Tabletop games of empire: modern board games and the pervasiveness of neoliberalism

LUCAS MARQUES DOS SANTOS

Paulista State University (UNESP) – Bauru, São Paulo, Brazil.
E-mail: lmarquesant@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0001-6503-8999

LAAN MENDES DE BARROS

Paulista State University (UNESP) – Bauru, São Paulo, Brazil.
E-mail: laan.m.barros@unesp.br
ORCID: 0000-0003-2429-9716

Abstract

The article investigates the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideology in modern tabletop games. In recent decades, there has been a resurgence of tabletop games and the consolidation of a new market. One of the milestones of the new era is the popularization of the board game Catan, in which players explore an island at the beginning of the Age of Exploration era. Based on the survey of the characteristics of the 100 best ranked games in the Board Game Geek forum, we identified the prevalence of neoliberal dynamics in several games. Based on contributions from communication, game studies and post-colonialism, we will raise some issues regarding the phenomenon of tabletop games and the ideological components in them. From representations of European colonialism, passing through the imagination of the neoliberal future and arriving at the current directions of the industry.

Keywords
Tabletop games; Neoliberalism; Colonialism; Game studies; Communication.

Introduction

In the last decade, not only video games have participated in relevant phenomena involving ludic artifacts. Board games – or analogue games, tabletop games, among other terms – have grown and consolidated themselves as a market and networks of players. And, in the context of isolation resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, this trend has become even more entrenched. First, we think of the business metrics that support the information: an industry valued at US$ 15 billion globally (Matalucci, 2021), with an estimated annual growth rate of 13% until 2026 (Business Wire, 2021). Expanding this perspective, a myriad of objects to be researched emerges. Today, board games (and their networks) are radically different from 10, 20, 50 or 100 years ago. From trends in mechanics and themes – many of them influenced video game genres, even – to social and intersubjective configurations of players' groups.

Regarding the theme of this publication, *the colonization of play by neoliberal capitalism*, we can say that few combinations of these terms do not apply to the current state of board games. Starting with the most problematic: colonization. A significant part of the most popular games have time periods and places of European colonization as a background; others project interplanetary colonization, especially the already tangible planet Mars. Some have in neoliberal fantasy its most relevant aspect. Pleasures involving financial growth and good management of monetary and patrimonial resources. However, what is running through all these examples is precisely the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideologies in board games. The logics of capitalism govern the players' pleasure and the ludic strategies of a large number of games. Furthermore, they are completely present in the conditions of play: distribution, industry, social characteristics of developers and players.

This article investigates the prevalence of neoliberal ideology in the so-called modern board games. That is, from the growth of a new industry and the emergence of design philosophies of the late 1990s and early 2000s, commonly demarcated by Catan's popularity. To illustrate our research, we will focus on the ranking of best board games from the Board Game Geek forum, the most famous in the segment. In our contemplation on games, capitalism and neoliberalism, we will focus on four main themes, divided into subtopics: an overview of neoliberalism in board games, empire and colonization, neoliberal future and counter-hegemonic responses. The study of these new dynamics of tabletop games are not comprehensive as for video games, however it is possible to observe a greater concern from academia and the media in addressing relegated and taboo subjects. We hope to contribute in an embryonic way to some of these discussions.

Methodology

The article's corpus has a more specific process and a more generalist one. As mentioned, we use the top games ranking from the Board Game Geek forum to illustrate the phenomena and trends accompanying it. In this way, we collected the top 100 from May 3, 2021 and the respective tags in category, mechanic and family sections. The data will be mainly articulated in the next subtopic, in which we will present an overview of the topic. Also, certain games mentioned are not in the top 100, but develop pertinent questions for the article.

Regarding the theoretical content, we first propose to situate the article in the field of communication and the game studies. We can identify board games as media as we understand communication as an aesthetic experience. If it is common to study digital games in the field of communication, it is not only because we are dealing with technological or media objects, but because there is a range of relational phenomena of communicational nature.

