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From The Scratchware Manifesto to Game Workers Unite: manifestos and labor claims in two decades of indie video games

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Abstract

The article analyzes *The Scratchware Manifesto* (2000), considering the development of indie games and the transformations in the production and creation of games in neoliberal capitalism. Therefore, we approach the textual genre manifesto as a sociocultural practice of transformation that presents limitations because of its Eurocentric nature, and the debate of *The Scratchware Manifesto* was held in dialogue with other manifestos, such as the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (MARX; ENGELS, 2012) and *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* (ANTROPY, 2012), among others. In addition, we point out some processes of creation, production and circulation of indie games, from their alignment or not with the market, as well as the labor precariousness. Finally, we indicate initiatives that are promoting alternative relationships of indie game creation, as well as other relationships with work in the video game industry.

Keywords

Scratchware Manifesto; Video game; Indie; Capitalism; Neoliberalism.

A new hope

In the year 2000, some unidentified game designers published *The Scratchware Manifesto* on the internet. The three-part text – Prelude to Revolution, Know your Enemy, and What is Scratchware? – consists of a critical analysis of the state of the video game industry at that time, especially in the United States. The manifesto pointed out problems that were becoming current and normalized, considering a commercial production of just over 30 years, such as the choice to imitate existing game genres that would be safe investments, instead of innovating; the labor model with many hours of work; and the publication of games with bugs, consequences of exhausting work. In addition, increasingly, game production began to receive more and more investments, becoming an industry that, therefore, expected (and still expects) huge profits. Thus, the authors defined this form of work as a "dysfunctional business model", which remains until today, especially in companies that develop triple-A games¹.

To change this scenario, the *Manifesto* proposed another type of game, called scratchware, which was the opposite of what had become the dominant form in the market and should be accessible (both for its value and the form of acquisition), of high quality, replayable, of short duration, created by small teams (no more than 3 people), and focused on 2D art, which is faster and more economical to develop and has an aesthetic potential of many possibilities.

The Scratchware Manifesto has become a call to revolution against the game industry and for the protection of video games, which can be considered as a call to independent video games, free of business structures. Indeed, the *Manifesto* resulted in a movement against the industry in the years that followed and possibly inspired a series of independent productions, scratchware games, which presented themselves as antimarket. However, increasingly, independent games distanced themselves from political and aesthetic anti-capitalist positions and got closer to the idea of indie as just without corporate funding, self-published, and so forth.

In consequence of that, we perceive, in different contexts of contemporary video game production, the same problems pointed out in the *Manifesto*, but in a more intensified way, as the result of neoliberal processes of video game appropriation. This is observed in different aspects, both because the economic configurations of game production are increasingly concentrated *in the hands* of large corporations and because the intersection of several social axes is not yet effective in video games. It is an aspect that the *Manifesto* did not even contemplate, which can be observed in the fact that the text does not call for the diversity of subjects (people) in the production of games, rather to a generic diversity of creation.

In view of such context, we analyze *The Scratchware Manifesto* (henceforth *TSM*), 21 years after its publication, considering the development of indie games and the transformations that we can observe in the production and creation of games within the neoliberal form of capitalism. Therefore, we begin with a consideration on the textual genre *manifesto* as a sociocultural practice that presents limitations because of its Eurocentric nature, as well as on possible dialogues of *The Scratchware Manifesto* with other manifestos on video games and divergent thinking, such as *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Marx & Engels, 2012); *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Drop-outs, Queers, Housewives, and People Like you are Taking Back an Art Form* (Antropy, 2012); *Manifesto for a ludic century* (Zimmerman, 2013); and, after, *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the late Twentieth Century* (Haraway, 2016; 2009).

As a second step, we comment on some processes that are part of the indie game project present in the production of games nowadays to contemplate the forms of alignment, or not, with the market. In addition, we approach aspects of the precariousness of video game work and elements related to the forms of work in video games in the Brazilian context.

¹ Games produced with higher development and marketing budgets.

In the final part, we point out some movements that can be recognized as a future beyond the neoliberal co-optation networks of the video game industry, such as unionization, production, and game sharing initiatives. Moreover, the future of video games needs to be thought of broadly, which means to state that the necessary movement must be intersectional and decolonial since unidirectional approaches will not be able to transform a logic that has lasted for more than 500 years. In other words, it is necessary to confront the different axes of oppression of colonial logic in its neoliberal capitalist form.

Manifest 101

In the historiography of the manifesto as a genre, different researchers, such as Janet Lyon², Anna Lawton³, Marjorie Perloff⁴, among others, have focused on this textual form, pointing out its political nature, but which has changed over time into a type of challenge, a calling, to a group or institution (Amidon, 2003). Although the manifesto is understood by the studies of textual genres as a text that uses the force of language as a form of rupture and resistance, it remains tied to an understanding of the world that is Eurocentric, as its first occurrences dealt only with European contexts, based on these experiences, and the subsequent texts followed recurrent characteristics of those occurrences, such as dissatisfaction with a given fact, list of problems, calling to a group or institution, formation of a group, and so on (Amidon, 2003).

