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Who hasn't dreamed of being a video game player? Coloniality, precariousness, and hope labor in Free Fire[1]

TARCÍZIO MACEDO

Rio Grande do Sul Federal University (UFRGS) – Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil.
E-mail: tarciziopmacedo@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0003-3600-1497

GABRIELA KURTZ

Rio Grande do Sul Federal University (UFRGS) – Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil.
E-mail: gabriela.kurtz@pucrs.br
ORCID: 0000-0002-8730-3383

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Abstract

This article seeks to understand how colonial images and imaginaries travel through games, based on advertising actions around them, and create mature conditions for the proliferation of free labor based on hope. The theme is framed from theoretical-epistemological precepts that problematize the relationship between labor and leisure in video games, a phenomenon that is better understood through the lens of coloniality. The gaze focuses on the advertising strategies of *Operation Chrono* in Brazil, the game Free Fire, along with campaigns by major advertisers in esports and soccer. The reinforcement of the neoliberal ideology and the profitable valorization of the forms of leisure and hope of aspiring players is identified, through the reproduction of rhetoric that reiterates the colonial matrix, the precariousness, the exploitation, and asymmetries of power in the industry and the esports ecosystem.

Keywords

Introduction

In recent years, there's been a particularly interesting phenomenon ongoing within the digital gaming landscape. Garena Free Fire (FF) (Garena, 2017), launched in 2017, was quickly appropriated by the Brazilian community, both for its similarity to other popular titles such as Player Unknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG) and Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CS:GO), and for its portability since it is a mobile game. Brazil is one of the leaders in the global community, reaching the status of most downloaded game for smartphones in the country since 2018 and with a server dedicated to the Brazilian public. FF is not only hegemonic in the national mobile scenario, with a record-breaking number of players and downloads, as the company reports being the most profitable mobile game in the country in 2019 (Falcão, 2021) and reports indicate that the title was the most downloaded in the world in 2019 and 2020.[1]

As this is a battle royale-style[2] multiplayer game, there is a rising competitive scene. In his critical appraisal of the Brazilian electronic sports scene (esports), Thiago Falcão (2021) argues that Garena's game has developed significantly to the point of rivaling the leaders of the national competitive scene: League of Legends (LoL) and CS:GO. Part of this success is due to the commercial advantage of FF: it is a game that can reach both the most varied social classes and regions of the country, especially the less central ones (North and North East), reinforces the author. The issue revolves around certain existing conditions and material elements that computer or console games require, such as LoL, CF:GO, and FIFA, and that aren't required by FF – which favors its proliferation in the country. This context of relative access ease to competitive FF by certain social classes is attractive.

As suggested by Falcão (2021), attention needs to be placed on how the Brazilian esports scene is not only about teams, players or marketing opportunities, commercial gains, and the rising of new idols and athletes, but also about the understanding of the precarious context represented in the social implications and structural problems that are results of the colonial ties in the country. With the professionalization of the segment known as mobile esports, it is not uncommon to find examples in media coverage reports of the triumph and rise of players performing certain activities related to gaming.[3] The possibility of leaving their communities and achieving a wealthy lifestyle through a career in gaming, whether as an athlete or as a streamer[4], attracts countless young people in vulnerable conditions. It is from this context that we address our analysis.

In December of 2020, Garena, the company responsible for releasing and distributing FF, launched a marketing campaign in Brazil to promote a new game tie-in, with maps inspired on a cyberpunk aesthetic and the launching of a character-based on the soccer player Cristiano Ronaldo.[5] This game mode, called Operation Chrono, had a special campaign for the Brazilian audience. The promotional video, released on the 24th of December 2020, consists of a super production of a little over three and a half minutes that tells the story of a boy from "the *Quebrada*" (an expression for someone that lives in an urban peripheric region) who loves soccer and Free Fire. The commercial was filmed in Jardim   Peri, in São Paulo, the same community that revealed Gabriel Jesus, a player from the Brazilian National Football Team. In addition, it featured a collage on the roofs of the houses in the neighborhood made by Luan Cardoso, who had already

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[1] Retrieved 2021, May 22 from: https://bit.ly/2THf0rW e https://glo.bo/3gDjDeB.

[2] It is a game genre in which several players are pitted to fight for survival, either individually or in teams, on a map that periodically shrinks.

[3] Retrieved 2021, November 16 from: https://bit.ly/3iQd8rw, https://bit.ly/3xpgrdk, https://bityli.com/JD6QI, https://bityli.com/Q4EVe, https://globoplay.globo.com/v/10015013/, and https://bityli.com/AP5d07.

[4] Name given to those who produce audiovisual content through live streaming tools, which can be either amateur or professional.

[5] Retrieved 2021, May 22 from: https://bit.ly/3zus44t.

made a piece of Gabriel Jesus in the same location, in a campaign for Adidas.[6] This association between soccer, esports (cf. Macedo & Falcão, 2019), and FF is not merely casual – it appears in many ways in the chosen scenery for the filming and even the actors chosen in the campaign's production. This video, thus, offers an analytical potential of both ambivalence of the play/game as a tool of coloniality in the contemporary (Mussa et al. 2020), as to the similarity of the advertising speech present in Brazilian soccer and esports as part of reinforcing the play's historical *continuum* of colonization.

Thus, we arrive at a central question for this study: what do these narratives enact? What do these speeches enact? In which way do the advertising actions of the developers of competitive games reinforce coloniality and what are the consequences of this? That is, what are the implications and what emerges from this process in the contemporary labor economy? To provide empirical consistency to the reflections we seek to answer above, we propose a study of FF's Chrono Operation concerning other advertising productions focused both on gaming and soccer. This effort allows us to address a critique of a certain idea, present in the video, that playing FF professionally, relies on performance and imaginary in regards to streamers and professional players (both soccer and esports) to, ideologically, validate the hope labor and reproduce the asymmetries of power within the esports ecosystem.

For this purpose, eight videos were selected in total, in which brands such as Itaú, Nike, Guaraná Antártica, and FIFA set off a trail with the narratives, aesthetics, and elements present in the advertising video for Operation Chrono in Brazil. We hypothesize that signs are pointing to a colonial logic behind Garena's actions, one that retrieves discourses already undertaken in soccer and, thus, repositions the play's colonization to a much longer, comprehensive, and continuous process that is cyclical and accompanies capital reorganizations. This connection calls for a comparative examination between the advertising rhetoric used in soccer and the campaign in question, to launch understandings that allow us to perceive how colonial images and imaginaries travel around the world through the forms of the game, based on the advertising campaigns surrounding it through different periods. This is developed from the methodological input of content analysis.

Thereby, our discussion of this object is guided by four biases that, we propose, help elucidate how play becomes the cogwheel of a system that i) exploits the unpaid labor of players; ii) favors capital accumulation; and iii) erases a set of colonial mediations and hierarchies, of exploitation and domination in favor of the neoliberal ideology that favors the (re)production of structural inequalities. First, we approach the play with the theoretical-epistemological key of coloniality, to sustain that its nature was colonized by the dominant structures to serve a project of perpetuating the power relations established by colonization. Thereafter, we reflect on the state of contemporary play in its intrinsic relationship with capitalism, problematizing the gradual corrosion of its nature and its reduction to an instrument/tool of coloniality – here we make a brief appreciation of the relationships between leisure, labor, and coloniality. Having established these theoretical frameworks, in the third moment we approach a contextualization of Free Fire Chrono Operation. At last, we describe how the study was carried out and we used its results as examples and, then, presented a comparative reading between Gardena's advertising videos and others.