Here, we understand communication as a sensible experience, that is, "an experience that involves the individual and their communities of appropriation in a participatory process, in which

communication takes place." (Barros, 2017, p. 160). The exercise of reception "involves appropriation and production of meanings" (Barros, 2017, p. 162). A position vis-à-vis the communicational object, which does not refrain from its political component. Jacques Rancière (2009) proposes the concept of "the distribution of sensible", which brings together aesthetics and politics by highlighting the power relations and inequalities of the world's perception regimes. For Rancière (2009, p. 26), it is "in the sensible outline of the community's common, of the forms of its visibility and its disposition, that the question of the aesthetic/political relationship is raised".

It is, therefore, in the articulations between communication, aesthetics and politics that our analysis is built. Communication thought from the perspective of aesthetic experience, with special attention to the production of meanings that takes place in the plane of aesthetic perception, and aesthetics thought of as a social, cultural and political phenomenon, as something dynamic that takes place in the specular encounter - and spectacular, many times - between the spectator and the aesthetic object. In this perspective, the aesthetic experience establishes links between sensible perception and politics, as the spectator - emancipated, in the words of Rancière (2012) - actively participates in the production of meanings. And when this spectator places himself as a player, in the game medium, the aesthetic experience acquires a ludic dimension, as we have already elaborated in a previous text (Barros & Santos, 2020).

It is, as proposed by Herman Parret, to "socialize the sensible" and "sensitize the social", since "the sensus communis is the sensus of a community that (...) is neither argumentative nor consensual: It is affective " (Parret, 1997, p. 197). And in the case of gaming communities, the sensible, ludic and immersive experience needs to be thought of in its political dimension. The act of playing is, therefore, more than mere entertainment. It implies personal interrelationship laden with affections and affectations, and among these, it is worth highlighting the bonds of identification and self-recognition, of ideological attachment and political engagement.

The perspective adopted for the article regarding communication is influenced by the philosophical trend of phenomenology. Some video game researchers, such as Brendan Keogh (2015) and Muriel & Crawford (2018) have already worked on the phenomenological methodology. In short, it is an approach that aims to understand the game not only through what it presents on the screen, but through the act of playing as a cybernetic relationship between body, senses, machines, controls, and visual feedback. In board games, this bodily and relational aspect can be even clearer, as the physicality of being in relation to objects and other players is explicit.

Throughout the text, we will use bibliographical references of video games, since there is a greater amount of research and some of the subjects are shared with board games. However, we emphasize the specificities of the board game media:

> Board games are like video games in some useful ways, but they are also quite unlike video games in other respects: for example, they are tangible, emphasize face-to-face social interaction, are manipulable, and provide the opportunity to change the underlying state of the game. Board games offer unique insights into contemporary culture that a mere linkage to video games does not unpack (Booth, 2021).

In this way, recent articles and books on tabletop games helped us in the work's themes, such as Nancy Foasberg (2019) and Cornel Borit, Melania Borit and Petter Olsen (2018).

Cash runs everything around me: an overview of capitalism in modern board games

The Board Game Geek forum does not represent the majority experiences of tabletop games

players, but a portion of enthusiasts who have specific identities, move the market and integrate dynamics of legitimation and delegitimation. The site followed the transformation of modern board games from a small niche, especially in some countries in Europe and the USA, to a more globalized phenomenon. Created in 2000 by Scott Alden and Derk Solko, the forum now has more than 2 million registered members. Information about the site's exact demographics and their characteristics is not transparent. Members used to organize censuses on the forum. From the last one we retrieved, dated 2019, 85.3% of the users who answered declared themselves to be male, 89.2% white and 53.7% residing in the United States. These surveys are far from being scientifically accurate, yet they indicate patterns of hardcore gamers and hobbyists.

In Brazil, the Ludopedia website and forum fulfills a role similar to the Board Game Geek. A user census is organized annually. In 2020, for example, 61% were men and 40.5% were people with complete higher education - followed by 32.1% with postgraduate/master's degree -, indicating the social demographic and the high entry value for these new games. Data that do not differ much from the focus group research carried out by Jesiel Carvalho Lima de Araujo (2019), which also identifies the ethnicity declared by the 25 interviewees – white (56%), brown (28%) and black (12%), the remaining percentage unanswered. Another relevant factor is the demography of people in serious romantic relationships, sometimes equal to or greater than single people, indicating strong emotional bonds.