Therefore, we understand that any manifesto, by its nature centered on the European experience, is able of being a call to rupture to the point where its limitations become evident, either by the fact that it is not able to contemplate diversity in the necessary changes or by the fact that leaves out aspects that the author (or authors) of the manifesto considers that they are not of interest to him or she (or they) and should be addressed by identities that may benefit from such elements. This reveals the colonial roots of the manifest as the hierarchies of power subjugate the diverse subjects/the diverse identities to the unique point of view of the dominant colonial subject.

In any case, studies of textual genres agree, and so do we, that discourse contemplates the inexhaustible possibility of human activities, as Bakhtin proposed (1992, p. 279). Thus, we adopt this premise to think about the manifesto and, later, our specific object, *The Scratchware Manifesto* (2000). Therefore, we understand that the speech and textual genres encompass more than recurrent elements (grammatical or stylistic), they consider the communicative need of a community in space and time, with whom the manifesto dialogues.

Hence, we consider the manifesto as a process that is part of a "(...) broader sociocultural context which was the exigency for their production" (Amidon, 2003, p. 13). This context does not fail to interact with the ways in which cultural communities communicate and the same linguistic elements that can be observed in other communicative circumstances, throughout their historical uses, reflect any change in social life in the discourse genres (Bakhtin, 1992, p. 286), which reinforces the idea that it is necessary to reflect on a textual gender in its spatiotemporal situation, as it is not a static form.

In this sense, our approach to *TSM* (2000) is based on the idea that "the manifesto is a genre which calls for action, for agents to gather together and challenge existing political and aesthetic institutions and movements" (Amidon, 2003, p. 13), but understands the limitations of the gender, which, perhaps, guide us beyond the manifesto. Furthermore, we understand that this call to action stems from obvious problems in the speech production situation and that are reported in a given manifesto, which becomes

² Lyon, J. (1999). *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern*. Ithaca: Cornell UP.

³ Lawton, A. (Ed.). (1998). *Russian Futurism Through its Manifestoes, 1912-1928* (A. Lawton & H. Eagle, Trads). Ithaca: Cornell UP.

⁴ Perloff, M. (1986). *The Futurist Moment: Avant Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

part of the text as "formal features of the genre" (Amidon, 2003, p. 19).

In addition, our point of view follows the path of investigating the possibility of manifestos acting as forms that propose "breaks from traditional aesthetic, cultural, and political forms" (Winkiel, 2008, p. 1) as they are representations of the "quintessential gesture of modernity" (Winkiel, 2008, p. 1), with modernity being "a complex narrative, whose point of origin was Europe, a narrative that builds Western civilization by celebrating its achievements while hiding, at the same time, its darker side, 'coloniality'" (Mignolo, 2017, p. 2), which will be discussed later.

As we have already mentioned, each and every manifesto has its limits, which can also be an aspect related to the genre itself as it can call to action, but not necessarily cause the action, thus becoming a 'to come', as thought by Jacques Derrida: not a future that may come to be, programmed, but, rather, a future (*l'avenir*) that is unexpected, unforeseen, that may arise when we are not even waiting for it (Ziering et al., 2003, 28s). Manifestos, in a sense, comprise desires for a "better" future (in quotation marks, because that future depends on the point of view of the text), but which need the participation of different agents. Moreover, perhaps, what we need to make a call to change is in a field other than that of the manifesto, essentially textual, but in a field of change by practice.

The Scratchware Manifesto (2000) comprises the idea of breaking with the context in which it is written, pointing out identified problems and proposing divergent paths to change. It indicates both modifying the ways of making video games in aesthetic and cultural terms, as well as political ones, which led us to relate the text with other manifestos, prior and subsequent, which present themselves as a need for action against capitalist logic, earlier, and the neoliberal logic of today, both supported by "coloniality" (Quijano, 1998; 2005), this being a colonial matrix of power that did not cease with the end of colonialism or with the *independence* of the former colonies, but which remained in operation in modernity based on the hierarchies of power and subordination of the subjects (control of knowledge and subjectivities; of economics; of authority; and of gender and sexuality) and continues to be reproduced in neoliberal capitalism.

This implies understanding a relationship of elements that precede the very existence of capitalism, but which guarantee its permanence and even the idea that there is no other viable system, as these elements have historically been naturalized after the invasions of the Americas, the enslavement of the peoples of Africa, and colonization, which resulted in the formation of the first major groups holding capital and the *right* of exploitation of peoples and identities understood as inferior. Thus, we understand the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Marx; Engels, 2012) as one of the first texts that addressed the relationship between the division of labor and class stratification, a problem that endures.

