

Platinum in games: a psychopolitical enunciative project

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Abstract

Based on two theoretical models – the Flow Psychology, by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and the tensive semiotics by Claude Zilberberg – this essay aims to analyze the values and the enunciative project of the platinum activity, which is precisely to complete all the challenges proposed by the game development team. The paper then focuses in understanding how the search for such strategy, of strong psychopolitical nature, impacts the enunciative project of the game itself, reducing the effect of the narrative proposal in the name of rewards that are outside the game, concerning the space of neoliberal values of the digital world.

Keywords

Digital games; Tensive semiotics; Flow; Enunciative project; Psychopolitics.

Introduction

Video game consumption is a solid phenomenon that drives a billion-dollar industry worldwide. According to Ryan Wyatt, director of Youtube¹, the platform had, in 2020, forty million channels focused on games, which added up to 100 billion hours of views in that same year. Some of these channels are even among the most popular not just in their segment, but across the entire platform.

Some of the producers and consumers of this content promote some sort of dissection of games, bringing together information, trivia, secret messages from the universe of specific games, developing guides and strategies to overcome the proposed challenges, as well as giving management tips for players to optimize their performance. To understand how this market interferes in the users' relationship with games, this paper adopts the perspective of Zilberberg's tensive semiotics and Csikszentmihalyi's psychological and positivist concept of *flow*. These two models will help understand the emotive conventions that permeate the activity of play.

Lastly, the paper proposes an answer to the following question: how does this “market” of gaming performance (hereafter referred to as the *platinum* or *platinum activity*) interfere with the emotive values proposed by the game. From the psychopolitical strategies of power, proposed by Byung-Chul Han regarding the neoliberal movements within the digital socialization space, and the critique of gamification, proposed by Goulart & Nardi, Conway, Woodcock and Johnson, among others, it becomes noticeable that the cultural manifestation of “platinum games” brings with itself a charge of activity control and exposure of an individual who seeks – through submission to the digital collective – validation of his illusion of “self-ownership”.

Presentation of the flow model

Flow is a concept coined by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. In his book, *Flow: the Psychology of Optimal Experience*, the author proposes that the characteristics of an enjoyable experience often involve “a sense that one’s skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand, in a goal-directed, rule-bound action system that provides clear clues as to how well one is performing” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, p. 71). When the activity seems too challenging, it creates anxiety and fatigue; when it is too banal, it generates boredom and a feeling of emptiness.

To define the elements that constitute this “pleasant experience”, the author uses the book *Man, Play and Games*, by Roger Caillois, in which there is a list of appropriate categories to represent the essence of playing, “a division into four main formulas, as the role of competition, luck, simulacrum or vertigo prevails in the considered games” (Caillois, 1990, p. 32)².

The four categories listed by Caillois are:

- *Agôn* (competition) – a category that comprises games such as chess, Olympic sports, and some board games, in which rules seek to simulate an equal playing field and fair play. “The *Agôn* presents itself as the pure form of personal merit and serves to manifest it” (Caillois, 1990, p. 35)³.

- *Alea* (luck) – it encompasses games such as lottery, heads-or-tails, and slot machines. These are games ruled by chance and luck, in which the player's abilities are not considered, as well as their previous

¹ Agrela, Lucas. (2020, December 10) YouTube teve 100 bilhões de horas assistidas de vídeos sobre games em 2020 [YouTube achieved 100 billion hours of watched videos on games in 2020]. Exame Magazine. Retrieved from: <https://exame.com/tecnologia/youtube-teve-100-bilhoes-de-horas-assistidas-de-videoes-sobre-games-em-2020/>.

² In the original: “*uma divisão em quatro rubricas principais, conforme predomine, nos jogos considerados, o papel da competição, da sorte, do simulacro ou da vertigem*”.

³ In the original: “*O Agôn apresenta-se como a forma pura do mérito pessoal e serve para o manifestar*”

history in the competition or their accumulated knowledge, abolishing natural or social advantages that may exist among the participants.

- *Mimicry* (simulacrum) – a category in which children's make-believe and military reenactments appear. In this instance, there is the creation of a temporary fictional universe, and all participants temporarily agree with the new rules of conduct, which aims to fascinate the viewer and participant.

- *Ilinx* (vertigo) – it comprises games such as circus acrobatics and extreme sports. In this classification, “The disturbance caused by vertigo is very often sought as an end in itself” (Caillois, 1990, p. 43)⁴. The search for adrenaline in these games is justified, according to the author, by the repressed desire for activities of disorder or destruction.

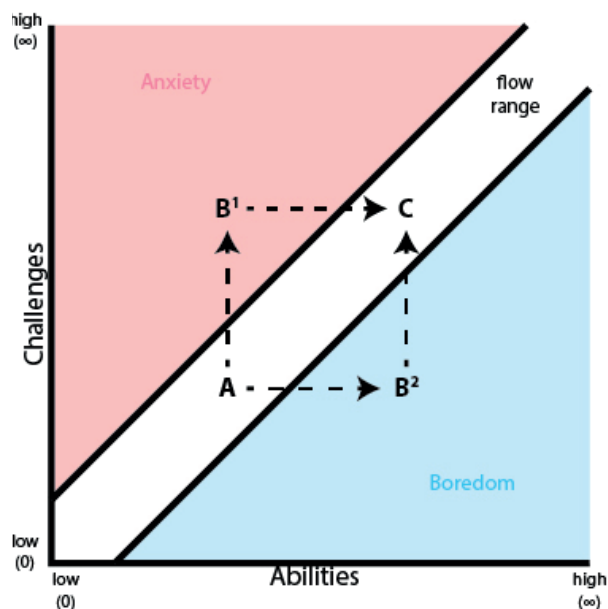
It is worth noting that games do not mobilize just of the four categories proposed by Caillois, and that these are just four aspects of the same field of experience. A card game such as poker has elements of *Agôn* and *Alea*, a game of RPG (Role-Playing Game) mobilizes *Agôn* and *Mimicry*. In more extreme examples, a Russian roulette “game” mobilizes *Alea* and *Ilinx*.