Our observation points to a radical expansion of the process of colonization of play, a phenomenon indicated by Thiago Falcão, Daniel Marques and Ivan Mussa (2020), Falcão et al. (2020) and Ivan Mussa, Thiago Falcão and Tarcízio Macedo (2020). However, our approach shifts to the centrality of the debate on the problematization of advertising strategies that surround games like FF, which act to reproduce logics of coloniality and domesticate gamer subjectivity through the agency of neoliberalism. We believe that advertising pieces can carry the reproduction/reenactment of practices that reinforce the naturalization of colonial discourse and exploratory genealogy of global coloniality. The reflection that we introduce here emerges as a proposal of a set of questions that lead us to a broader research program on the state of

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[6] Retrieved 2021, May 22 from: https://bityli.com/d1EZ66.

contemporary play, from which the debate in this dossier is inserted.

On ideologies and coloniality, the ideology of colonialism

Play, like other instances of life such as politics, communication, and publicity, is always situated in the epistemic ethnic-racial/sexual/gender place. Play, therefore, derives from an economic, epistemic, (geo)political, ideological, historical, spatial, ethnic-racial, classist, and even gendered context. Soraya Murray (2019) helps us adequately problematize this argument when considering the video stories constructed at the intersection in regards to the broader events of society, by the many contexts in which stories are situated. The author argues that "(...) it becomes impossible to separate a history of games from politics, culture, economics, identity politics, and the interests of those who wish to codify that history as one thing and not another" (Murray, 2019, online). The implications of this are many, as we shall see, but, before entering the debate about coloniality, a move towards ideology is necessary.

Controversial, "ideology" is a widespread concept used to this day for diverse purposes. Its recurring popularity is directly proportional to the flexibility of meanings it has:

> 'Ideology' can designate anything from a contemplative attitude that misrecognizes its dependence on social reality to an action-orientated set of beliefs, from the indispensable medium in which the individuals live out their relations to a social structure to false ideas which legitimate a dominant political power (Žižek, 1994, p. 3-4).

Similarly, Louis Althusser argues that social practices and ideas are closely related, and adds: "it can be said that there is no practice without ideology, and that every practice – including scientific practice – realizes itself through an ideology" (Althusser, 1990, p. 256). For this author, people, in any social activities (whether related to the domain of science, art, law, politics, morals, or economic production), act subject to the respective ideologies, by default of their will and more or less with complete ignorance on the subject. We are here in the ideological space insofar as social domination (exploitation, power) intrinsically depends on non-transparency, as pointed out by Slavoj Žižek (1994). "Ideology is a systematically distorted communication" (Žižek, 1994, p. 10). For ideology in the sense of service of power to be effective, "the very logic of legitimizing the relation of domination must remain concealed" (Žižek, 1994, p. 8). The arguments of Althusser (1990) and Žižek (1994) show that nothing is done without ideological influence and that the ideological struggle is, in this sense, evident.

Authors such as Mário Stoppino (1986) and Teun van Dijk (1995) evoke the "weak", and, therefore, neutral sense, that considers ideology as a general meaning system, or as processes that would underlie the sociopolitical cognition of data groups and that anyone could, more or less effectively, direct to their ends. Alternatively, Žižek (1994), Althusser (1990), and John Thompson (2009) advocate a critical reading of ideology from its "strong" sense.[7] This meaning, as Stoppino (1986) recovers from two general trends inventoried by Norterto Bobbio ("weak" and strong of ideology), arises from the concept of ideology proposed by Karl Marx and is "understood as false awareness of domain relations between classes" (Stoppino, 1986, p. 585).

Thus, our reading of ideology adheres to a "strong" perspective of the concept, to the detriment of its weak, still predominant meaning. The aim of ideological critique would then be, as Thompson (2009) and Žižek (1994) suggest, to unveil and discern how the unknown biases of the significant symbolic forms of culture are formed and constitutive of relations of domination. This includes, therefore, practices, discussions, discourses, and texts of the so-called hope laborers (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013) and the global

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[7] Thompson (2009) bases his critical conception on the dialectical relation of symbolic forms with domination systems, that is, in the use of culture and its constructions of meaning to implement and keep relations of domination.

video game culture from its ruptures, gaps, and lapses.

The theory of the modern/colonial[8] world-system shows that coloniality and the capital rationales go beyond the rhetorical and ideological sphere, as it involves various procedures – entangled with distinctive structural layers – inserted in the same historical material reality (including the symbolic-ideological) (Grosfoguel, 2008). However, the scrutiny of these ideological and rhetorical devices is an analytical mechanism by which authors of the decolonial circle operate a significant part of the critique that exposes and deconstructs the colonial legacy (that is, the continuity of colonial forms of domination) reified by countless discourses, narratives and practical aspects of life. Ideology, for example, is a concept often used by Walter Mignolo (2003, 2007) in his works *Historias locales/disenos globales* and *La ideia de América Latina*. Colonialism is situated by this author as a hidden ideology of both modernity and Latin America, and thus, it is seen by Mignolo as a key ideology to understand the "idea" of Latin America.

On the other hand, the ideology of colonialism is implemented through coloniality as a logic of domination. The matrix of colonial power itself referred to in terms of coloniality (Quijano, 1992, 2000), emerged from the combination of the expansion ideology of Western Christianity, with the consequent change in commerce arising from land ownership and large-scale exploitation of labor (Mignolo, 2007). Ramón Grosfoguel (2008), starting from the colonial difference, also considers the duty to observe more seriously the ideological-symbolic strategies of the modern/colonial world, as well as its colonial/racist culture.[9] Once he understood the tangled web in which both the colonial matrix of power is naturalized and hidden as a triumphant project of modernity and the way differences are converted into values, Mignolo (2007) analyzes the dark side of modernity's rhetoric. Since the beginnings of the constitution of the capitalist world system, the constant hoarding of capital has always been connected with ideologies – be they racist, homophobic or sexist – which is reinforced from Grosfoguel's (2008) perspective.

This shows us that, despite the ideology and associated rhetoric not being the only means by which coloniality and the logics of capital operate and are limited, focusing on these analytical categories is particularly appropriate, as it is recognized that "cultural processes/ideological (...) encourage the subordination of the periphery in the capitalist world-system" (Grosfoguel, 2008, p. 128). Grosfoguel (2008) emphasizes that underestimating cultural and ideological dynamics put the political-economic approach itself at risk. It is in this sense that the notions of "ideology" and "rhetoric" are here redefined, therefore, about the heterogeneous entanglement of the set of ideas responsible for giving conceptual coherence to the strategies of multiple capital agents, in this case specifically represented by Garena.

Furthermore, arguing that play is a tributary of an ideological context opens the way for making the ideological struggle within the practices, discussions, and texts that permeate the universe and play/game spaces. This perception places us in a circuit in which all responses to an ideology can only be ideologic itself: "when some procedure is denounced as 'ideological par excellence', one can be sure that its inversion is no less ideological" (Žižek, 1994, p. 4). It is from this perspective that Mignolo (2003, p. 58) argues that the answer to the colonialism ideology – hence, to coloniality itself – involves the construction

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[8] The term refers to the world-system theory developed by the sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein (1974), among others. To him, the imagery (that is, several ideas responsible for giving conceptual coherence) of this modern world-system was built from three conflicting, although complementary, ideologies, the fruit of the European Enlightenment: conservatism, liberalism, and socialism. Walter Mignolo (2003, 2007) develops the concept by internalizing the colonial/racial/modern element in Wallerstein's (1974) world-system conception, now conceived from a "modern/colonial world-system". This happens from the identification, by Mignolo (2003, 2007), of colonialism as a fifth hidden ideology (Christianity would be the first), as an unpleasant and derivative process, from the point of view of Western epistemology and political theory, but a "necessary evil". Explicit projects of modern rhetoric are often phrased in positive terms – "civilization", "salvation", "progress", "development", "modernization" and "democracy" – while the word "colonization" is silenced, even when it is understood as a vital step to bring the "good" closer to the people who so desire and deserve it.