We discerned in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, first published in London in 1848 and in Germany in 1872, the traces for the ideas that fueled *TSM* (2000). This is due to the fact that there is a strong element of class between the two texts, an aspect that is not usually addressed in video game studies (Game Studies). In this sense, the act of reflecting on the classes of people who work in the video game industry, whether directly or indirectly, takes on a secondary role with regard to video game criticism.

The *Manifesto of the Communist Party* had the task of "proclaiming the inevitable and imminent dissolution of modern bourgeois property" (Marx; Engels, 2012, p. 9). The text defines "the revolutionary role that capitalism played in the past" (Marx; Engels, 2012, p. 31) and highlights elements that were crucial for the growth of the bourgeoisie to take place: the invasion of America⁵ and the circumnavigation of the African continent (Marx; Engels, 2012, p. 34). These elements enabled the development of large industry in Europe that used the resources of colonized territories, generating a world market for production and labor exploitation. The *Manifesto of the Communist Party* argued that, just as the bourgeoisie developed, so did the proletariat, which "constitutes a truly revolutionary class" (Marx; Engels, 2012, p. 46). Furthermore, it

⁵ The authors wrote "discovery", but it is not appropriate for us to use this concept.

upheld that the proletariat would use its political strength to deprive the bourgeoisie of capital, proposing measures that would be different for each country, such as "expropriation of land ownership and use of land rents in State expenditures", "suppression of the right of inheritance", "public and free education for all children", among others (Marx; Engels, 2012, pp. 58–59).

The *Manifesto of the Communist Party* was a communist utopia. We know, however, that it did not take place and the bourgeoisie not only remained in power but also expanded its reach. In this sense, it seems evident to us the limitation of the manifesto, even though it called for an entire class to transform its place from the oppressed to "an association in which the free development of each one is the condition for the free development of all" (Marx; Engels, 2012, p. 60). The social and political elements that we observed in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, even though they predicted different contexts, were centered on the European experience of life and work. Furthermore, the text was not able to recognize certain elements of capitalism that have only become effective and have been maintained (and still do) precisely by the history of the division of labor since the invasions of the Americas, the exploitation and enslavement of peoples of Africa and the *orientalization* of the non-European world (and later European and later Anglo-American) through colonization. Thus, any transformation that is wished in a manifesto, one that breaks with structures of oppression, must also be thought of in an epistemological way. In this sense, transformation also needs to reach mentalities, which means "to epistemologically transcend, that is, decolonize the Western canon and epistemology" (Grosfoguel, 2008, p. 116).

Not directly related to *TSM*, the book *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Drop-outs, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form* (2012), by Anna Antropy, an American game designer, also presents an alternative way of thinking about creating and even producing video games. Our choice is not fortuitous, but guided by the fact that the text, published 12 years after *TSM*, indicates the same problems of the video game industry and highlights aspects that are fundamental to our debate, indicating the need for decentralization of dominant discourse in video games.

Although the text is not entitled *manifesto*, it is not necessary for it to be. And this is the case of *Rise of the Video Game Zinesters*, since it brings a review of the state of the industry so far (its problems and the problem the author has with video games) and makes a call to all people to create, make and share games. In this review, she identifies the basic *trope* of contemporary games: men shooting men in the face, which may vary for "women shooting men in the face".

This limitation of experience becomes obvious when Antropy compares video games with other media, such as cinema and comics, with regard to the diversity of representations and stories. However, the limitation is not restricted to this, and the author reminds us how game creation is trapped in the logic of capitalist production and that it is necessary to get rid of it to create games. In the same manner that *TSM* indicates how games should/could be made to move away from market production, Antropy also suggests some ways to develop games as there were usually technological barriers that kept people away from video game creation.

In this sense, she proposes that people should not worry about making an original game, but strange games – "Make weird shit." (Antropy, 2012), people should use the resources they have, that is, with limitations, they should create by themselves and that games can have literally any theme. This idea of video games is what makes Antropy think of the game as a zine, as something revolutionary and artistic, an aspect that the author addresses at the beginning of the text. The possibility of everyone taking part in the creation of games would be the great turn towards a set of diverse video games as well as the themes that would differ from the trope "man shooting man in the face", which can enable the representation of other experiences of life, diversity, something that is lacking in the dominant game industry.

Thus, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* (2012) works as a retake of *TSM* in order to expand it, in the sense of thinking about a diverse creation/production. However, the call in the text can be understood as

directed more to people who are not making games than to those who are creating video games (or are part of the industry). From our point of view, it is a call that should be embraced by all people interested in games, because we consider them cultural objects so ubiquitous in contemporary societies. Beyond a video game outside the logic of the industry, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* (2012) also takes up the aesthetic element that was addressed in the *TSM*, which highlights the fact that a single validated aesthetic prevails in the current video game, a legitimation that has occurred due to sales numbers of a certain game around the world.