The four categories developed by Caillois encompass the antagonistic poles of *Paidia* – which represents fun, turbulence, improvisation – and *Ludus* – the space for training, concentration, and rules. Such theoretical framework provides Csikszentmihalyi with the basis for the following statement:

In our studies, we found that every flow activity, whether it involved competition, chance, or any other dimension of experience, had this in common: It provided a sense of discovery, a creative feeling of transporting the person into a new reality. It pushed the person to higher levels of performance and led to previously undreamed-of states of consciousness. In short, it transformed the self by making it more complex. In this growth of the self lies the key to flow activities. (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, p. 74).

Visually, Csikszentmihalyi's flow graph has the following appearance:

Figure 1 - Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Graph



Source: the author.

⁴ In the original: “A perturbação provocada pela vertigem é procurada como fim em si mesma, muito frequentemente”

In the third volume of the game design book collection, *The Rules of the Game*, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman discuss Csikszentmihalyi's ideas about Flow. The authors highlight that:

Csikszentmihalyi outlines a person's experience along two axes. One axis represents the degree of challenge an activity offers. The other axis represents the skills that a participant has (...) On one side of the range is the state of anxiety, where the activity tests surpass the participant's abilities. On the other side is boredom, the state in which the player's skills outweigh the challenge that the activity can provide (Salen & Zimmerman, 2012, p. 725).

It is important to keep in mind this "ideal" of game design – in which the player cannot be consecutively overwhelmed by something beyond their capabilities, nor left in their comfort zone indefinitely – it is not a constant state, but a point of reference. Ideally, the player must only temporarily move between zones of boredom (in blue) and anxiety (in red), to then return to balance. Therefore, their inability to meet the challenges must be only momentary (in graph 1: path $A \rightarrow B^1 \rightarrow C$) as well as their mastery and absolute control of the game space (path $A \rightarrow B^2 \rightarrow C$).

According to Salen & Zimmerman, "The best games can scale their challenge to the player. Ideally, games are simple to learn but difficult to master, offering an adequate degree of challenge for beginners and advanced players" (Salen & Zimmerman, 2012, p. 736). Such observations are echoed by assertions from other developers⁷, journalists⁸ and game analysts⁹, which testifies that Csikszentmihalyi's flow model can be considered as one of the several tools that guide the game development market.

Regarding this status of model attributed to the flow, some observations are necessary. Several articles produced in the field of game studies make important criticisms of the flow model, from which we will highlight *The Circuit of Fun or From Ludology to Ideology: Fun, Escapism and Exclusion in the Culture of Digital Game*, by Lucas Goulart and Henrique Nardi. The authors note the existence of an effort, both in the work of Johan Huizinga as in Caillois', to advocate for a "purity" of playful activity. According to the authors, the "need to maintain a 'reality apart' - and that only in this way games would be possible - is a very present theoretical heritage within Game Studies (and the culture of digital games in general)" (Goulart & Nardi, 2019, p. 7610).

This tendency of the ludic isolationist model maintains its influence in the work of Csikszentmihalyi, who is an author of the positivist school of psychology. The authors observe that the principle of the dynamics of *flow* presupposes the uncritical repetition of similar patterns and an isolation from the social context, always with the objective of protecting the magic circle and the isolation of play.

The problem is that these dynamics, as noted by Goulart and Nardi, add to the pre-eminence of a white, Western, male, and heteronormative culture in the games environment, as well as in the values of the academics who validate them. The authors then rightly observe:

5 In the original: "*Csikszentmihalyi traça a experiência de uma pessoa em dois eixos. Um eixo representa o grau de desafio que uma atividade oferece. O outro eixo representa as habilidades que um participante possui (...) De um lado da faixa está o estado de ansiedade, onde os testes da atividade ultrapassam as habilidades do participante. No outro lado está o tédio, o estado no qual as habilidades do jogador superam o desafio que a atividade pode proporcionar*".

6 In the original: "*Os melhores jogos conseguem dimensionar seu desafio para o jogador. Idealmente os jogos são simples de aprender, mas difíceis de dominar, oferecendo um grau adequado de desafio para os jogadores iniciantes e avançados*".

7 See Chen, 2003.

8 See Baron, 2012.

9 See Berube, 2021.

10 In the original: "*necessidade de manutenção de uma 'realidade à parte' - e de que apenas assim os jogos seriam possíveis - é uma herança teórica muito presente dentro do Game Studies (e da cultura de jogos digitais em geral)*"

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 must be avoided to maintain the ideological illusion of the magic circle, include the historical struggles and conflicts of LGBTQ populations, women and non-white people. (Goulart & Nardi, 2019, p. 79)¹¹.

Goulart and Nardi point out that, far from ensure the purity of playful activity within society, models such as flow and the magic circle end up being co-opted by the mechanics of neoliberal capitalism, in their strategies to transform all culture into a product and all activity into profit-generation. However, this does not mean that such models should be abolished. Jamie Woodcock and Mark Johnson, when analyzing the harmful consequences of gamification with a neoliberal bias, acknowledge the role of magic circle and flow theories in legitimizing this movement, but point out that "An important point that we therefore want to reiterate is that game elements themselves are not the problem. They are like the brick in Deleuze and Guattari's analogy, as they come with the possibility of being used for a variety of purposes" (Woodcock & Johnson, 2017, p. 547). Similarly, Mussa, Falcão and Macedo (2020), when criticizing the phenomenon of colonization of play, remark that:

Rewards or time-limited events, taken in isolation, don't tell us much. It is necessary to understand how these gears fit into a higher order of mechanisms, whose purpose is to provide models for creating games that produce the most desired effect in the industry: attracting and maintaining players' attention (Mussa, Falcão & Macedo, 2020, p. 329)¹².

