, but also illustrate the weakness of resistance strategies, so that new, more effective methods can emerge. The entertainment industry, thus, seems to follow the aggressive expansion model of other platforms usually analyzed by critics and researchers, like Uber, AirBnB, Facebook, and Amazon. Platforms like Blizzard, however, find a particularly fertile terrain: the colonization of the ludic by capital.

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