Another manifesto that we are interested in commenting on is Eric Zimmerman's *Manifesto for a Ludic Century* (2013). The text, which is called a manifest, needs to be understood as such, but, unlike the others mentioned, it does not call the action nor proposes itself as a call to break with the current situation, in fact problematic, of the video game industry. Zimmerman's manifest takes the path of concordance, of thinking about the century we live in as the *playful century*, and of being uncritical about any aspect related to both the production and reception of games. The author presents thirteen topics to describe how he understands such a century. Among these, he addresses ideas such as: the hypothesis that game experiences will replace linear media; the homogenization of the relationship of different cultural communities with information and its systems; the need for effective playfulness in social contexts; the idea that all people should think like designers and be game designers; and the idea that games and play are important because they are beautiful; among others (Zimmerman, 2013).

Zimmerman's manifesto evidences a ubiquitous reality in different contexts of knowledge production about video games, a reality marked by an uncritical, Euro and Anglocentric reading of the world. The *Manifesto for Ludic Century* is much more about a statement of agreement with all practices present in industry and games than the opposite and calls potential readers to agree that we need to accept the game as it is, because the playful element is what will make a creative and innovative century effective.

In this sense, we can perceive that the limitations of a manifesto are not limited to what it can do, but also to the limitation of the author's critical reflection on the world. This, however, is not related to a geographical issue, of authors from the North or South, but, rather, an epistemological matter, of knowledge control, as Quijano (2005) suggests. Eric Zimmerman, game designer and author, not only proposed a negative function (in view of the *objectives* of a manifesto) but also did not contemplate cultural, social, political, economic, and aesthetic differences, to mention just a few dimensions. Nevertheless, it is a text that dialogues with *TSM* (2000) for having a romanticized element about the reception and production of games, besides considering the video game as beautiful (something that can be related to the statement in the *TSM* that games are art, without presenting any debate about it), without any serious consideration. This manifest appears in this debate to show the death of potentiality and critical sense necessary when making video games today.

Thus, we can think of other potentialities and limitations for these texts, resuming the role of manifests as a legitimizing genre of art in modernity (Bortolucce, 2015), taking into account, as a starting point for this approach, the fact that *TSM* openly defines digital games as an art form; it is not our intention, in this text, to discuss the complexities and controversies of this position. The manifestos published by the so-called historical avant-garde at the beginning of the 20th century were fundamental to organize the concept of artistic institutions through direct criticism. By presenting themselves as opposition to the practices of production, curation, distribution, and access of institutionalized art of that period, the avant-garde were pioneers in recognizing and describing this system, thus enabling new strategies of production, association, and organization among artists. In his study of the avant-garde, from a perspective centered on critical theory, Peter Bürger (2008) presents the thesis that, with these movements, art entered its stage of self-criticism and that only from this perspective it is possible to objectively understand the previous stages of its development, as well as to delimit and question what art would be as an institution

from a historicizing perspective. Therefore, despite the failure of the avant-garde attack against the art institution, which aimed to promote a production that brought art closer to everyday praxis, this offensive was successful in the sense of historically positioning its practices and enabling future resistance. However, it is important to take into account that the contribution of manifestos is limited by their Eurocentric perspective, even when their content is critical to Eurocentrism, and that, as a legitimizing genre of art in modernity, manifestos share the same colonizing epistemologies and institutional structures that propose to deconstruct.

The Scratchware Manifesto and *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* (2012), so, also acted as enablers of the stage of self-criticism in the production of video games, recognizing and naming the institutionalized practices of the game industry. Nevertheless, they also share with the historical avant-garde the failure of not being able to demobilize the triple-A video game as an institution, despite having catalyzed alternative forms of production beyond the industry, enabling some new possible models within the broad and contradictory spectrum that we know as indie video games.

Scratch, indie and the neoliberal co-optation: about failures

The Scratchware Manifesto (2000) has a relevant historical role in the general recognition of the video game industry's problems and of the difficulty to solve them, since such problems concern not only those who produce the games but several other aspects. We have already commented on the *TSM*'s premises, but it's worth repeating them in order to point out its limitations, as well as the paths that made the creation and production of indie games a possibility, as "the growth of independent games in the mid to late 2000s appeared, on the surface, to have answered the manifesto's call" (Williams, 2017, p. 215) — even though it has also followed other paths.

In its three-part, or phases, presentation, *TSM* emphasizes that the game industry does not concern itself with creative and innovation perspectives that do not fit into what the market has already approved and considers as sure profit, making video games a doomed imitation from tedious creation processes. The three phases proposed by the manifesto called the game developer community to action in order to break with the already established structures, as we mentioned.

One point presented in Phase one, *Prelude to the Revolution*, comments on the problem of big teams, and how scratchware games are creations of small groups or one or two people. What the manifesto fails to address (besides pointing out that it is not productive to have a large team, since the production of a game does not need so many people) are the distance among team members because of the specialization of tasks and the consequent dismissal of people who have already finished their work in a project, as well as the need to create groups within the same project, taking into consideration the enormous planning of some games, which leads to a distance from the reality of the work they experience.