Based on this, some researchers have proposed new ways of using models such as the flow and the magic circle. Instead of trying to preserve its unsustainable and artificial isolation from the social world, they seek to understand what such an initiative meant at its time, and to reframe its purpose within the present context, diverging from the interpretation that subjugates such principles to neoliberal efficiency.

Efforts in this sense have already been made with the work of Huizinga (Mussa, Falcão & Macedo, 2020), Caillois (Kristensen & Wilhelmson, 2017) and Csikszentmihalyi (Conway, 2014). This article believes that the flow can also be observed beyond its role in legitimizing the neoliberal gamification model, if paired with principles from the French school of semiotics. Such proposal will be formalized forward in the following section, after the presentation of the tensive semiotic model.

Presentation of the tensive semiotic model

Once outlined the conceptual field of game studies in which this article will base its discussion, it is necessary to approach the meaning within the linguistic domain in our object of analysis. This article uses the work of the French semiotician Claude Zilberberg, who proposed a framework of analysis aimed at "overcoming the tenacious prejudice according to which the 'Dionysian' affection would do nothing but disturb, derange the 'Apollonian' form" (Zilberberg, 2011, p. 45)¹³. The author gave the work of his predecessors – Algirdas Julien Greimas and collaborators – a configuration that some have pointed out as little explored in traditional theoretical models. It brings a more fluid reading of the categories which are

¹¹ In the original: "*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*"

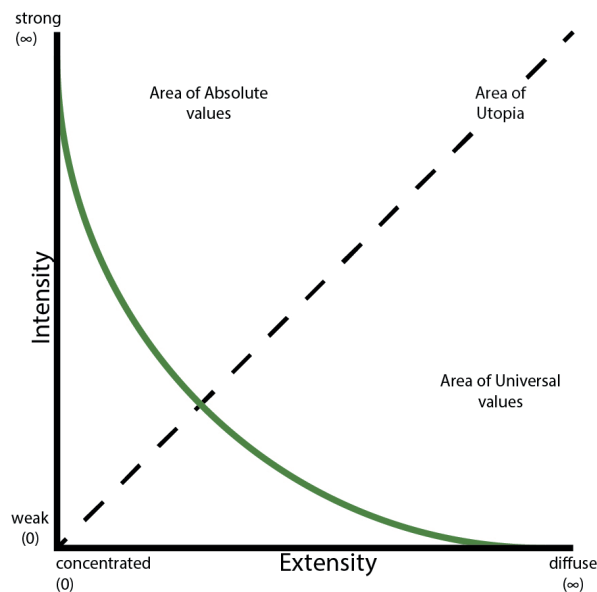
¹² In the original: "*Recompensas ou eventos com prazo limitado, tomados em isolamento, não nos informam muita coisa. É necessário compreender de que modo essas engrenagens se encaixam em mecanismos de ordem superior, cuja finalidade é fornecer modelos de criação de jogos que produzem o efeito mais desejado da indústria: a atração e manutenção da atenção dos jogadores*"

¹³ In the original: "*ultrapassar o tenaz preconceito segundo o qual o afeto 'dionisíaco' não faria nada além de perturbar, desarranjar a forma 'apolínea'*"

present in these models of strong structuralist inspiration.

The author sought to bring greater flexibility to the rigidity of positions within the models, considering the scale of intensity and extension values, thus acknowledging previously unanticipated scalar spectra of the semiotic presence. It is precisely about the gradations, starting from the “hypothesis that the discourse, when advancing, seeks, from the more and less emerged and accumulated, to recognize the elected growing direction” (Zilberberg, 2011, p. 64)¹⁴. The graphic form that the author found to represent this theoretical proposal can be seen below:

Figure 2 - Zilberberg’s Tensive Graph



Source: the author.

Zilberberg produced a two-dimensional graph, composed of *intensity* and *extensity*. The author argues that intensity governs extensity, since, according to his interpretation, the impact of a “something” on the observer directly interferes with their ability to observe its objective elements. To Zilberberg, *valences* are sub-dimensions that constitute each of the two dimensions, which increase or attenuate themselves, configuring discursive statutes defined by the combination or opposition between such valences. To exemplify these dynamics between valences and dimensions, the author describes his own chart as follows:

From the perspective of universal values, sensitive to extensive valences, absolute values are certainly strong, but they have the serious defect of being concentrated. Universal values, in turn, are weak, but they have the advantage (to them, more significant) of being diffuse; from the perspective of absolute values, sensitive mainly to intensive valences, universal values are diffuse but weak; the absolute values, in turn, are certainly concentrated, but their strong impact largely compensates for this defect (Zilberberg, 2011, p. 91)¹⁵.

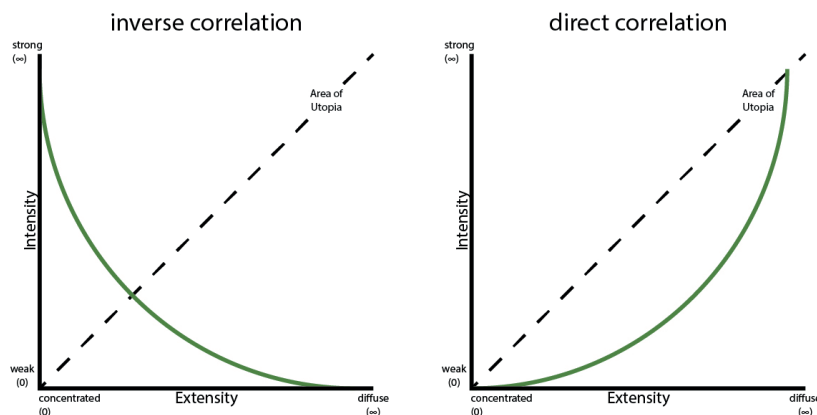
¹⁴ In the original: “hipótese de que o discurso ao avançar procura, a partir dos mais e dos menos surgidos e acumulados, reconhecer a direção crescente eleita”