These data do not show the entire phenomenon of tabletop games. First, the forums' surveys lack scientific rigor, linked to the most active users and market interests. Second, because tabletop games are not limited to these new fronts in the industry, as we will argue in the conclusions. From the truco or the checkers in public squares to the hybridizations with the digital environment developed by communities of players are phenomena that have been relegated several times.

There has been a process of legitimizing modern board games as an entertainment for adults and a promising market. This legitimation carries ideological forces, social groups welcomed and excluded from this distribution of the sensible. In video game studies, there is the concept of hegemony of playing, which, keeping in mind the differences between the media, can be applied to board games:

> In relation to digital games, there is an encounter between heteronormativity, misogyny and the technology that sustains the industry, a process that Janine From, Tracy Fullertom, Jacquelyin Ford Morie and Celia Pearce call "hegemony of playing" (2007): a system that feeds back, always keeping the same mechanics, causing it to be consumed by the same audience (men, heterosexuals, cissexuals, whites), who end up becoming the producers of these games, alienating groups that are not within this scope and making "game" [p.79] an uncompromising composition kept always by the same dynamics. In this way, since the symbols and representations that identify heterosexual men (and their worldviews) are the references of what is "real", it is understandable that among these so-called "political issues" that should be avoided in order to maintain the ideological illusion of the magic circle, include historical struggles and conflicts of LGBTQ populations, women and non-white people (Goulart & Nardi, 2019, p. 78-79).[1]

A hypothesis that sensitive issues, such as colonization, are less contested and representations of capitalism recur is precisely the feedback system from creators, audiences and works. The board game

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[1] From the original: "Em relação aos jogos digitais, existe um encontro entre heteronormatividade, misoginia e a tecnologia que sustenta a indústria, processo que Janine From, Tracy Fullertom, Jacquelyin Ford Morie e Celia Pearce nomeiam esse processo de 'hegemonia do jogar' (2007): um sistema que se retroalimenta, mantendo sempre as mesmas mecânicas, fazendo com que seja consumida pelo mesmo público (homens, heterossexuais, cissexuais, brancos), que acabam se tornando os produtores desses jogos, alienando grupos que não estejam dentro desse escopo e tornando 'jogo' [p.79] uma composição inflexível mantido sempre pelas mesmas dinâmicas. Dessa maneira, sendo os símbolos e representações que identificam homens heterossexuais (e suas visões de mundo) as referências daquilo que é 'real', é compreensível que entre essas chamadas 'questões políticas' que devem ser evitadas para que se mantenha a ilusão ideológica do círculo mágico, se incluam lutas e conflitos históricos das populações LGBTQ, mulheres e pessoas não brancas".

renowned for popularizing the new medium configuration, Catan - originally titled Settlers of Catan – puts the players against the resources of an uninhabited island. The game also spread the idea of eurogames, a broad term to designate products that rely little on luck, and in which players are not involved in direct conflicts, but compete for power and resources through tactics that favor efficiency. The term was coined by the origin of these games, mostly European, like Catan, created in Germany by Klaus Teuber .

The Board Game Arena top 100 reverberates the legacy left by Catan and other games at the time. Only one game, Crokinole, was created before the 20th century. The second oldest game dates from 1982 and only two are from the 1990s. There are 13 titles from 2000 to 2009, and 83 games have been published since 2010. The economic category is in 40 games; industry/manufacturing in 12. Some of the most popular mechanics involve reproductions of capitalist structures: worker placement - with 30 instances –, income – 19 – and auction – 9. Among the families, six games have the colonial tag; only in one of them, Spirit Island, is there the possibility of not playing with the colonizers.