Although Greg Costikyan (Designer X in *TSM*) in his two-part *Death to the Games Industry* (2005) article⁶ does not consider the manifesto naïve, the text presents several points that lead to that conclusion, the same way it leads towards an argument reproducing several discourses from the "gamer culture", reinforcing the idea that creating games is a "one man's work" and that money isn't necessary to make games (but who pays the rent, utilities and grocery bills?). Phase one of the manifesto also ends its presentation by stating that they want to make games an art — an aspect that we have already commented on as complex and controversial —, and recognizing the industry's problems as somewhat pervasive.

There is, in fact, a utopian content in this part of the manifesto, relating to the desire to leave the dystopia of the game industry, but this same utopia centers itself on the expectation of a way of making games that can only relate to what Designer X imagined. Yet, he proposes a list of rights (inspired by

⁶ Retrieved May 26, 2021, from <https://www.escapistmagazine.com/v2/death-to-the-games-industry-part-i/>.

Scott McCloud's 1988 or 1990 *Creator's Bill of Rights*⁷) that games developers should have. Besides this content, there is a discourse of love for work, observed in the concept of "we make games because we are gamers", which reveals an agreement with the neoliberal logic that operates precisely in the exploration of freedom, since "everything that belongs to practices and expressive forms of freedom — emotion, game and communication, starts to be explored" (Han, 2017). This discourse of love for video games is central both in the construction of a masculinist, white and colonial hegemonic ideology in the industry and in the silencing of debates on social and political issues (Bulut, 2020), which maintain the structures of oppression even among independent developers, leading to a relationship of cruel optimism of abusive work practices such as extensive and frequent overtime, known as *crunch time* (Cote & Harris, 2021).

The following parts are more descriptive: phase two deals with the system behind the industry and debating the elements of capitalist and neoliberal co-optation of the game industry, while phase three describes the scratchware game. Phase two shows how the game production works, stressing the aspects of power and money in the industry. In this sense, corporations are the central figures in this system, ensuring the greatest potential profit to shareholders and paying the lowest wages they can, and not acknowledging, in work positions, issues of gender, race, disability, etc.

These corporations occupy more and more decisive positions on the production chain, which results in precarious work, compartmentalization of labor relations and job relocation (besides the aspects of exploitation of materials from countries in the Global South for the creation and maintenance of hardware equipment). Another aspect that we observed, in the last ten years, is the social clamor for companies to take a stand on pressing cultural issues, such as machismo, racism and sexism. Thus, they continue to carry out predominantly oppressive economic policies, while promoting campaigns that show them as socially conscious. The dominance of corporations is part of the logic of coloniality and complements the processes of individualization of life stimulated by neoliberalism, since we can consider this yet another system to end collective movements, insulating subjects as a result.

In this phase two, *Know your Enemy*, the manifesto points out the fact that work practices are in dire conditions, but one must highlight that the viewpoint comes from the US context, as the precariousness of work is the rule in the reality of countries in the Global South. In addition, we learned from this phase of the *TSM* that corporations invest a lot in marketing to convince their consumers that they are aware of cultural issues, and that they also invest a lot to convince people in the game industry that organizing and unionizing makes little sense, as they are part of a new economy, not merely factory workers. The idea in this excerpt of the manifesto, which compares corporations that control the world with vampires, echoes what Mark Fisher introduced in *Capitalist Realism*⁸ (2020), that "capital is an abstract parasite, an insatiable vampire and zombie-maker; but the living flesh it converts into dead labor is ours, the zombies it makes are us" (Fisher, 2020, p. 28). Since capitalism in its neoliberal form co-opts all forms of subjectivities, it creates subjects who live and work only to optimize themselves (when, in fact, it's the company that earns more from it), obliterating the potential of the community.

The discourse against unionization is very present in the production of games, in different contexts; in Brazil, considering that many people who work in the area have embraced the idea that unionization is a process that only serves to give strength and money to unions and power to the State that charges for labor rights, work relations depend on the hiring of individual micro-entrepreneurs in work regimes that are not properly regulated, and partnership agreements in small groups; there are also situations where slightly larger companies offer different contracts. Data on these labor relationships are available on the 2nd Census of the Brazilian Game Industry (Sakuda et al., 2018) demonstrating, for example, that most Brazilian companies outsource their workload (35, 4%), followed by the hiring according to the

⁷ Retrieved May 26, 2021, from <https://www.scottmccloud.com/4-inventions/bill/rights.html>.

⁸ Originally published as *Capitalist realism: is there no alternative?*, by Zero Books in 2009.

Consolidation of Labor Laws exigencies (28%) and informal work (18.5%), and ending with researchers/scholarship holders (8.8%), interns (8.5%) and young apprentices (0.6%). These are less regulated labor relations that delimit how capitalism shapes the view of subjects about work — instead of thinking of themselves as workers, a class of working people with the possibility of revolution, “neoliberalism transforms workers in entrepreneurs” (Han, 2017), which ends up reflecting in the way companies treat these people.