¹⁵ In the original: “Na perspectiva dos valores de universo, sensíveis às valências extensivas, os valores de absoluto são, certamente, intensos, mas apresentam o grave defeito de serem concentrados. Os valores de universo, por sua vez, são tênues, mas têm a vantagem, a seus olhos mais significativa, de serem difusos; na perspectiva dos valores de absoluto, sensíveis principalmente às valências intensivas, os valores de universo são difusos, mas tênues; os valores de absoluto por seu turno, são por certo concentrados, mas seu impacto compensa amplamente esse defeito”

To better understand this principle, it is necessary to understand how Zilberberg categorizes the valences in his work. For the author, the *intensity* is composed of the *tempo* and *tonicity* subdimensions, and in general terms it is close to the generic concept of strength, which "can be measured in their quality of suddenness, 'precipitation' and energy" (Zilberberg, 2011, p. 69)¹⁶. *Extensity*, on the other hand, is composed of the *temporality* and *spatiality* sub-dimensions, representing the measure, or extension, of the reach of intensity in relation to the subject.

The author also identifies two possible correlations within this tensive dynamic, determinant of the status of a semiotic object: the *inverse correlation* and the *direct correlation*:

Figure 3 – Direct and Inverse Tensive Correlations



Source: the author.

To exemplify the inverse correlation phenomenon, shown on the left of Figure 3, the author compares this correlation to the principle of *Aura* proposed by Walter Benjamin, in which the *Aura* of the artwork, whose impact comes from its own uniqueness, is in the area of the *absolute*, while the excessive availability of a same reproducible work, provided by technical reproducibility, is located in the area of the *universe*. Moments of extremely high intensity and low extensity are the *impacts* that loom over the subject, while moments of extremely high extensity and low intensity are the *atonies* that almost escape the subject's perception.

To describe the direct correlation, it is said that "impact values and universal values increase each other, and everything runs smoothly in the best of all possible worlds" (Zilberberg, 2011, p. 92)¹⁷, that is, there is some form of reinforcement of one value over the other due to their tensive configurations which, in this case, are not inverse, but in the same direction.

Despite the visual and terminological similarities between the Flow graph (proposed by Csikszentmihalyi) and the tensive graph (proposed by Zilberberg), any proposal for fusion or equivalence between the two must be resisted. The first is a graph that proposes a guide for the game designer's activity, while the second is a model that aims to quantify the emotional investment within a proposed discourse. Although uncommon, there are cases in which the strategies towards game's difficulty and their emotional impact do not converge in the same direction. Therefore, by bringing such models into discussion, this is purpose of this article: to demonstrate how graphics can promote an understanding of the *enunciative project* of a game, when analyzed separately on the same game.

The term *enunciative project* is used by several authors, among them, Renata Mancini, in the

¹⁶ In the original: "podem ser medidos em sua qualidade de subitaneidade, de 'precipitação' e de 'energia'"

¹⁷ In the original: "os valores de impacto e os valores de universo aumentam-se uns aos outros, e tudo transcorre da melhor forma no melhor dos mundos possíveis"

article *A tradução enquanto processo [Translation as process]*. The semiotician, when discussing the translation process, states that this project is the guiding thread of several decisions made by a translator, which cut across linguistic or language concerns – in the case of translations between different languages – as they try to capture the intention of the translated discourse. We use the author's conceptualization, inspired by Zilberberg's model, to also use the concept in our work:

We understand as enunciative project the set of textualization strategies put into practice in the act of creation that embody the persuasion project of an enunciator (the discursive profile of one who "says") in relation to the interpretive act of the specific profile of the targeted enunciatee (the discursive profile of the reader, viewer, listener, etc.). It is worth emphasizing that the interpretive action also contemplates the modes of sensitive engagement, in addition to the construction elements of intangibility (Mancini, 2020, p. 26)¹⁸.

This enunciative project, along the lines observed by Mancini, is built from the manipulation of three main axes: (i) the hierarchization of narratives that present the content within the text, (ii) the personal/spatial/temporal location strategies and (iii) the semantic choices of the figures and themes of the discourse.

The identification of the increases and decreases in intensity caused by the enunciative project builds what Mancini names as a *tensive arc*. In her studies, focused on translation, this arc can be defined as "the design of the sensitive interface of a work, a profile that is built from the alternation between moments of impact (stronger and more tenuous) and softer moments (in degrees of atony)" (Mancini, 2020, p. 25)¹⁹.

Based on this definition, this article argues that the observance of the tensive graph, allied to the flow graph, allows one to understand the enunciative project of a game, and that this makes it possible to also analyze which ideological values are in motion in a given discourse.

By promoting a traditional semiotic analysis – in which the game is the text/discourse to be analyzed – the fundamental and narrative levels are observed (in which narrative structures are understood), as well as the discursive level, in which the figures²⁰ of a discourse are visible and, consequently, its ideological bias. As the semiotician Diana Pessoa de Barros observes, when stating that "The semantic figures of discourse, as explained, seek, essentially, to create the illusion of reality." (Barros, 1988, p. 154)²¹, the figures of the discursive level are largely responsible for promoting the "bridge" between the text/game discourse and the "world of things".

When tensive semiotics is included in the analysis of the text/game, it is possible to observe the emotional accents that such discourse uses, and also understand which of the present figures are mobilized to be impactful – therefore, mobilizing within the discourse - or to remain toneless, in the background.