The brief overview of the Board Game Geek's top 100 games should not be taken strictly, but rather as illustrations of legitimate trends in the medium. Even with 40 games in the economic category, in a superficial analysis of the titles it is possible to identify that the sample could be larger. Board games are commonly based on the extraction and production of resources aiming at capitalist efficiency, common in farm management games, for example. Which, even when situated in feudalism, use structures of modern capitalism. This is also the case with the theme of colonization: space games – most based on the pillars of the 4X genre (eXplore, eXpand, eXtract, eXterminate) – do not have the tag. Even representations of modern European colonialism are classified in other ways, such as Age of Discovery. In this analysis of terms, it is possible to identify a eurocentric view, which sees the Other in a different or exotic way. Be it Latin America in the tropical category or games that show the exoticism of the Middle East and Asia. Characteristic of the ideology of orientalism, as defined by Edward Said (2007).

(Board) games of empire

To start thinking about the topic, we return to the example of Catan. The game popularized design ideas that had been developed for decades in the German market. In particular, the conflict between players, which does not involve wars, but diplomatic power relations, trading and the exploitation of different natural resources. The island that gives the game its name is fictional and without inhabitants, however rich in biomes and resources. The art of the game alludes to the beginning of the Age of European expansion – later, it was established in parallel publications that the game takes place in 1503.

Unlike history, Catan brings a non-violent colonization to native peoples, without the notion of metropolis. It is polished and sanitized to eliminate problematic issues. Nancy Foasberg (2019) writes about the update of the myth of *terra nullius*, a land that belongs to no one, and, at the time mentioned, without natives and slaves. The abstraction and exclusion of past violences, while colonization ideologies are still present, both suggest players' pleasures without being bothered by reality, as well as that ideologies and pleasures are linked in different aspects. Foasberg (2019, p. 22) understands that "Eurogames tend to celebrate the productivity of colonialism, a portrayal that allows players to indulge in the pleasures of efficient management and the acquisition of wealth", while supporting the Eurocentric ideology of *terra nullius*.

Still meditating on Catan, more than identifying representations and rewritings of history, it is identifying the relations that the theme and its logic have with the contemporary neoliberal ideology. For Lorenzo Veracini, using Catan as one of the examples, if the settler colonial phenomena "are primarily about the reproduction of one social body in place of another", games embody this dynamic, managing to "capture and represent the proliferation of particular sociopolitical entities through time" (Veracini, 2015, p. 75, our translation).

Puerto Rico is another acclaimed game – for years, the Board Game Geek's top 1 games – and famous for its issues. Unlike Catan, the board game's setting is a process of real colonization, Puerto Rico, which systematically enslaved indigenous and African populations. The most problematic point of the game is the colonists' pieces, small brown disks. Over the course of the game, the pieces are placed in workplaces, including plantation-based latifundia. The manual and other information do not specify the origin of the settlers, even offering an adventurous tone ("fearless settlers"), which is not supported by the comparison between the game elements and history. A case of evident racism that has been generating discussions in the communities for years.

From the release of Puerto Rico to today, the medium has grown and certain speeches have been challenged. In 2019, an incident happened involving the announcement of the game Scramble for Africa, by GMT Games, which portrays the invasion of European powers on the African continent between the 19th and 20th century. Players problematized the simplistic approach to historical violence, generating a clash between different sides in the hobby. The case broke the bubble and appeared in discussions in the press (Bolding, 2019; Draper, 2019). The game was eventually canceled.

Scramble for Africa debates are just the tip of the iceberg. Representations of colonies, Asian exoticism and other scenarios continue to appear in abundance. The discussion is always more nuanced than meets the eye. In short, there are rare examples of truly decolonial or postcolonial mainstream board games – precisely because there is little room for radical voices from the ex-colonies. The French game designer Bruno Faidutti (2018) criticizes, in a famous article, the stereotyped and colonial representations, mainly based on Orientalism, but he attributes part of the controversies to the differences in sensibility and humor between countries. Researchers and designers from the global south, however, can identify other natures of these issues and propose other initiatives.

Among the arguments that defend the existence and maintenance of the mentioned games, there is the separation between the mechanics and the theme/scenario. It is a common sense – marked by practice – that the themes in eurogames do not matter and are not articulated in the mechanics, which, in this perspective, is the most important aspect of the game. Foasberg (2019, p. 20) argues that "certain themes recur in Eurogames because they align with certain economic mechanics, and that this pairing of themes and mechanics is politically problematic".