[9] Grasfoguel (2008) also argues that the world-system analysis generated a few years ago the concept of geoculture to complement and refer to global ideologies.

of "another paradigm [which] also leads us to 'another ideology', that of 'critical cosmopolitanism'".

The emancipation and imagination of possible futures would be at the thresholds of modern ideologies, on the edges from which critical cosmopolitanism is drawn up as a paradigm and another ideology, from which frontier thinking emerges from both subordination and attentive, open and mindful hegemony, conscious of coloniality. The frontier thinking, that resists the five ideologies of modernity (Mignolo, 2003, 2007), shows the strength of the ideological struggle and the objection to certain concepts of ideology that ground themselves in the use of violence to defend freedom, of anti-democratic means to protect democracy, in the defense of space at the expense of human lives and in the appointment of outlaws to uphold the law (Mignolo, 2003).

Ideology, here, assumes the function of designating, similarly to the use of "proletarian ideology" in the late 1920s (Žižek, 1994), the very "subjective" driving force of subordinate activity, not the corruption of consciousness under the pressure of bourgeois ideology. The notion of "other ideologies" is designed to introduce subalterns to fulfill their historical mission: to assert their space where their ideas were denied by modern thinking, whether from the right or left-wings (Mignolo, 2003).

That said, it is important to emphasize that video games are products that cannot be fundamentally dissociated from culture and its dominant ideologies (Murray, 2018). It is relevant to consider video games in the scope of wider broader cultural and colonial discourses, because the products of this industry are themselves tributary of the cultural contexts in which they are inserted (Shaw, 2010), although the colonial – and neoliberal – discourse in video games tends to erase this particular set of mediations, circumstance, and dimensions. This brief digression introduces the notion that rethinking play through the perspective of the modern/colonial world redefines important assumptions. It allows us to examine which projects play – in their diversity of formats – have served throughout their history.

As it has been mentioned numerous times in the previous lines, "coloniality" is a concept created by Aníbal Quijano (1992) which expresses an attempt to understand modernity as a process intimately related to the colonial experience. The notion of "coloniality of power", like a matrix or pattern of power in the modern/colonial world, is an organizing foundation that encompasses the exercise of domination and exploitation in four interrelated domains of human experience: economic (including the exploitation of labor and financial control), political, social and epistemic/subjective/personal.

Each of these domains of administration and control (to the world order), supported by the racial and patriarchal foundation of knowledge – the enunciation from which the world order is granted (Grosfoguel, 2008; Mignolo, 2007, 2011) – intersect amongst themselves and make the colonial matrix of power difficult to recognize and also make it a complex structure of interconnected levels. The end of colonialism with the independence/decolonization processes did not, in any way, translate into the elimination of colonial relations. It is this set of persisting structures and phenomena that is called colonialism. The diagnosis is that we continue to live entangled by the same "colonial matrix of power", by the same colonial hierarchies of European/Euro-American exploration and domination rooted in the "international division of labor", in the racial-ethnic hierarchy and the spiral of accumulation of capital on a global scale (Quijano, 1992).

The development of capital and the creation of capitalism, such as we know it, was precisely financed and it is at the heart of the conception of modernity and its hidden side, coloniality. Contemporary capitalism is the direct heir to the logic of colonialism, and coloniality would be one of the essential and particular components of the world pattern of capitalist power (Quijano, 2000). The transformation of capitalism implies the development of new modes of "colonization" and control, including the forms, activities, and situations of play in the world. In this sense, we believe that video games are an expression of particular importance in the dynamics of reorganizing the colonial matrix of contemporary power (cf. Mussa et al., 2020).

Games between leisure, labor, and coloniality

It is in the movement to establish a new defining paradigm of the contemporary media environment, the platform of society (Van Dijck et al., 2018), that the relationships between play, labor, and society undergo profound complexifications (Falcão et al., 2020). The growing platformization of the gaming experience reveals a phenomenon that manifests itself in various manners in the gaming industry, in which the colonization of the play finds momentum to strengthen itself. This notion is a proposal that appears, for the first time, in the work of Falcão, Marques, and Mussa (2020) and of Falcão et al. (2020), later developed in Mussa, Falcão, and Macedo (2020). The notion seeks to offer a critical reading of a platforming process of game practices – a subversion of the principles of the playful activity by economic forces of a global capital that colonizes the experience of play. This current scenario would be marked by a reconfiguration of the video game industry, based on an ethic that acts to transform the act of playing, disguised at effort and labor, into capital values. It is a cyclical dynamic of constant (re)production of sociabilities for the capital, available for the exploitation and appropriation of its value as a given. We believe that the diagnosis is accurate, despite referring to a specific phase within the historical *continuum* of play colonization.

The argument that the platformization of society and the colonization of play follow the same modus operandi of capitalism and neoliberalism – establishing conditions of exploitation based on the matrix of domination and colonial power (Falcão et al., 2020) – calls for a debate on free labor necessary for this article. The sustainability of the internet as a medium is directly dependent on huge amounts of labor, which are not equivalent to employment. Tiziana Terranova (2000) argues that a substantial part of this immense amount of labor that supports the internet is derived from a particular form of free labor, which ranges from unpaid, poorly paid/under-compensated, socially produced, and of collective origin.

Multiple entertainment products depend directly on the time and effort dedicated by their base communities, and it is in the daily "engagement" of legions of consumers that the economic and cultural maintenance of media products is guaranteed (Macedo, 2021a). "Free labor is the moment where this knowledgeable consumption of culture is translated into [excess] productive activities that are pleasurably embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited" (Terranova, 2000. p. 37). Emphasizing power asymmetries, Terranova (2000) seeks to recognize the relevance of free, affective, and cultural labor for the media industry. The author follows the argument that free labor is structural for the cultural economy in late capitalism, and this is the field that multiplies and exhausts it. In these terms, free labor would be an asset of the cultural economy in general and a relevant, albeit underestimated, force in advanced capitalist societies (Terranova, 2000).

Free labor, thus, is granted simultaneously, not voluntarily enjoyed, relished, and explored, based only on the emotion and dubious promises and hopes of digital labor. This movement allows us to redefine activities in gaming also in terms of free labor: situations in which the player participates voluntarily and free of charge in the creation of value, driven by motivation linked to leisure/entertainment, affection, the exhibition of consumption, expression of identity, experience, visibility and through the impulse of neoliberal subjectivity.

Even so, there is something that escapes from the undertaken debate about the dimension of free labor and that, however, is the engine of its existence. Linked to all the impulses described above, there is a hope dynamic in the activities developed by various trades that fall into the new category of digital laborers, from influencers, drivers, and application delivery persons, from micro-celebrities to aspiring gamers, professionals, and gaming streamers. A certain impulse of hope moves their practices, fueled by a neoliberal subjectivity and rationality (Dardot & Laval, 2009). This stimulus is used as inspiration to reinforce the hierarchy, precariousness, and exploitation of the labor of an entire category: under the hopeful belief that, with a lot of work and effort, one day maybe this free labor will be rewarded and made

worth it.