Perhaps one of the best points in the manifesto is the call for the organization of a class of workers who demand their rights. This specific appeal suggests the establishment of a new game industry, which could arise from new relations of creation and production. New ways of thinking about the world and acting on it require multifactorial positions — issues that, as we understand it, the *TSM* cannot contemplate, as it does not break with the structures of coloniality, which determine the relations of international division of labor, of racial/ethnic and gender/sex hierarchies, and aesthetic hierarchy, among others (Grosfoguel, 2008).

Therefore, we understand that the limitations of *TSM* (2000) result not only from the non-critical content but also from a possible lack of awareness of other ways of thinking about knowledge, other ways of reflecting on the world, other ways of relating to it. In this sense, we approached Donna J. Haraway’s manifesto, *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism at the End of the Twentieth Century*. We analyzed this text in dialogue with *TSM*, as it highlights theoretical and social practice aspects that, many times, were/are left out of reflections on social realities. Because it presents fundamental points for thinking about the relationship between people and technology, the *Cyborg Manifesto* also inaugurates a fundamental discourse in the field, something that the limitation of the *TSM* did not reach, but that is of capital importance in order to think about the game industry in the 21st century.

Originally published in 1985, the *Cyborg Manifesto* starts the conversation in its title, referencing Marx and Engels’ *Manifesto of the Communist Party* and proposes the emergence of a new creature that would combine both machine and organism, a hybrid of social reality and fiction — not corporeal, but a metaphor for a new way of living in a world that was then (and still is) dichotomous between science and technology. The text points out that such liberation from the structures of oppression will only arrive with an awareness of the scenario, which leads to the need for a genderless world, or, better yet, a post-gender world. In it, fractured identities would no longer support “natural” identity matrices or totalitarian constructions, since the “cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities, which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work” (Haraway, 2009, p. 45).

This whole, let’s say, proposal only becomes a possibility in the confusion of borders that it presents, as Haraway puts in the manifesto. So, it is not only a matter of problematizing gender, but, rather, a set of elements that sustain oppression, such as sexuality, the colonial idea of race and, also, technoscientific thinking that guarantees the existence of a system of domination marked by the dualism of, especially, sexual, racial and epistemological differences established by the masculinist view of whiteness, which influences different levels of social life. The *Cyborg Manifesto* called to action not only feminist-socialists, but all women, as well as the subjects of the queer movement, to take up a discourse that has historically been controlled by the white cishet man. The text reverberated and was fundamental for the research of Judith Butler, Paul Preciado and Gloria Anzaldúa.

One could say that the *Cyborg Manifesto* carries out what the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* did not achieve — namely, to question the epistemological structures that maintain a system of domination based on difference. In the latter, the gender question is too subtle, only contemplating the existence of women as yet another instrument of production of the bourgeoisie; the same goes for the race aspect. We find it significant to mention the importance of returning to the *Cyborg Manifesto* to debate *The Scratchware Manifesto*, 21 years after its publication, because, we emphasize once again, a

text with progressive or even revolutionary positions, breaking away from video game production based on capitalist and neoliberal logic, is unable to address gender, racial or sexual issues because it centers itself on the experience of men or on a normalization of masculinist experience.

The closing of the manifesto, or Phase three, not only marks the characteristic aspects that scratchware games should include in their creation/production, but also states a problem that goes beyond video game production: the fact that the final product cost a lot for most people. Thus, the development and circulation of scratchware games would be an alternative to the triple-A industry games (which at the time of the manifesto cost around US\$ 50 and today cost around US\$ 70) to reach more geographically and financially diverse audiences.

Since the publication of *TSM* (2000), some aspects have become easier for those who want to produce scratchware games: there are, for example, multiple options for distribution and a larger dissemination of independent games on digital platforms, an increasing visibility of indie games in the specialized media and more free development tools. If back in the day, independent digital games circulated in a very specific niche, nowadays they are a full part of the institutionalized model of game production and circulation, being widely contemplated by major publishers such as Xbox Game Studio and Sony Interactive Entertainment (including the PlayStation Indies initiative).

One could consider this integration a failure of the indie video game project, since it results from the co-option of the independent production model by the industry, mainly through digital platforms that end up conditioning the working relationships of developers to their affordances. This process happens because the platforms act as infrastructures that enable the production, distribution, dissemination and monetization of digital games for independent developers who do not have access to these resources through a large game studio.