The idea that the essence of games is in mechanics is present in discussions about video games. Scholars such as Brendan Keogh (2015) and Aubrey Anable (2018) understand that it is impossible to dissociate the elements of a game from the experience; the valuation of one over the other reflects the ideologies of play. Graeme Kirkpatrick (2012) writes that the concept of gameplay provided legitimacy to video games as a media and, through a set of practices, is related to hegemonic games and players. We can also think about mechanics in board games. An element of legitimacy and prestige valued by hegemonic discourses.

A great example of this phenomenon is the aforementioned Puerto Rico, acclaimed for the elegance of its systems. In particular, the role choice mechanics that it popularized: a player, in a turn, chooses a card from a limited set and all participants perform the function described on it, but only whoever took it performs a bonus action. The first to choose in a round has the governor token, which is passed to the player on the left in the next phase, giving a dynamism to the games. The available roles are: settler, mayor, builder, craftsman, trader, captain, and prospector.

We are not going to describe all the functions in detail, but the important thing is to understand the connection between them. An illustration: the settler card allows you to take a plantation or quarry tile from the general stock and place it on the individual board. The mayor, on the other hand, removes the colonists from ships and places them in plantations, mines and other buildings, making them useful as resource producers. The craftsman card causes the player to receive goods according to their patrimony. These goods can be exchanged for coins with the trader's card or converted to victory points when boarded

by the captain on ships. The winner is whoever, at the end of the game, has the most victory points.

All of these systems interact, creating complex strategic variations. Over the years, hundreds of tactical guides have been made about the game. Following the tradition of eurogames, the conflict between the opponents is not direct, but based on production decrease and blocking of resources, functions and actions. The participants around the table are rulers, managers of a space solely dedicated to the accumulation of capital and the market. Such an impersonal approach to the representational components of the game is an argument for some players to justify the separation between mechanics and theme, ignoring ethical questions and interpretations. However, we think that impersonality and instrumentalization reveal intrinsic links between mechanics, setting and ideological vision.

Puerto Rico reproduces, with its abstractions, the machine of colonialism from the perspective of the colonizer. Even the notion of the generic colonist, conveyed by the game's official paratexts, indicates the human being as a possession, an object, detached from their humanity. Scholars José Messias and Kênia Freitas (2018), when interpretating Orlando Patterson and Saidiya Hartman's ideas about the ontological dimension of slavery, write:

> In this sense, the slave's existence would be primarily marked not by alienation and exploitation (which mark the suffering of a social subject), but by their quality of being accumulated and by their fungibility (which mark the characteristics of a social object) - that is, not by a work relationship, but by a property relationship (Freitas & Messias, 2018, p. 415).[2]

We describe the cases of games about colonialism and the tensions between mechanics and representations to demarcate how capitalist logics are pervasive. Borit et al. (2018), writing about board games, reiterate that the European colonial project is based on two concepts, imperialism and capitalism. The scholars used the writings on postcolonialism of John McLeod and Robert JC Young, mainly to identify colonialism as a modality of control resulting from imperialist ideology and as an activity on the periphery of the empire, while imperialism is operated at the center as a state policy and project of power.

At the same time, the concept of empire is updated in neoliberal ideology. In 2009, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter published Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games, a classic in game studies. The book contains analyzes and interpretations of various gaming phenomena, based on the concept of Empire, by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. A neoliberal regime, formed by economic, administrative, military and communication components, which integrates our perception of the world. This concept is linked to that of biopower, developed by Michael Foucault:

> Hardt and Negri offer something more ambitious, a comprehensive account of conditions of work, forms of subjectivity, and types of struggles in contemporary capital. Empire is global in terms not only of its geographic reach but also of its social scope. Capital now taps its subjects' energies at multiple points: not just as workers (as labor power) but also as consumers (the "mind share" targeted by marketers), as learners (university degrees as vocational preparation), and even as a source of raw materials (the bio- value extracted for genetic engineering). Empire is thus a regime of "biopower"— a concept borrowed from the philosopher Michel Foucault (1990, 135–45)— exploiting social life in its entirety. (Dyer-Witherford & de Peuter, 2009, p. XX)