Finally, the observation of the flow model – not as a quality scale of a game, as proposed by

¹⁸ In the original: "Entendemos por projeto enunciativo o conjunto de estratégias de textualização postas em prática no ato de criação que dão corpo ao projeto de persuasão de um enunciador (o perfil discursivo de quem "diz") em relação ao fazer interpretativo do perfil específico de enunciatário visado (perfil discursivo do leitor, espectador, ouvinte etc.). Vale reforçar que o fazer interpretativo contempla também os modos de engajamento sensível, para além dos elementos de construção da intangibilidade"

¹⁹ In the original: "o desenho da interface sensível de uma obra, um perfil que se constrói a partir da alternância entre momentos de impacto (mais fortes e mais tênues) e momentos mais brandos (em graus de atonia)"

²⁰ Within semiotics, the figure represents the "cover" that is given to an element in the discourse. For example: in the Duke Nukem series, the protagonist-hero figure, with his profanity, machismos, physical strength and indulgence in drink, sex and tobacco, makes the sexist and toxic ideology of the game's discourse identifiable.

²¹ In the original: "As figuras semânticas do discurso, conforme foi explicado, procuram, essencialmente, criar a ilusão de realidade."

the neoliberal gamification model, but as a key to reading the game's enunciative project – allows us to understand that the text/game develops itself in interspersed cycles of anxiety and monotony. It can be observed, within the flow regime, which figures are used to represent the obstacles/challenges, or which are meant to solve them, or even which figures represent or challenge the monotony of the already known and mastered, as well as the figures used to break such control.

The flow analysis, observed in line with the tensive semiotic model, allows the comprehension of the enunciative project of a game. This project and the mobilization of its discursive figures, promoting accents and atonies, exposes the game's ideological bias. However, the practice of the platinum activity, promoted by the neoliberal way of life, ends up clouding the efficiency of this analysis, as it will be demonstrated next.

The play and the “platinum”

Within gamer terminology, platinum²² is the activity of achieving all the objectives, or achievements, available in a game. As more achievements are acquired, some games even offer new cosmetic or interactive elements – or even points to be exchanged for new games – to the player. Mikael Jakobsson, in the introduction to his article “The Achievement Machine”, sums up the importance of such an element of gaming activity:

Systems where players collect virtual rewards that in some sense are separated from the rest of the game have seen a dramatic rise in popularity during the last few years. These systems that connect different games that share for instance the same technological platform or publisher are often called achievements (...) Collecting achievements has become an integral part of Xbox 360 gaming. The system has divided gamers in camps for and against achievements and changed the way many people play games. (Jakobsson, 2011, online).

Such structures of achievements, badges and challenges are one of the cornerstones of the phenomenon of gamification²³ – the practice of building loyalty in customers and employees towards a brand, product or service, through playful strategies – that spread throughout the business world in the last decade (Conway, 2014).

Byung-Chul Han even sees such gamification as a way of submitting the game to the regime of neoliberal capitalism and psychopolitics:

In order to create more productivity, emotional capitalism also appropriates games, which should be, indeed, the other of work. It “gamifies” the world of work and life. The game grants an emotional and even dramatical weight to work, thus generating more motivation. Through its reward system and the quick sense of achievement, the game generates more performance and yield. The player, with their emotional investment, is much more engaged than a merely functional or rational worker. (Han, 2020, p.69)²⁴.

In this sense, resuming the remark of Woodcock and Johnson (2017) on how to not alienate a

²² Azevedo, Theo. (2014, may 09). Caçadores de troféus: conheça brasileiros fanáticos por “platinar” jogos [Trophy hunters: meet the Brazilians obsessed with “platinum” games]. UOL Start. Retrieved from: <https://www.uol.com.br/start/ultimas-noticias/2014/05/09/cacadores-de-trofeus-conheca-brasileiros-fanaticos-por-platinar-jogos.htm>.

²³ See Galessi, 2018.

²⁴ In the original: “Para gerar mais produtividade, o capitalismo da emoção também se apropria do jogo, daquilo que seria, na verdade, o outro do trabalho. Ele ‘gamifica’ o mundo do trabalho e da vida. O jogo emocionaliza e até dramatiza o trabalho, criando assim mais motivação. Através da rápida sensação de realização e do sistema de recompensas, o jogo gera mais desempenho e rendimento. O jogador com suas emoções está muito mais envolvido do que um trabalhador meramente funcional ou que atua apenas no nível racional”

technique based on its perverted use by the neoliberal regime, the authors propose the existence of two modalities of gamification: the first one would be gamification-from-above, the preferred modality of the neoliberal regime, which elevates work to its maximum value and aims only to gamify activities that generate profit for the company, conditioning employees to play in order to achieve excellence in their performance. The second modality would be the gamification-from-below, a kind of counter-gamification, with situationist and autonomist roots, where workers gamify their routines to have fun, which generally does not suit the obsession with productivity of the psychopolitical neoliberal regime.

Both modalities cover the axis, proposed by Caillois, between *Ludus* (training, rules and discipline of training, i.e., gamification-from-above) and *Paidia* (iconoclasm, chaos, invention, i.e., the gamification-from-below). The importance of this remark is highlighted by the authors themselves when they observe that:

Context is, therefore, everything for 'gamification', and the application of game systems to life can be used to enhance or curtail work. In doing so, two sets of polar opposite political entanglements are apparent; 'game mechanics' are consequently not neutral, and 'fun' is an emergent property dependent on context far more than on formal systemic game elements (Woodcock & Johnson, 2017, p. 553)

In this article, henceforth, where gamification is noted, it will refer to the modality of gamification-from-above and, specifically, its application within the neoliberal context: that of a capitalist nostrum, which makes employees more productive and motivated, regardless of their surroundings.