The access to the infrastructures enabling the development and sale of games without an employer as an intermediary is one of the central themes of *The Scratchware Manifesto* and, considering only this positioning of the text, we could then say that digital platforms were the way out sought by its authors. However, the platform ends up being an incomplete solution, as it will always end up limited to the functionalities and logic of the affordances of these platforms — which, while promoting a certain democratization of the digital games market, expressed by its growing occupation by independent titles and studios, also limit and shape this production according to their own policies. An example is the Unity platform, a game engine that facilitated access to 3D game development by offering tools that dispense with the creation of models for characters and scenarios from scratch, providing an extensive library of ready-to-use components. Unity expanded the spectrum of profiles of professionals working with game production and provided market access for many small studios, but also established itself as a type of aesthetic and technical monopoly for these products, standardizing the production of these independent games to their tools and logic (Chia et al., 2020).

Therefore, it is necessary to understand that overcoming the large employing company as the only intermediary for accessing the infrastructure of game production through the platform is an ambiguous position that causes a paradox to the independent video game: this is, at the same time, the main enabler of the triple-A resistance strategies proposed by the *TSM* and the main obstacle to the full realization of its main goal, the total break with the neoliberal logics of the games market. One also notices this ambiguity in the platform logics, which are heterogeneous and operate at different degrees of resistance. If, on the one hand, the aforementioned Unity acts as a monopoly, standardizing the production of digital games and intermediating their distribution, there are, on the other hand, platforms like Twine, which are central in the production of indie games that aim at more radical breaks with neoliberal logics of the triple-A video game (Chia et al., 2020), as the work of Anthropy and his proposal of video games zines expressed in the manifesto *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* (2012).

The divergence of such relationships reflects the contradiction of the independent video game

project: the technical difficulties for the production of games in cooperative models are no longer a concern, despite the limitations and ambiguities of the platform, but, even so, the game industry hasn't become more democratized, a fact that highlights the limitations of the strategies adopted for this technical aspect. Both *TSM* and *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* (2012) bring proposals concerning the forms of production and creative design of games, but neither of them contemplate aspects that could determine the viability of distributing these products in the same technological ecosystem that allows them to exist — such as the problems of gatekeeping and the economy of attention in digital spaces, which make room for the co-option and precariousness of the indie creators. The gatekeeping happens when, by publishing games on digital platforms that provide a distribution structure and are intermediaries between game producers and consumers, the authors are at the mercy of the recommendation algorithms of these services, which decide who gets to be seen and who will end suffocated amidst the almost infinite amount of content available. With the high volume of independent productions, the dispute for audience takes place within artificial intelligences operating with insufficient transparent recommendation criteria, and usually favoring authors who already have visibility on the platforms. The economy of attention is central in this environment in which users browse through an enormous volume of entertainment options, with their attention disputed in online environments increasingly saturated by countless precarious creators, in a scenario so desolate that indie developers nicknamed *Indiepocalypse* (Pedercini, 2017).

Aiming to win the war for visibility in this *indiepocalyptic* desert of abundance, indie developers adapt not only the aesthetics and development tools of their games according to the platforms, but also their modes of reflection, self-definition and classification designed in order to better circulate in these environments mediated by artificial intelligences; we should not forget, either, that journalism and specialized game critics are also part of these same digital platforms. This situation is in the radar of both developers and researchers aligned with perspectives of anti-hegemonic rupture, such as, for example, Anthropy after the publication of *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* (2012), in its criticism of the reception of her game *Dys4ia* (Klepek, 2015); Pozo (2018) when commenting on the media co-option of the independent production of queer games through empathy; and Pieve, Rodrigues and Merkle (2020) in their survey of the taxonomy of LGBTQ games on the Itch.io platform.

Based on this observation, we can formulate the hypothesis that the failure of the indie project happened because of an incapacity to produce localized proposals, both in relation to technologies and to global contexts. These failures talk directly with many sociocultural aspects of how capitalism and neoliberalism appropriated forms of creation/production in order to update anti-system expressions so that they correspond to their objectives. In this sense, it was suitable that we commented on some neoliberal appropriations of the creation and production of video games, so that we could reflect on new perspectives of indie utopias, 21 years after the first manifesto for the independent video game.

What remains of scratch: last considerations on a future for indie games

The world as we experience it today, with acts such as privatizations and the political dormancy of its subjects (Fisher, 2020), although very natural to us (for that is how capitalist realism works), was almost unthinkable in the 1980s. These elements, plus the idea that the individual should not depend on the State, are common in neoliberal logic, as seen in different groups and communities — although there has been spots of resistance since the early 1970s, with the formation of a neoliberal state in Chile after the 1973 coup (Harvey, 2005).

This formation is relevant for the discussion because it works parallel to the growth and consolidation of the video game industry and to the way the economic policies applied to this industry reflect the “neoliberal state. (The freedoms) it embodies reflect the interests of private property owners,

businesses, multinational corporations, and financial capital” (Harvey, 2005). This resulted in the ways the game industry has stabilized and crystallized, the same forms addressed by *TSM* (2000), by *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* (2012) and on this article’s notes on both the game industry and the indie game.