The concept of "hope labor" as "a motivation for voluntary online social production" is proposed by Kathleen Kuehn and Thomas Corrigan (2013, p. 9) to expand understanding of the motivations behind online social production. According to the authors, hope labor is a construction based on the ontological affective and temporal dimensions of hope. Structurally, it comes from a political economy that aspired to repair the insecurities of contemporary workplaces, as a coping strategy that would be useful to navigate the uncertainties of the labor economy of our time. This movement, however, is made without considering the risks associated with the related processes. The concept, therefore, is ideologically arranged according to the meritocratic investment in job expectations, although its impact is harmful to prospects and careers in intended sectors. Kuehn and Corrigan (2013) argue that the attraction and fascination of working online as a type of investment guide to the future is usually a minimized motivation for social production, although it is increasingly present and incorporated into online business models.

The authors define hope labor as "un- or under-compensated work carried out in the present, often for experience or exposure, in the hope that future employment opportunities may follow" (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013, p. 10). Kuehn and Corrigan (2013) introduce the term from a study of bloggers and revisers, but we believe that it is useful for understanding a variety of other digital laborers, including aspiring streamers, pro-players[10], application drivers, and delivery persons, among others. The labor of hope thus expands the debate about free labor. Structurally, Kuehn and Corrigan (2013) distinguish hope labor from other forms of free labor based on the emphasis given to the temporal relationship between present work experience and future work ambitions. In this relationship, there is a transfer that shifts costs and risks from companies to the subjects, who are solely responsible for their success. This temporal dimension is essential to understand the dynamics implied in this context and is often absent in debates about free labor (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013).

Hope labor is thus presented as a type of "investment" that rewards individuals based on merit, despite its detrimental impact on employment prospects and careers. Kuehn and Corrigan (2013) have already pointed out that the concept would be useful both to understand the motivations behind the production of digital content, as the progressive orientation of vast industries – from media to gaming – in applying this same guideline as a condition to guarantee future jobs. Therefore, "hope labor is yet another means of valorizing leisure spaces that captures digital 'workers' in relations not unlike those defined by traditional labor arrangements" (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013, p. 10). The appreciation and exploitation of ways of leisure – and hope – of countless professions of digital laborers for capital accumulation is what has driven the spirit of capitalism in our time.

Free Fire and Operation Chrono in Brazil

Free Fire is a multiplayer shooter game designed for mobile devices. Its beta version was launched in September 2017 by Vietnamese developers 111dots Studio that, at the time, only had dedicated servers in its home country. The goal was to compete with another local developer, Horus Entertainment, which had released Bullet Strike: Battlegrounds in the same year. Both companies aimed to replicate the success of PUBG in the country, but 111dots Studio ended up emerging from the competition far beyond what was planned. Some of the reasons for its success were the light mechanics, focus on easy-to-learn gameplay and simpler graphics. This made FF an extremely accessible game for many types of devices. In December 2017, Forest Li, CEO of Singaporean company Garena and one of the richest men in the world, acquired the rights to FF shortly after the beta version was published by 111dots Studio and launched Garena Free Fire. Today, his fortune in the gaming world is only behind Time Sweeney, CEO of Epic Games (creator of

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[10] Term popularly used in the global video gaming community to refer to professional video game players. It is short for the professional player.

Fortnite).[11]

In January 2018, FF was already the leader of downloads in 22 countries. Among them was Brazil, currently one of the main members of its community. Garena often pays attention to the Brazilian market, creating characters inspired by Brazilian celebrities, such as Miguel (developed from the character Capitão Nascimento, from the *Tropa de Elite* movie) and Alok (named and created after the internationally renowned Brazilian DJ). Among other campaigns, there is also the launching of the game's theme songs with Brazilian artists, such as the video "Zé Guaritinha" by MC Jotapê and Mano Brown, produced by Kondzilla.[12]

Beyond the international leagues, Garena has an entire league dedicated to Brazil. There are three series in it. A, B, and C,[13] and the scenario has been configured as highly promising. The performance of Brazilian teams in the championships also brought the spotlight to the tropics: players have already emerged as winners in several disputes. Among them, the 2019 World Cup, held in Rio de Janeiro, consecrated the Corinthians team and raised both the Brazilian team and its players to the FF world elite.[14] Other teams also stood out, such as LOUD, one of the main organizations ahead of FF in Brazil today. In addition to having major sponsors such as Banco Itaú, it maintains positive campaigns in the championships.

As mentioned in the introduction, Free Fire is a game that was quickly appropriated by the population with less purchasing power in Brazil. This generated a series of journalistic content pointing to the possible "dream realization" from the practice of playing certain video games. With the professionalization of mobile esports, narratives about "making it" through esports and gaming streams spread and dominated the media discourse. It is in this context that the advertising campaign specifically aimed at Brazil about Operation Chrono arises. This event was created to launch the character Chrono, inspired by the soccer player Cristiano Ronaldo, as well as new game modes and game maps. In Brazil, a promotional advertising video was made. Not coincidentally, it was filmed in the community of Jardim Peri, in São Paulo, the same place where the player Gabriel de Jesus was revealed.

Garena gathered FF influencers and held a selection with players aged 12 to 16 years old to find the "main character" of the ad in the community itself. The one picked was Fabrício Gonçalves, at the time 13 years old. The intention was to show the tale of a boy who was both a soccer and Free Fire fan, where a collage of the player Cristiano Ronaldo would be revealed on top of the favela's roofs. Garena's campaign promoted the renovation of the houses that were involved in the collage scenario, under the responsibility of Luan Cardoso, the artist who was also the author of a piece of the player Gabriel Jesus in a campaign for Adidas in 2018.[15]

Methodological procedures

Our research, of exploratory and qualitative nature, makes use of document research and content analysis. Laurence Bardin (1977) postulates that content analysis has four distinct phases: pre-analysis, coding, categorization, and analysis. In the pre-analysis, we choose the documents and formulate hypotheses and objectives. Our main document analysis is of the publicity video launching Operation Chrono in Brazil. However, we also added other documentary records to complement this study, such as journalistic articles, advertising videos of Brazilian soccer advertisements, and campaigns with esports teams. The list of videos used is shown in Table 1 below. In total, eight videos were collected, which

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[11] Retrieved 2021, May 22 from: https://glo.bo/3gDjDeB.

[12] Retrieved 2021, May 22 from: https://bit.ly/2S14uvk.

[13] Retrieved 2021, May 22 from: https://bit.ly/35vo4D0.

[14] Retrieved 2021, May 22 from: https://bit.ly/3cP6OwO.

[15] Retrieved 2021, May 22 from: https://bit.ly/3gtL2kg.

selection was carried out between April and May 2021.