Play, competitiveness and status

Johan Huizinga, at the end of his book *Homo Ludens*, noted how various activities considered "playful" – such as organized sports, or medieval jousting – had lost their playful spirit, and exemplifies his point by analyzing a "fever" of the 30s, time when the book was written: the card game called bridge:

From the days of ombre and quadrille to whist and bridge, card games have undergone a process of increasing refinement, but only with bridge have the modern social techniques reigned completely over the game. The paraphernalia of handbooks, systems and professional training has made bridge a deadly earnest business. [...] Proficiency at bridge is a sterile talent, one that sharpens mental faculties in a very one-sided manner, with no enrichment of the soul in any way, while it consumes an amount of intellectual energy that could be better applied elsewhere. (Huizinga, 2014, p. 221)²⁵.

In a more recent historical reading, we find the same critique on game activity and its parallel practices. Henry Lowood published an article in 2007 entitled *A tecnologia encontrada: Jogadores como inovadores na produção de machinima* [The discovered technology: Players as innovators in production], in which he registers some of the social and technological developments that culminated in what is now the *machinima*²⁶ industry.

According to the author, it was the players' needs to record their performance for training and strategy discussion, and also to develop scenarios and specific tests for their skills, that led game production

²⁵ In the original: "Desde os tempos da quadrilha até aos do uíste e do bridge, os jogos de cartas passaram por um processo de aperfeiçoamento cada vez maior, e só com o bridge as técnicas sociais modernas se apoderaram inteiramente do jogo. A proliferação de manuais, de sistemas e de preparação profissional fez do bridge um jogo extremamente sério. [...] A habilidade para o bridge é um talento estéril, aguçando as faculdades mentais de maneira muito unilateral e sem de modo algum enriquecer o espírito, consumindo uma quantidade de energia intelectual que poderia ter melhor aplicação".

²⁶ Machinima is a term used to designate movies or videos captured within the video game software itself. Both the movement of the characters and the visual effects are built within the game's programming, not using any other image capturing or editing software.

companies to standardize the development of the code that controls the games. This led to the creation of interfaces with friendlier codes – the so-called game engines – which allowed for the improvement of tools such as game registration and scenario editors, so that players could use them to train and record their performances.

The game engine also represented a new business model (...) as much as a game development. Standardizing game production has also opened the door to a flood of player-created content, which in turn would extend the game's commercial life. (Lowood, 2011, p. 18)²⁷.

The popularity of these tools, which allowed players to use game resources differently from the canonical narrative proposed by the developer, was due to the nature of the player community. Both in Lowood's period of analysis and in more recent times, clans, or teams – as is customary to call groups of players who play on the same team, especially in competitions – are characterized by a gregariousness and competitiveness that spawned, among others effects, *e-sports*.

Carl Sagan even proposes that this behavior is a genetic inheritance, and that such pleasure in competition and exhibitionism in sports and events are remnants of such instincts:

Some part of our beings longs to join a small band of brothers on a daring and intrepid quest. We can even see this in role-playing and computer games popular with prepubescent and adolescent boys. The traditional manly virtues— taciturnity, resourcefulness, modesty, accuracy, consistency, deep knowledge of animals, teamwork, love of the outdoors— were all adaptive behavior in hunter-gatherer times. We still admire these traits, although we've almost forgotten why. (Sagan, 1997, p. 16)²⁸.

This need for contention and exhibitionism is also noted by Lowood, when describing how “players formed groups maintained by their increased multiplayer connectivity and chat options. Like hacker gangs dissecting the details of computer networks, these clans [...] shared high-performance techniques, both in gaming and in programming” (2011, p. 19)²⁹. Such gregarious behavior can even be considered as one of the facets of the “*gamer ethos*”:

The reinterpretation of the player as an actor had not just one but two predominant forms: the superior player, the god of the joystick and mouse, and that of the player-programmer capable of hacking the game's code and displaying a mastery of technology. Both forms of performance occurred as audience demonstrations, in ways that would later influence the use of games to make movies, while illustrating the sort of experimentation and informal learning that have accompanied computer games for so long. (Lowood, 2011, p. 21-22)³⁰.

²⁷ In the original: “*O game engine também representou um novo modelo de negócios (...) tanto quanto uma desenvolvedora de jogos. A padronização da produção de games também abriu os portões para uma enxurrada de conteúdos criados por jogadores, o que, por sua vez, estenderia a vida comercial do game*”.

²⁸ It should be noted that Carl Sagan's reading is problematic in terms of gender, as it works in harmony with binarist ideologies. In the context of this research, this excerpt shows that the “naturalization” of the desire for competition and dispute is not a new phenomenon, having been addressed in several fields of study. However, this article considers that the characteristics raised by Sagan are not necessarily linked to male gender.

²⁹ In the original: “*os jogadores formaram grupos mantidos por sua incrementada conectividade multiplayer e opções de chat. Como gangues de hackers dissecando os detalhes das redes de computadores, esses clãs [...] compartilhavam técnicas de alta performance, tanto de jogo quanto de programação*”

³⁰ In the original: “*A reinterpretação do jogador como um ator teve não só uma, mas duas formas predominantes: a do jogador superior, o Deus do joystick e do mouse, e a do jogador-programador capaz de hackear o código do game e exibir o domínio da tecnologia. Ambas as formas de performance ocorreram como demonstrações do público de formas que, mais tarde, influenciariam o uso de games para se fazer filmes, ao mesmo tempo em que ilustravam os tipos de experimentação e aprendizagem informal que tem acompanhado os games de computador há tanto tempo*”.

Therefore, it is possible to observe the existence of a program parallel to the narrative program of a game, in which the player seeks – through their achievements and performance in the activity of playing – recognition from their status and other rewards. Here, it is stated that the *platinum* practice enhances this dynamic, opposed to the activity of play, as we intend to demonstrate further.