Fisher established that “capitalism is inherently dysfunctional” (Fisher, 2020, p. 37). In the same way, the game industry is also dysfunctional, because it works with the same logic, as *The Scratchware Manifesto* pointed out when describing it as a “dysfunctional business model”. The different work contexts in this industry continue to reflect the characteristic insecurity of this model, marked by uncertainty and by increasingly precarious jobs. In addition, it continues to promote the compartmentalization of work relations, either through contracts that prevent colleagues from exchanging information about their specific functions within the projects, or through work division by gender and race. What the neoliberal colonization of video games has given us is a new form of colonization of subjectivities, both in the industry and in the communities of gamers. Therefore, it is relevant to locate how resistance spots are being held in this field in contemporaneity.

Over the two decades after *TSM* (2000) first came out, the idealization of overcoming the difficulties of production and distribution of games by individualistic and technical means, and the resistance against the collectivization of the labor cause in video games begins to be overcome, enabling new horizons for the independent video game. A landmark event in this renewal is the creation of the Game Workers Unite (GWU) at the 2018 US Game Developer Conference (GDCon) in response to an anti-union employers’ panel organized by the event. GWU, since then, has articulated itself as a horizontal organization of game industry workers that, while appropriating classic union practices, also adapts them to the specific context of work in digital games (Ruffino & Woodcock, 2021). It is also important to highlight that GWU works through local chapters, which privileges the regionalization of ways of thinking about independent video games. The Brazilian chapter, founded in April 2018, works through a profile on the social network Twitter⁹ and a server on the Discord platform.

The growing debates about the need for collective articulation of video game workers that gave rise to GWU also unfold in other forms of organization of local collectives with different approaches — which could focus on demands, class, identities or specific strategies. In Brazil, there are some examples of this plurality in initiatives such as Peteca¹⁰ and Firma GameDev¹¹.

Peteca defines itself as “an independent video game organization with national coverage” (Documento, 2019). It works through local cells and the organization of meetings by people called “pullers” (*puxadores*, in Portuguese), which propose, enable and record actions focused on production and working conditions in the independent video game scene. The “puller” system is rotating (a cell cannot have a fixed puller or a team of pullers) to guarantee horizontality in all decisions. It is also not allowed to organize meetings without sharing records of activities on the group’s Discord server, the collective’s official communication channel. Peteca also works as a support network for participants through the dissemination of games produced by its members, offering guidance on labor issues and sharing information and technical training. Those taking part of the group usually position themselves as being outside the traditional game market, preferring to work independently from local studios and companies, and the organization’s manifesto defines, among situations to be avoided, not “entering the market without a commitment to the society: unethical design, exploration of trends and maintenance of target audiences”. The organization’s logo embodies both the anarchist and communist symbols.

Firma GameDev, on the other hand, presents itself as a collective that brings “the social side of games and other art forms to gamedevs”, and is known for having a greater link to the commercial indie

⁹ Retrieved from https://twitter.com/GWU_Brasil.

¹⁰ The official site, with the group’s manifesto, is currently hosted at <http://peteca.online/>.

¹¹ The group’s official Twitter handle is <https://twitter.com/FirmaGamedev>.

games market than Peteca. Firma has initiatives to publicize games produced by members of the collective, and also organizes events and lectures, distributes anonymous forms to map working conditions in the Brazilian indie market, shares job vacancies and creates spaces for dialogue between workers. It also has a group focused solely on women video game workers, the Dev Migas +, which promotes job vacancies, creates dialogue spaces, mentoring and support groups, and shares contacts between the participants. Both the Firma and Dev Migas + focuses more on surveillance actions on companies and on the building and cultivation of ties between workers than on direct confrontation with the market, like Peteca. The parallel between these two organizations allows researchers to glimpse a plurality for the collectivization of labor agendas in video games.

Rise of the Videogame Zinesters (2012) brought a challenge to the hegemonic hetero-cis-normativity masculinist line of thought in the production of digital games, but still did not confront how the love for work can be pervasive also among queer indies, who shoulder the heavy responsibility to make the video game more inclusive in extremely precarious conditions (Ruberg, 2019). The movements of collectivization and unionizing in the game industry represent another stage in the proposition of an independent video game focused on valuing work that begins with the publication of *The Scratchware Manifesto* and advances with the *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*.

Finally, we understand the need that, besides the alternative movements of creation, production and circulation of video games, we should (and by *we*, read the players, the researchers and the designers) enable and promote the development of new political subjects, as suggested by Mark Fisher (2020) — people capable of rethinking and recreating the subjectivities dissolved by the neoliberal version of capitalism. Both the industry and the video game as a cultural object reflect many aspects of the world, since different games offer ample possibilities for the development of our avatars, which end up reproducing the neoliberal maxims of self-optimization and self-regulation — which, in turn, reinforces the colonization of subjectivities in game worlds. If a video game manifesto were to emerge in 2021, it should cover not only the aspects of labor relations and the influence of capital in the industry, but also how the representations and ways of experiencing the world within the dominant video game are building cultural models that often reflect the interests of the ruling classes.

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