Table 1 – List of videos used in the analysis

Document Title	Nature	Link	Access Date
Operação Chrono Free Fire - 2020	Vídeo	https://youtu.be/HXepypT2nLQ	22/05/2021
Campanha Isso Muda o Game Itaú - 2021	Vídeo	https://youtu.be/M5ZyTFJjXV4	22/05/2021
Campanha LOUD + Itaú - 2021	Vídeo	https://youtu.be/-jCNxnZa5BM	22/05/2021
Nike Vai na Brasileiragem - 2018	Vídeo	https://youtu.be/Vm-avsAjrIo	22/05/2021
XXL - Sports Unites All - 2016	Vídeo	https://youtu.be/NvustDmW7bk	22/05/2021
2014 FIFA World Cup™ | OFFICIAL TV Opening - 2014	Vídeo	https://youtu.be/JP67IM1LX-M	22/05/2021
Willian - Revelação Guaraná - 2014	Vídeo	https://youtu.be/IRXst1_t7a4	22/05/2021
Ronaldinho Alegria: Joga Bonito Nike - 2006	Vídeo	https://youtu.be/I16g_ciA4os	22/05/2021

Source – Data collection/Produced by authors

The chosen videos are divided between campaigns focused on games, with the promotions of Operation Chrono (Garena) and Itaú, entitled *Isso Muda o Game* and *LOUD+ Itaú is* ⬚, and advertising campaigns aimed at soccer. Itaú's videos were chosen because they bring a context to how advertisers work on issues such as gambling, labor, and coloniality. When it comes to soccer-themed videos, we chose those that were represented in the sense of highlighting major advertisers (such as Nike and Guaraná Antartica) and addressing the World Cup. We consider that the relevance of one of the most important global sporting events, together with renowned brands, forms satisfactory criteria for choosing. Besides that, the narrative of hope labor and the use of favelas as a setting only manifested themselves in advertising after the 2000s. In Edison Gastaldo (2002a), there is evidence that there are not so many traces of these stories in soccer advertising in the previous period. In this way, the last criteria is of the nature of the topics covered, the aesthetics and elements that brought a connecting trail with the narratives of the advertising videos by Garena and Itaú.

The codification stage proposed by Bardin (1977) comprises the establishment of rules (or registration units) for directing the gaze on the collected materials. We chose to cut by theme, which consists in discovering the meaning, not the form. These units are intrinsic to the analyzed videos, based on the promotional video of Operation Chrono. Still, on coding, we gave the context units. They are directly linked to registration units, as they serve as understanding units for the meanings of the former ones (Bardin, 1977). In this study, they are established from the theoretical framework and contextual documentary data. After coding, the third step is categorization. Bardin (1977) explains that it is an operation of classification of elements that constitute a set. The categories that we list are (1) hope labor and precariousness, (2) rationalization and universalization, (3) meritocracy and social ascension through gaming, and (4) similarities with soccer advertising discourse, which will be detailed in the fourth stage — of analysis. It concerns interpretations and conclusions about what was observed. These steps will be detailed below.

Neoliberal ideology and hope labor as operators of the esports ecosystem

Before we start our analysis, it is important to consider that hope labor is normalized and naturalized from rhetoric deriving from neoliberal ideologies and, therefore, can only be properly understood as an ideological process (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013). The analysis we offer considers the ideological operation of hope labor as central to its functioning and maintenance in the contemporary labor economy. In particular, we identified some general ways through which hope labor is operated by Garena in its discourse and reinforced by other actors of the esports ecosystem. Although these ways are not exhaustive, they offer a set of tools that we believe are useful to identify and explain the role of hope labor in the service of power. The debate here focuses on the ideological legitimation of hope labor.

Having made this introductory note, it is important to emphasize that the neoliberal ideology present in hope labor is particularly fruitful in allowing players to see how the search for a career is taken for granted, based on the premise that the efforts, as a form of labor, will be rewarded for individual merit. This ideology masks and maintains the asymmetrical power relations of digital capitalism. In the set of videos, we observe a recurring category: the discourse that players, if they dedicate considerable time and effort, will have their contributions and merits translated into job opportunities and promising future careers.

By inserting this rhetoric in its video, Garena engages players in what Kuehn and Corrigan (2013) have called, as stated, "hope labor": un- or under-compensated labor performed for exposure or experience in hope that, in the future, it might be worth the effort. This hope labor condition is not a peculiarity of the gaming industry or digital laborers, since it is possible to trace it in many other work relationships in the precarious *devir*, but it is the result of global coloniality that travels throughout the world – at least in the last five decades – starting from the neoliberal project. The repercussions of this movement are felt across the globe in different sectors and work activities – from unpaid internships to voluntary work, for example.

Perverse, the rhetoric of neoliberalism updates discourses that profess that "all labor is decent and honest", to normalize informality, precariousness, and exploitation in labor relations, in addition to disqualifying the collective organization of workers and the fight for better working conditions. As stated, the notion of hope labor goes hand in hand with the idea of free labor. Both are normalized and naturalized by the same neoliberal logic and ideological values: the idea that, with luck, precarious labor can guarantee long-term economic stability. Precarious labor can, therefore, be understood as free and hope labor that is not compensated or poorly paid, performed for the sake of visibility and/or experience, in the hope that it can be compensated later. The argument is echoed in the meaning that the work explored can be rewarded with merit and overcoming. This movement is based on the neoliberal rationale that emphasizes and privileges the individual over the collective and broader and more structured social groups that cross social experience. This individualizing logic is organized to meet certain political and economic projects and interests (Dardot & Laval, 2009) and to maintain the modern/colonial world-system.

When transferring responsibility to the individual, a particular set of different prescriptions that constitute and mediate life is both less perceived and less highlighted. Social reality is much more complex than this reductionism tries to propose and capture. A series of economic, social, historical, biological, psychological, material, geographic, etc., factors determine and mediate our existence. This reductionism is particularly opportune in avoiding the centrality of the problem: the historical inequalities between individuals fueled by the logic of coloniality in the world-system. It is this rationality that makes neoliberalism an explanatory model, an ideology that distorts social reality (Dardot & Laval, 2009). The pro-player profession, as we know it, belongs to a new category of digital laborers that is powerfully instrumentalized by this ideology. What is promoted is a deposit of responsibility on the individual, and

their "force of will", as the key to solving any personal, interpersonal, material, subjective, and psychological problems.

If a player is to develop and sustain an optimistic perspective on future job opportunities, he will need to see hope labor as a legitimate process, albeit necessarily uncertain in all of its appearances. One way this occurs is through modern "rationalization" (Thompson, 2009), arguing that labor based on hope is a legitimate way to secure future employment. In the Operation Chrono video, Garena offers us perhaps the most convincing rationalization of hope labor. The video suggests that playing voluntarily can be a strategic choice to enable the careers of aspiring pro-players and streamers.

In the advertising ad, this argument finds repercussions with the presence of renowned pro-players and streamers who only rose to fame, and whose successful careers were made possible, through the exposure of their images and their efforts (playing the game) on streaming platforms for hours on end. This unpaid effort is conventionally defined as "play" (Dibbell, 2016). However, this action in exchange for some visibility is not just any trivial effort. A substantial amount of the productive activity – creative, exploited, and precarious – of these subjects on the internet can be called labor. Going further, this form of effort by aspiring streamers and aspiring pro-players can be seen as hope labor and unpaid free labor (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013; Terranova, 2000). Literature on the lives and careers of streamers and aspiring professional video game players, for example, informs that individuals who see gaming as a job and profession (who obtain or seek to obtain their main income from this activity) undergo effort regimes and dedication that often exceed the workload of a formal worker and reach around 70 or even 90 hours of weekly work (Johnson & Woodcock, 2017), even without any guarantee of remuneration.

It is a structure that relies not only on paid, precarious, and free digital laborers, as suggested by Falcão, Marques, and Mussa (2020), but on a considerable sense of hope. The research by Mark Johnson and Jamie Woodcock (2017) offers us, at a certain point, an adequate picture of the presence of hope labor involved in building careers on gaming stream platforms such as Twitch. Even though hope is an undeveloped theme in these authors' research, when they detected the existence of a neoliberal subjectivity standing out in the interviews with 39 low-popularity streamers, "through which streamers argued that hard work, in streaming, is automatically rewarded" (Johnson & Woodcock, 2017, p. 16), Johnson and Woodcock (2017) point to the importance of hope labor in the terms presented in this paper.