As we propose, it is possible to articulate this thought from digital to board games, especially when "empire" is in the title of so many productions: Twilight Imperium, Dune: Imperium, Imperial Struggle, among others. The neoliberal ideology is not only prevailing in these more explicit examples, but as a force that permeates the most different dynamics, incorporating itself into the ludic. There are indeed

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[2] From the original: "Nesse sentido, a existência do escravo seria primordialmente marcada não pela alienação e exploração (que marcam o sofrimento de um sujeito social), mas por sua qualidade de ser acumulado e por sua fungibilidade (que marcam as características de um objeto social) — ou seja, não por uma relação de trabalho, mas por uma relação de propriedade".

pleasures involved in creating point machines and strategies aimed at efficiency, however it is difficult to find them outside the capitalist logic. It is a constant joke among board game enthusiasts that the act of playing games often resembles that of an accountant.

Again, there are nuances in the issues raised. Most of the pleasures taken from this rationality, from the puzzle of efficiency in games, are valid and can even teach us about social and economic dynamics – in addition to being aesthetic experiences, enjoyed in different ways by players. However, the concepts of capitalism are persuasive in several productions. Dyer-Whiterford and de Peuter (2009, p. 192, our translation) say that video games can be "machines of subjectivation", which "simulate the normalized subjectivities of a global capitalist order— consumer, commander, commanded, cyborg, criminal— not to mention the rapid shedding and swapping between identities". As we briefly reflected, all the relationships that exist when we play contribute to the production of meaning. Roles, even abstract ones, guide us in our behavior when playing. The spatial relationship with the board game itself suggests interesting relationships: a top-down view, the display of players' power over the world model and its components.

Fantasies of Mars: it is easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism

In the previous subtopic, we saw how a specific theme of games, colonization, expresses neoliberal values. Games look to the past and find reproductions of the present. David Praschak, Stefan Ancuta and Max F. Schmidt (2020) suggest that strategy games can function as a neoliberal historiography. The researchers argue that aspects of "historical performativity already constitute history on a diegetic level, and most closely resemble historical reenactment" (Praschak et al., 2020, p. 81). Thus, they argue that neoliberalism is the moral code of most strategy games, leading to individualistic behavior by players, who only seek self-protection and survival in this system. The players seek the concentration of power and the unstoppable growth of their wealth and points – which, following the myth of meritocracy, only depend on themselves and on the exploitation of others. There are reasons for connect these ideologies to strategy games:

> This strategic approach to problem solving is one of the reasons why neoliberalism was adapted so eagerly by the strategy games genre. They are fueled by a constant need for numbers which explain the situation, ranking the strategic decisions of the players through their success in the narrative. Conflict between entities is the foundational principle [...] by rules that cannot be meaningfully changed, determining the players' experiences as well as directing their outcomes. As mentioned above, the outcome of this competition is eliminatory, Neoliberal thinking is, in that sense, integral to the strategy experience overall, making it necessary to pursue growth and expansion, which in turn secure earlier earnings (Praschak et al., 2020, p. 85).

The neoliberal ideology, precisely because it is the hegemonic one, is inserted into the entire fabric of society, also modifying our view of the past and our ability to envision different futures. Since the 1980s, thinkers have meditated on this alienation, this blurring of vision. Mark Fisher (2020) coined the concept of "capitalist realism", which can be summarized by the phrase "it is easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism". The current state of capitalism has compromised our imagination to think and fight for other social systems, consenting to the little that is offered to us.

In board game medium, the notion of capitalist realism is easily identified in games that take place in space and in the future of humanity. Several space games are based on the 4X pillar, which becomes even more engaging with the intersubjective component of political relationships between players. The fantasy setting of space allows the more violent and amoral side of imperialism to emerge without feeling the weight of the past.

By funneling the theme, we arrive at a trend that tells us even more about today's projected future:

games about Mars colonization. While Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos – the personifications of contemporary neoliberalism – dispute the colonization of the red planet, a range of productions about the phenomenon are released. Board Game Geek has 140 games and expansions registered under the Mars tag, most of the last 10 years. Games like Terraforming Mars, On Mars, and First Martians: Adventures on the Red Planet.