Platinum effects – tedium and atony

Observing the channels dedicated to game analysis, it is possible to perceive the effects of *psychopolitics*, a phenomenon that Byung-Chul Han analyzes in his book *Psicopolítica: o neoliberalismo e as novas técnicas de poder* [Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power]. According to the author, psychopolitics can be considered as an heir of *biopolitics*, a concept idealized by Michel Foucault as a form of control of an individual's body by the power dynamics – which sought to adapt such bodies to greater efficiency in their work and social functions – and it operates with such deep roots in society that Foucault even considers it as a kind of “soul”:

It should not be said that the soul is an illusion, or an ideological effect, but that it exists, that it has a reality, that it is permanently created, around, on the surface and inside the functioning body of a power that exerts itself over those who are punished – in broad terms, over those who are watched, trained and corrected, over the insane, children, students, the colonized, over those who are locked in a production apparatus and controlled throughout existence (Foucault, 2001, p. 31)³¹.

According to Han's proposal, in the last century's rise of the neoliberal regime, biopolitics has developed into psychopolitics, replacing control of the body as a political force by the mental optimization, in which the need for performance and recognition shapes the individual into its own and hardest watchman:

The neoliberal performance subject, as an ‘entrepreneur of himself’, engages in self-exploitation willingly and even passionately. The making of the self as a work of art brings a beautiful and deceitful appearance that the neoliberal regime maintains in order to exploit it completely. The power technique of the neoliberal regime takes on a subtle form. It does not take over individuals directly. Instead, it ensures that individuals, voluntarily, act against themselves in a way that they reproduce and interiorize the context of domination, to then interpret it as freedom (Han, 2020, p. 44).

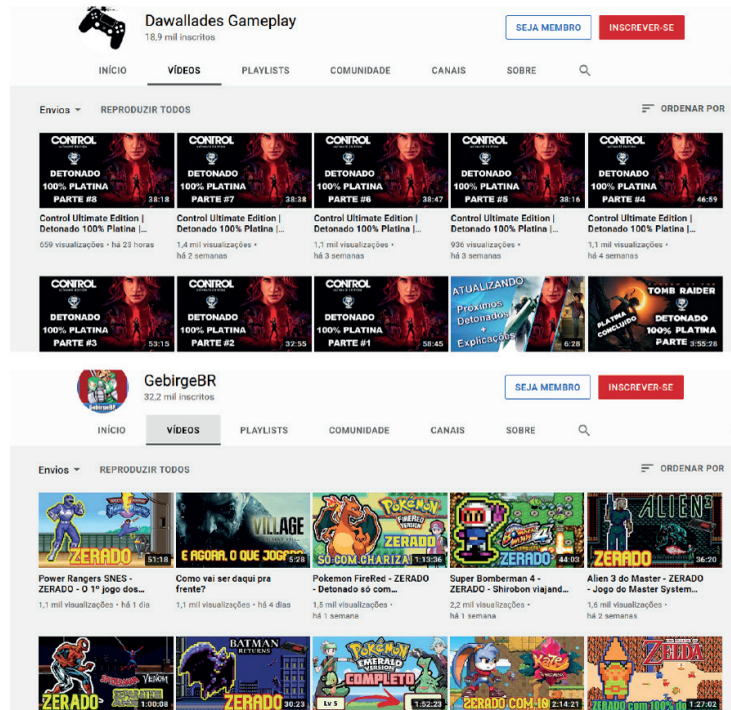
Within platinum culture, such psychopolitical ideology shows itself throughout the “business model” of platinum gaming, which can be seen in some YouTube channels focused on the topic. Figure 4 shows two channels on the platform, called *Dawallades Gameplay* and *Gebirges BR*.

If one types in the YouTube search bar the word “*Detonado*” (Brazilian jargon for guides that describes all the secrets and easter eggs hidden in a game, also called walkthroughs) and “*Zerado*” (a jargon that refers to a game that was played until all of its achievements and secrets were conquered, being also synonymous with “platinum”), most of the first results come from these two channels³², which this article proposes to be symbolic of the adequacy of these channels to the psychopolitical model of platinum activity.

³¹ In the original: “*Não se deveria dizer que a alma é uma ilusão, ou um efeito ideológico, mas afirmar que ela existe, que tem uma realidade, que é produzida permanentemente, em torno, na superfície, no interior do corpo em funcionamento de um poder que se exerce sobre os que são punidos – de uma maneira mais geral sobre os que são vigiados, treinados e corrigidos, sobre os loucos, as crianças, os escolares, os colonizados, sobre os que são fixados a um aparelho de produção e controlados durante toda a existência*”

³² This statement takes into consideration the Brazilian interface of the platform.

Figure 4 - Print screens from the YouTube channels Dawallades and GebirgeBR



Source: YouTube (2021).

Producers of this type of content, as well as their consumers – considering that the syncretism of these two categories is not uncommon – embrace some principles, that constitute to some extent the two types of ethos proposed by Lowood, the "joystick god" and the "player-programmer": (i) the dynamism of the content, since players look for news and guides on new games as soon as they are released, with the first walkthrough videos launched after such releases becoming the most accessed of the platform during a certain period; (ii) the completeness of the content, as the best walkthroughs and guides for platinum gaming are those containing the most complete and detailed information about the game's data, including information on its development process.

This type of behavior disrupts Zilberberg's tense analysis model and Csikszentmihalyi's flow analysis, which we are using for our discussion. When the player seeks platinum, the challenges he faces have all been researched and scrutinized in videos and walkthroughs – where guides on how to defeat challenges faster and with the least expense of resources can be found – and, because of this, the element of surprise/unpredictability and challenge, responsible for the player's temporary motions through the field of flow anxiety, decrease, keeping the experience in the field of boredom.

By observing how the tense model functions, similar interferences of the platinum activity in the game's enunciative project become noticeable. The dimensions of extensity result from the subject's sensitive perception towards space and time. The previous research on the game's spaces and the location of the collectable items within its chronology broadens the player's knowledge on the whole extensity of the game, while the description and analysis of each one of the obstacles and opponents reduces the intensity of such elements. Such events concentrate the tensivity of the enunciative project in the field of atony.