The advertising pieces fuel the argument that precarious labor – free and hopeful – would create opportunities to acquire the experience and visibility players need to gain paid labor. It is not uncommon to find amateur – and even official – championships that only offer in-game prizes (in the form of virtual goods) or sponsorships, rather than cash prizes. Among aspiring and semi-professionals on the outskirts of esports, it is common to find reports that these forms of remuneration (experience and visibility) should be considered the main priorities – even more than money[16] – for players who are just starting (cf. Macedo, 2018). Working for free and with hope would be the path to professional advancement.

The idea here is that the player must focus on gaining experience and becoming well-known. The rest will come naturally as if it were a capital investment that will yield results in the future. What is suggested is that talented players will not find a desirable job (or are less likely to find it) if they do not choose to work for free first, in exchange for experience and visibility, to better position themselves for future employment opportunities. Acquiring experience and exposure can be the most reliable path to a career in the current esports scenario, However, this does not denote that this procedure of legitimation by rationalization is not, in itself, ideological. (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013). By recovering, for the context of esports, the framework is given to the soccer player profession as hope labor within the scope of neoliberal discourses of risk and investment, Garena denies the fundamental uncertainty and insecurity of hope labor: whether this investment will have return in the future. Moreover, it avoids any responsibility

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[16] Something similar appears in the video "*LOUD + Itaú é* □" (sic) with an excerpt, at eleven seconds, which says: "it is much more than money".

towards these players: success and failure depend exclusively on each one.

In addition, by indirectly exposing that players should focus on gaining experience and visibility, Garena underscores a degree of agency – defining success or failure – on the part of the hopeful laborer who masks structural power asymmetries – a dynamic that is typical to the relationships involved in this form of labor (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013). As the entry into the professional scene is beyond the control of each player – which is noticeable in the absence of formal regulation of the activity in many countries (Falcão et al., 2020) –, the set of actions that must be taken to obtain a job opportunity is, in reality, a precept imposed from an external point of view and that plays a role at least as important as knowing how to play (cf. Falcão et al., 2020; Macedo & Fragoso, 2019; Macedo, 2018).

Another strategy for legitimizing the ideology in the videos is based on the idea of universalization – which takes us to another analytical category. One of the most present ideas in esports revolves around the unethical fallacy that, within the game, "everyone is equal". This argument evokes an illusion that the material components (in this case hardware and software) are neutral and, thus, it would be enough for each player to want to make an effort and train to reach professional status. This "promise of equality", conveyed since the dawn of the internet (Macedo, 2021a), opportunely serves the neoliberal ideology and meritocracy and is, particularly, effective in the low-cost marketing of the actors involved in the monetization of esports. A proof of this is that the ideas similar to this one are widely spread by the actors that make up the esports industry at all levels – from pro-players to team owners and developers. In the *Isso Muda o Game* campaign, promoted by the Itaú bank, with players from the FF lineup of the LOUD team, the celebration of the individual appears both in the description of the video – "one's dream becomes the dream of an entire community" – and in the speech of one of the players. starting at ten seconds: "we left the *Quebrada* to represent Brazil in the world, we became idols of millions. *And whoever is arriving now can also become that. We started new careers, created opportunities (...) what was just a little game changed our lives. And, now, it feeds the dream of many*" (emphasis added by us).

Thompson (2009, p. 61) argues that relations of domination are ideologically staged as if they were "beneficial to all" and "open in principle to anyone who has the ability and the inclination to succeed with them". As in all fields of social life, risks and damages in esports are not distributed symmetrically. Based on meritocratic precepts of neoliberalism, the videos suggest that hope labor will reward the best and most hard-working ones in the future. Victor Alexandre de Oliveira, FF pro-player popularly known as Vitinnn, said something similar in a recent article: "it's not because we come from the *favela*, without a good cell phone to play with, that they [younger players] won't be able to arrive where we also arrived. We also left there, so anyone can make it".[17]

Base on this meritocratic framework, the failure and the lack of return of the investment made – moments in which the promises of investment and meritocracy lose their shine when players' efforts seem no longer worth the sacrifice – can be explained by a player's lack of skills, competences, talent, aptitude or hard work, or even because he did not act intelligently enough or because of the time needed in hope labor game, suggested Kuehn and Corrigan (2013). More than a meritocratic discourse that erases collective relations, the neoliberal ideology displayed in the videos and reproduced by actors that make up the esports ecosystem exempts developers and the State from any responsibility to players – whether professional or not.

The neoliberal ideology opportunistically ignores and leaves unexplored the power asymmetries of both the industry and the ecosystem of esports. This concentration of power gives the companies that maintain these competitive scenarios governance and control over the many employment opportunities. These companies are crucial actors that work with different new methods of governance and control (Falcão et al., 2020), whose strategic decisions affect, in many ways, the careers and work of countless

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[17] Retrieved 2021, June 16 from: https://bit.ly/3iQd8rw.

players – be it at the top or the bottom of the pyramid, with implications distributed very differently to each stratum.

Consistent with this meritocratic framework, the presence of renowned pro-players and streamers from the FF scene – in the same way, that internationally renowned players appear in soccer advertising – such as Cerol, El Gato, Nobru, Babi, PlayHard, Maellen, God Wins, The Joker and Maumauzk, reinforces the idea that everyone can reach the top by interacting with the aspiring players in the video. Lucio dos Santos Lima, 28, popularly known as Cerol, for example, comes from a peripheral area of Rio de Janeiro. He started working at age 11, dropped out of high school, and became a mobility app driver. His story is similar to that of millions of young Brazilians who experience situations of precariousness and vulnerability, were it not for his success in FF. In 2019, Cerol was elected the best Brazilian streamer at the eSports Brasil Awards, marked by the explosion of Garena's game in the country. One of the most popular Free Fire pro-players in Brazil, considered athlete of the year in 2019 by the eSports Brasil Award and the best player in the game's world championship in the same year by Garena, Bruno "Nobru" Goes, aged 19, has a similar background.

Falcão (2021, p. 15) adequately addresses this issue: "there is something like an idea of authenticity, a fable of victory that is incredibly seductive for the population's precarious layers". Here, another analytical category gains space: the idea of an advertising dimension of the game as an environment of social ascension, that the digital game would offer another path to economic mobility, specifically aimed at the D and C classes in a harmful way. It is not uncommon to find reports in the hegemonic Brazilian media that support this argument.[18] These are articles that celebrate the success and social rise of players like Cerol, Level Up and Nobru from Free Fire, as well as a new path traced by countless young people from the periphery of Brazil to dream of a better future. Each of these successful players is an example that it is possible to enjoy paid work as a result of their free labor and hope. And, thus, they reinforce the power asymmetries in the industry and the esports ecosystem.

Hope labor is presumably even more harmful and effective in precarious contexts where players are not equipped with the familiar welfare structures in the North. This favors greater longevity of labor based on hope in processes of exploration of digital labor because it is pursued as a chance to be lifted out of the precarious future, as a means and path to overcome it. The countless reports and the advertising discourse in campaigns and media pieces, permeated by neoliberal ideology, play an essential role in the players' subjectivity. The dynamics of rationalization and universalization, described above, are useful in boosting processes of hope labor that, ultimately, feed the power imbalance in digital capitalism, as reinforced by Kuehn and Corrigan (2013).