Paul Booth (2021) identified the trend and devoted a chapter of his book to analyze the link between games situated on Mars with neoliberalism and colonization. By applying what he calls ludic discourse analysis (LDA) in the workings of the mechanics of worker allocation, he recognizes the main discourses of the game. Worker placement refers to the assignment of limited pieces to perform jobs or acquire limited resources. What this mechanics expresses in the Mars colonization scenario is that the development of the space colony depends on "equal access to unequal resources" (Booth, 2021), as there will always be incentives for competition, to arrive before the other, restraining attempts at union. This dynamic is even more latent because colonization, in these games, is articulated by corporations. In Terraforming Mars – fourth on the Board Game Geek's list of best games – players hire different corporations with different specialties and methods. Booth analyzes, in Martians: A Story of Civilization, the link between resource scarcity and the corporate race:

> Ideologically, this neoliberal discourse also fits with the emphasis on corporations in the theme. Neoliberalism is a political philosophy that favors free-market capitalism and laissez-faire economic politics. One of the major tenets of neoliberalism is that the free market will solve or prevent many problems from occurring [...]. While the creators of Martians could have used any thematic rationale for how Mars was settled (different international space agencies? Hubs with different leaders? Governments?), the choice to use corporations in the theme and innate competition over limited resources in the mechanics echoes with a discourse of contemporary neoliberal capitalism (Booth, 2021)

To identify how these characteristics of neoliberalism manifest themselves in games, we will use Terraforming Mars as an illustration. The game published by FryxGames pervasively integrates not only its mechanics with competition between players, but also with what they share. Terraforming Mars is an asymmetrical game, meaning that the participants control different companies in the race to colonize Mars, with different skills and specialties. However, they build together the geographic, economic, biological and climatic characteristics of the planet.

The goal is to have the highest amount of victory points when Mars is habitable for humans. This endgame condition is not defined by an exact number of rounds, but by triggers activated by the set of player actions. Placing terrain tiles on the planet's general board and playing cards increase the temperature, oxygen level and the amount of oceans. When all three elements reach certain markers, the game is over. In this way, players control the game time, speeding up or delaying the colonization process. Certain actions provide bonuses to other players, depending on the cards and assets in play, also representing a process of economic interconnection.

In short, victory points correspond to economic and territorial influence. Every round, players have available a set of general actions, actions generated by playing cards, and a personal board with the resources. In order to achieve the greatest number of points and profit, they carry out what is, in board games, called engine building: an individual system to obtain maximum efficiency through the links between actions and generation of resources. Much of the pleasure of Terraforming Mars comes from success or experimentation with its efficient machine.

The foundation of the game, the engine building and the systems shared by the players, indicate two characteristics of neoliberalism: the belief that the free market and competition will always result in a positive development of space and that the accumulation of wealth of an individual is the result of its merit alone. However, the themes of some letters and their art, involving narratives and fantasies of the future, shows an ironic, cynical approach. It is a postmodern position, which, even knowing and disagreeing

with the current ideology, considers the only option to integrate with it with cynicism. Theorists such as Fredric Jameson (2016) and Vladimir Safatle (2008) write about this condition of late capitalism, whose representations are in force in the communication and artistic media.

Games about the colonization of Mars work with an imaginary that is palpable. Big companies are investing huge amounts of capital in the new space race, which has geopolitical conflicts even ignored by the aforementioned games – the public-private partnership in the US, the interest of China and Russia in space. Some games have a bit of irony in their representation of the future, like Terraforming Mars. However, none of them imagine a future different from what is in course.

Final remarks: claiming the present, imagining a future

In this article, we have covered only a small field of the intersections between modern tabletop games and neoliberalism. Studies can be carried out on the condition of workers in industry, game distribution and the production of components in the boxes. Or on the players, whether in game reception or demographic analysis. Or even specific games and mechanics in relation to capitalism.

However, in these conclusions, we propose only two discussions: one related to the alternative directions that the board games market already shows and can follow; and another about the unusual, and even counter-hegemonic and decolonial ways that we can see the phenomenon of tabletop games.