The strategy behind this scrutiny of the game universe, as well as the repetitions and preparations involved in the search for achievements, create a serialization and inventory of the gaming activity, which

builds a bureaucratic understanding of the game and renders the playing experience toneless. After identifying the atonization of the narrative, along with the increase of the boredom in the player's flow experience, it is now imperative to investigate how such elements interfere in the game's enunciative project.

Platinum as an enunciative project

Byung-Chul Han states that "Neoliberalism is a very efficient – even intelligent – system of freedom exploitation: everything that belongs to the practices and forms of expression of freedom (such as emotion, play and communication) is exploited" (2020, p. 11)³³.

Similarly, researches in game studies, some of which mentioned in this article, also observe the neoliberal capitalist practice of co-opting the playful and its mechanics, in order to create dynamics that colonialize and hierarchize activities, favoring privilege maintenance and the efficient generation of profit. *Gamification* and *platinum* gaming are the two most frequently used gears within this system, being based on a set of strategies that have been effectively summarized by Mussa, Falcão and Macedo, when analyzing the colonization strategy within certain games:

Notably, it is possible to focus the analysis on the following attributes: the progress structuring systems, the organization of the game by commitment and grinding³⁴, in addition to the player's management and collection of extrinsic rewards and/or punishments throughout the game process (Mussa, Falcão & Macedo, 2020, p. 327)³⁵.

Within the field of semiotics and discursive analysis, these neoliberal strategies reveal themselves through yet another symptom: the subjugation of the tensive impact of the enunciative project of a game, favoring the rewards of the platinum activity.

The platinum player seeks, with this enunciative project, to gain all of the achievements, find all the collectibles scattered throughout the game and acquire the knowledge of all the easter eggs. Through these actions and the acknowledgments they trigger – the insignias, trophies, the comments on the videos – the platinum player comes closer to the ethos of the *programmer-player* and/or the *god-of-the-joystick*, as proposed by Lowood. The gaming experience is subjugated by *Dataism*, Han's term to describe the almost sexualized obsession with data hoarding, created by the ostensible use of Big Data³⁶ within digital culture.

By observing the platinum enunciative project from the discursive semiotics point of view, it is noticeable how the platinum player is conditioned to ignore the analytical and critical potential of the narrative.

As previously stated in this article, the understanding of the discursive figures in a game is made possible, among other mechanics, by their impact and role within the game's enunciative project. Whether in identifying themselves with an enunciative project, or to criticize and satirize it, players need to perceive

³³ In the original: "O neoliberalismo é um sistema muito eficiente – diria até inteligente – na exploração da liberdade: tudo aquilo que pertence às práticas e formas de expressão de liberdade (como a emoção, o jogo e a comunicação) é explorado"

³⁴ According to the authors, grinding is "the incessant repetition of a task, without variation or risk, a repetition encouraged not by the intrinsic pleasure that the game/gamified system elicits, but by the results and external rewards generated by the behavior" (Mussa, Falcão & Macedo, 2020, p. 328).

³⁵ In the original: "Notadamente, é possível concentrar a análise nos seguintes atributos: os sistemas de estruturação de progresso, a organização do jogo por comprometimento e o grinding, além da administração e coleção por parte do jogador de recompensas extrínsecas e/ou punições ao longo do processo de jogo"

³⁶ Big Data is an umbrella term for strategies aimed at maintaining, interpreting, and organizing large volumes of data. According to Han (2020), Big Data is one of the main control tools used by the psychopolitical model.

such values within the game. They need to be impacted by what the game promotes as figuratively impacting, as well realize which figures the game's enunciative project defines as a challenge that hinders them, or an aid that gives them power.

However, the *platinum-player*, who seeks the enunciative psychopolitical project of the neoliberal regime, goes through this enunciative project of the game in a more flat and tedious way, absorbing the values embedded within the narrative in an apathetic manner, not being sufficiently impacted by them. The whole game becomes a great, toneless, and universal background, where all the figures in the project are accepted – fulfilling here the neoliberal objective by co-opting the flow and the magic circle: transforming figures and ideological choices of a discourse/game into something neutral, time-consuming, and universal. Something that doesn't need to be critically observed.

The platinum's enunciative project requires that the player absorbs all the values of the neoliberal discourse in an uncritical, dynamic, and productive³⁷ way, as the data and achievements to be accumulated and mastered are proof of his title of *player-programmer* and *god-of-the-joystick*.

Final remarks

The paper argued that the practice of platinum gaming presents itself as a psychopolitical enunciative project. As such, it is a parallel and dataist practice to the game itself, and it makes heavy use of gamification strategies, mobilizing content producers, discussion forums, websites, and several other players in pursuit of information – and achievement – hoarding spread throughout the game.

Platinum has a different pace: the player must reach “platinum status” as quickly as possible, and also, they must have as much information on the subject as possible. Therefore, it is chosen to sacrifice the game's enunciative project – as well as to suspend the possibility of a critical view of the game and its mechanics – leading to atony and boredom. In return, the players receive badges, views, and positive comments on their profiles, a dynamic that is summarized by Byung-Chul Han, when he states that “Gamification as a means of production destroys the emancipatory potential of games” (2020, p.73)³⁸.

This practice fulfills the psychopolitical model: subjugating all its activities to the need for performance, constantly exhibiting it to a digital collective and promoting self-vigilance. Unsurprisingly, when trying to visualize a “platinum game” or a “platinum player”, both objects look like trophies on the walls of an office, impressing visitors.

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³⁷ In extreme cases, computer programs and machines are created to run the game while the player is not even present (Jakobsson, 2011). However, this article limits its analysis to platinum practices that involve the player “live” engagement in such actions.

³⁸ In the original: “A gamificação como meio de produção destrói o potencial emancipatório do jogo”

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