If Cerol, Level Up, and Nobru can do that, why couldn't the others? This pyramid, then, sounds scalable to players, even if few achieve this feat. Hope labor, however, is far from being a level playing field. While each of them is the face of the market and scene today, beneath the bottom layer of pro-players and streamers lurk a legion of the aspiring, fans, content producers, tournament organizers, and all sorts of actors from a global industry working long hours and receiving negligible amounts or no remuneration (Falcão et al., 2020). An army of people is responsible for the progressive evolution and economic and cultural maintenance of the media products in which they are involved, ensuring the spread and propagation of each one of them (Macedo, 2021a).

This growing exposure of the top of the pyramid and the successful careers of teams and players from peripheral regions ends up generating an erasure of an aspirational, gratuitous and hopeful labor that is extremely precarious and unevenly compensated, with great concentration at the top. This experience is particularly dangerous for players living in the Global South because it feeds a harmful idea of social mobility and economic mobility through digital gaming – a function that was previously exclusively assumed by sports in general, especially soccer. This parallel is drawn by Garena in the video of Operation

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[18] See examples in footnote 4.

Chrono both because the piece refers to a social dynamic very similar to soccer and countless other advertising strategies for this sport, and because the symbolism of soccer games being interrupted and relegated to the background concerning FF. This apparent "solution" to the "condition" of precariousness (capitalist and colonial project in its essence) through merit supports the foundations of the neoliberal discourse. Garena uses the promise of success as an advertising strategy and suggests to millions of young people, giving them an unlikely source of hope, that they too can be champions like each of the streamers and pro-players featured in the video. Media narratives and advertising discourse, imbued with neoliberal ideology, reinforce this argument.

A precarious player will presume that it is necessary to work intensively, on a large scale of time, to rise competitively without even being paid for it. Their asymmetrical and unequal access to certain materialities inherent to this profession will make their journey towards professionalization and pro-player status even more difficult. In addition, platforms tend to prioritize and grant special treatment to certain games and content producers at the expense of others (Falcão et al., 2020). The internal logic to these platforms is always to benefit and favor the popular player over the little streamer, who tends to submit to an even more intense exploitation regime. The problem here lies in the difference in compensation. Large streamers monetize their content with platforms, from advertisements, partnerships, viewer subscriptions, and sponsorships, while others are exploited with almost nothing in return. The relationship is disproportionate and asymmetrical.

The last category we consider relevant is the similarities with soccer advertising discourses. The main point that leads us to make this connection is the Operation Chrono video itself, as we brought up in this analysis, for replicating rhetoric that we have already encountered before in another sport that does not – in principle – require the player to have the great purchasing power to train: soccer. Thus, we offer some comparisons with selected advertising videos. The first is related to the setting of advertisements in the *favela* and of people from these spaces. In Image 1 below (from left to right, top to bottom), we can see the similarities of the scenarios in Operation Chrono, at the opening of the 2014 World Cup, in the short XXL - Sport Unites All and in the Vai na Brasileiragem campaign from Nike.

Image 1 – Comparison of advertising videos

Source: Free Fire - Brazil (2020), FIFATV (2014), XXL All Sports United (2016), and Nike Futebol (2018)

It is interesting to note that the *favela* is the first scenario that appears highlighted in the videos, reinforcing the connection between the game (soccer and Free Fire) and the communities. Gastaldo (2002b) pointed out in his research that, during the World Cup period, black actors and *favela* representation appear more frequently in contrast to other contexts, in which advertising favors white and blonde people. Another important point is the relationship between hope labor and soccer. According to Simoni Guedes (1982), esports promises social ascension and economic mobility to millions of children in such communities, providing what can be defined as the "realization of a dream", a path to fame and wealth that would not be achieved by traditional labor. Gastaldo (2002b) observes the viability of the social ascension project through soccer endorsed even by the media, and brings the example of an institutional advertisement presented by Rede Globo in the 1998 World Cup: "In one of the sketches, a 'mother', leaning over a crib with a soccer ball, would say to her baby: Daddy, soccer ball, baby kicks, scores a goal, wins the Cup, baby gets rich, mom and dad too... [looks at the camera and speaks, smiling :] Brazilians were born for this, right?" (Gastaldo, 2002b, p. 105). This representation guarantees legitimacy and builds a dimension of authenticity to what is presented in the advertising discourse, seducing a specific audience.

Both in Garena's campaign and the others analyzed, there is a strong appeal of the rhetoric produced by hope labor. More especially in the video that shows the story of player Willian, promoted by Guaraná Antártica, and in Nike's *Joga Bonito* campaign, which shows the trajectory of Ronaldinho Gaúcho. In common, both are black players, whose ad rhetoric denotes that they would be endowed with expressive talent and would have been recognized for their physical prowess. Guedes (1998) points out that, in Brazilian soccer, the difference between physical and mental work has operated since the beginning, including the widespread maxim that a player thinks with their feet. There is, therefore, a depreciation of the players' physical and mental work. Gastaldo (2002b) points out that there is an appreciation of this specific part of the player's body in advertising discourses – the feet are shown much more than whole bodies, as the latter is more routine in a soccer broadcast. To the extent that the success of black players is linked to a purely physical skill (something that is also repeated in the representations of black people in dance and carnival), the subject is kept in a subordinate position that reinforces the ethnic-racial hierarchy of coloniality. In the video of Operation Chrono, we can see a focus, right in the first scene where the protagonist appears, on the smartphone and his fingers, skillfully handling the game. The focus and framing of the camera shift from feet to hands, but the ethnic-racial hierarchical logic remains very similar.

Another important point is related to the social construction of the Brazilian way of playing soccer, often associated with the concept of *malandragem* (which means something between trickery and roguish behavior). For Antônio Soares (1994), this concept is almost a myth that constitutes the Brazilian identity, even being defined as an orientation of conduct. The author calls it "*malandro* soccer" when this attitude is incorporated into the Brazilians' playing style. In the analyzed videos, we can see the presence and pride of this way of playing in Brazil. In Nike's *Vai na Brasileiragem* campaign, it is possible to see a montage of various people, in different contexts, making fun, playful plays, breaking rules (such as playing at airports, indoors, breaking light bulbs with the ball) to the sound of a beat that refers to *carioca funk*. The Brazilian's pride can be seen at the end of the announcement, at one minute and 13 seconds: there is a boy giving instructions to the team (Image 2) as if he were a coach, followed by cuts from several teams concentrating to play. A phrase from the boy draws attention: "Give it all we got! Give it our lives. This is Brazil! It's without fear! This jersey here has history!"