With the growth of the analog games industry and their legitimacy, there is more diversity in the audience – or at least a willingness to engage with the medium. In addition, more accessible ways to play were developed, such as digital platforms, player encounters in public places and specialized stores – of course, keeping the still relatively high entry monetary values. The Scramble for Africa controversy itself – which would have been ignored or even celebrated a few years ago – indicates a portion of the public connected to social agendas.

It's still too little. However, due to the popularization of the medium, some answers emerge. The mainstream market publishes games to combat colonizers, such as Spirit Island, although they do not necessarily assume a counter-hegemonic stance. Players organize themselves to spread the medium to new – and more diverse groups –, in addition to seeking alternative ways to distribute and preserve games. Digital media make it possible to experience games distributed by fans, which can also be printed. Practices that big companies in the field are increasingly fighting with the official integration of games in digital spaces.

Even more important is the emergence and funding of counter-hegemonic and decolonial artists and developers. We have examples of radical games – Bloc by Bloc: The Insurrection Game and collectives like TESA Collective. In Brazil, there are initiatives and works that aim to make the board game culture more diverse and inclusive. Creator Rennan Golçalves, from New Players Studios, develops actions around the AFROgames movement, based on three pillars: protagonism, afrocentricity and representation (Meeplebr jogos, 2020). His game studio "seeks to bring games with innovative themes giving prominence to black people and their culture"[3]. Black authors such as Talita Rhein, Sanderson Virgolino and Valter Vispo renew the national market with ideas different from the hegemonic Eurocentric and North American standards. Games like Grafito, Quilombolas and Cangaço work with Brazilian and historical elements. There are efforts to reproduce the narratives of native peoples, such as Kakrove, called by its creator, Aredze Xukurú, "the first wargame based on Brazilian indigenous culture".

The other direction we mentioned starts by looking at other tabletop games phenomena. In parallel with the popularization of the Catan-inspired lineage of modern games, a culture of tabletop RPGs and narrative games developed with diverse proposals, mainly grouping queer communities. In Brazil,

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[3] Retrieved May 15, 2020 from: https://www.instagram.com/newplayerstudios/.

we have the example of Kalymba RPG, by Craftando Jogos, "epic action-adventure RPG inspired by the cultures and mythologies of the African continent"[4]. Phenomena that forums such as the Board Game Geek ignore or have difficulty cataloging, in addition to having little adherence to specialized media. In these independent spaces, card games and board games appear with new proposals.

We can also look at tabletop games and ludic experiences outside of these defined marketing circles. As we write about modern tabletop games, people play a variety of card games with conventional decks, marked by regional variants and changeable rules. People play with what's available and give new meanings to artifacts: the swap game with bootleg Yu-Gi-Oh! cards, the house rules of War and Monopoly, the party games conducted by decks or just by imagination. As Milton Santos (2006, p. 221) indicates, the true artistic creativity that emerges today is in the "opaque urban areas", in popular areas, ignored by the government and the market, in contrast to the "illuminated", softened and addicted by a technical rationalism of mass culture. Perhaps tabletop games were never dead or stagnant for starts.

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Lucas Marques dos Santos is a Masters student of Communication in School of Architecture, Arts, Communication and Design from Paulista State University (FAAC-UNESP) and a member of the research group MIDIAisthesis - Cultura Midiatizada e Experiência Estética. Degree of Social Communication – Journalism   at School of Architecture, Arts, Communication and Design from Paulista State University . In this article, he contributed to the concept of the research; development of theoretical debate; data interpretation; support on text revision; manuscript writing and foreign language reviewer.

Laan Mendes de Barros is PhD on Communication in School of Communication and Arts of University of São Paulo (ECA-USP), with postdoctoral in Université Grenoble Alpes. He is a professor and researcher at the School of Architecture, Arts, Communication and Design from Paulista State University (FAAC-UNESP), permanent professor and coordinator of Communication Postgraduate Program . In this article, he contributed with the direction of the research concept; theoretical debate and data interpretation tutoring; manuscript writing and foreign language reviewer.