Image 2 – Vai na Brasileiragem Campaign, produced by Nike in 2018

Source: Nike Football (2018)

The boy's speech reinforces the daring and courageous children, as one also appears in the campaign by the same advertiser, *Joga Bonito*. The narrator talks about Ronaldinho Gaucho while the video shows a comparison between scenes of him playing as a child and later as an adult. The concept of the piece is that when you are a child there is no fear of daring. In the video of Operation Chrono, it is possible to observe this same focus both in the figure of the protagonist, Fabrício Gonçalves, aged 13, and in the other participants in the commercial. There are children and teenagers as extras and Free Fire influencers and athletes making appearances. In the video, there is an emphasis on fun and *malandragem*, especially as the boys and girls run through the alleys of the favela making mischief and entertaining the people around them. A very similar sequence can be seen in the XXL Sports Unites All video, in which the protagonist runs to return a motorcyclist's wallet while the police chase him, thinking he was, in fact, a robber. In Image 3 below, we can see a comparison between the XXL and Garena campaign scenes (from left to right):

Image 3 – XXL and Garena comparison
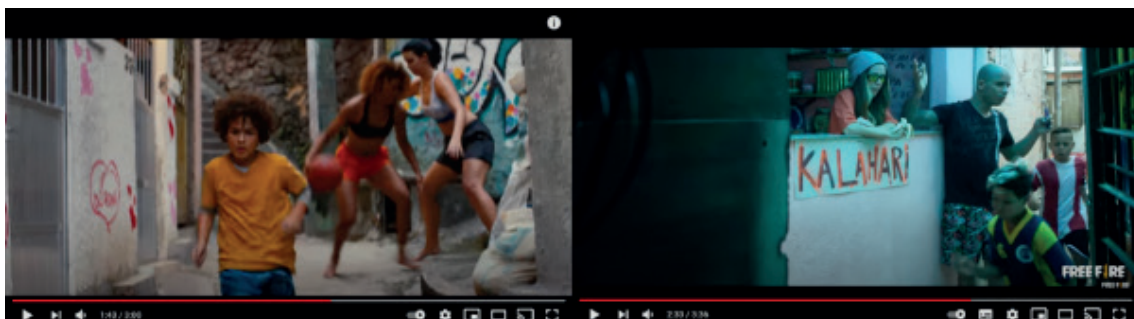
Source: XXL All Sports United (2016) and Free Fire - Brazil (2020)

At the end of the video, the boy meets the player Ronaldinho Gaúcho on the beach and hands over the wallet he lost, and everyone – including the police – plays together. The fun, the childlike spirit,

and the daring are also evident in Garena's video, when they create a large collage of the player Cristiano Ronaldo and film the result with a smartphone glued to a soccer ball, generating convergence between the sport and esport.

Final considerations

Socially recognized self-actualization is a common and primary motivation for the voluntary production of online content, including video game modders and YouTubers (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013). By shifting the action to subjects looking to build a career as streamers and pro-players, however, we are talking about a specific set, within a new category of digital laborers, who look at their online production with obvious intentions of financial return and economic sustainability. In the meantime, moved by affection and the collaborative spirit, players specifically direct their productive activities (artistic, technical, professional, cultural knowledge, etc.) to the media products they are involved with. This base is explored by informal and emotional working relationships, utopian aspirations, perceptions of autonomy and freedom, willingness to share, and the still undefined and blurred borders between free time, leisure, and free and hope labor (Falcão et al., 2020; Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013; Macedo, 2021a; Mussa et al., 2020).

In this context, hope labor, hence, moves to the centrality of the debate to serve as a central motivator for free online labor by aspiring streamers and pro-players, with the belief that their activities can lead to future opportunities of satisfactory employment. This hope, when commodified, proliferates the structural conditions that support digital capitalism (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013). Until they gain notoriety to convert social/cultural/symbolic capital into economic capital, legions of aspiring streamers and pro-players submit to precarious conditions of free and hopeful labor. Thus, we see the search for reputation, visibility, and experience configured as a kind of hope labor. Our argument, therefore, was aimed at drawing attention to the fact that the pursuit of long-term employment opportunities should also be considered in explaining the time and energy voluntarily donated by players aspiring to the elite in the careers of streamers and pro-players.

Advertising pieces like the ones illustrated in our corpus reinforce the idea that it would be enough to adopt a daring, "positive posture", to make obstacles be overcome as if by magic. This discursive production is not free from ideology, as we said. We seek to convey how advertising articulations reproduce colonial images and imaginaries that reinforce the coloniality of power, highlighting special attention to the relations of precariousness and exploitation arising from the rise and control that the neoliberal political and ideological ethos assumed of social processes related to the phenomena of labor and play. We seek to convey how advertising articulations reproduce colonial images and imaginaries that reinforce the coloniality of power, highlighting special attention to the relations of precariousness and exploitation surfacing from the rise and control that the neoliberal political and ideological ethos assumed of social processes related to the phenomena of labor and gaming. Garena's advertising strategy produces a discourse that encourages and values the profitable appropriation of leisure time – and hope – by players, from retaining their attention to converting pleasurable online activities into free and hopeful workforces. The aim is to guarantee the accumulation of capital in the face of the capture processes carried out by the current stage of contemporary capitalism (Mussa et al., 2020).

Our argument tried to illustrate how the Brazilian esports scene also depends on a network of informality, precariousness, and labor exploitation that involves winning personalities, media and advertising discourses, and a spectacle fueled by neoliberal dynamics of glamorizing precarious, free, and hopeful labor. In addition, the precarious context and how colonial images and imaginaries travel around the world through the forms of gaming, from advertising actions around them, create mature conditions for the proliferation of labor based on hope in cognitive, vigilant, and platform capitalism. In turn, hope labor contributes, in part, to the precarious process of contemporary labor dynamics (Kuehn & Corrigan,

2013).

As a result, esport and gaming as a path to a policy of ostentation and social ascension produce a growing glamorization of precarious work as free and hopeful labor. It is an unethical and cruel mechanism to say that anyone is just steps away from being among the best streamers and pro-players in a competitive landscape. Players ascend based on a gigantic impact (in their potentials) of countless mediations, dimensions, and circumstances (class, gender, ethnic-racial, which include material, cultural, socioeconomic, historical, geographic aspects, etc.) that at least do not make the journey to the top harder, not because of their own decisions, because of their "merits". It does take a lot of work to get to the top. Natural ability alone is not and never was enough, it does not sustain itself. Even so, it is necessary to assume more responsibility for the impact that these other dimensions of experience, for the places that subjects' bodies occupy in the world and the colonial chain (Macedo, 2021b), have on the whole than pretending that each player is totally and solely responsible for their success and failure.

Seen as an important logic for sustaining contemporary capitalism, hope labor is also essential for maintaining the esports scene in Brazil. It is produced by rhetoric that creates a false sense that anyone can be one of the best if they try hard enough, feeds the dreams of aspiring players, gives expectations of a better future based on the ontological, emotional, and temporal dimensions of hope, it disregards the aptitude of countless people, underestimates esports as a competitive enterprise colonized by capital par excellence and, finally, it feeds a predatory myth of free and hopeful labor that is used as inspiration to reinforce the hierarchy of power, precarization, and exploration of the (laborious) activity of aspiring players.

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Žižek, S. (1994). The spectre of ideology. In S. Zizek (Ed.), *Mapping Ideology* (p. 1-33). London: Verso Books..

Tarcízio Macedo is a doctoral candidate in Communication at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS). Master in Communication, Culture, and Amazon from the Federal University of Pará (UFPA), with a sandwich period at UFBA and UNEB. Specialist in Scientific Communication in the Amazon by the Center for High Amazon Studies (NAEA, UFPA). Founding member of the National Network for Research on Play and Political Culture (Metagame) and researcher linked to the Digital Artifacts Laboratory (UFRGS), InovaCom (UFPA), and Consia (UFPA). In this article, he contributed to the conception of the research design; data collection and selection; structuring the research problem and constructing the hypothesis; development of the theoretical discussion on ideology and coloniality and play, leisure, labor, and coloniality; data interpretation; support in proofreading; writing the manuscript and proofreading the foreign language version.

Gabriela Kurtz holds a Ph.D. in Communication and Information from the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS) and is a professor at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul (PUC-RS). Member of the National Network for Research on Play and Political Culture (Metagame). In this article, she contributed to the collection and selection of data; contextualization of the object and description of the methodological procedures; interpretation of data; support in proofreading; writing the manuscript, and proofreading the foreign language version.