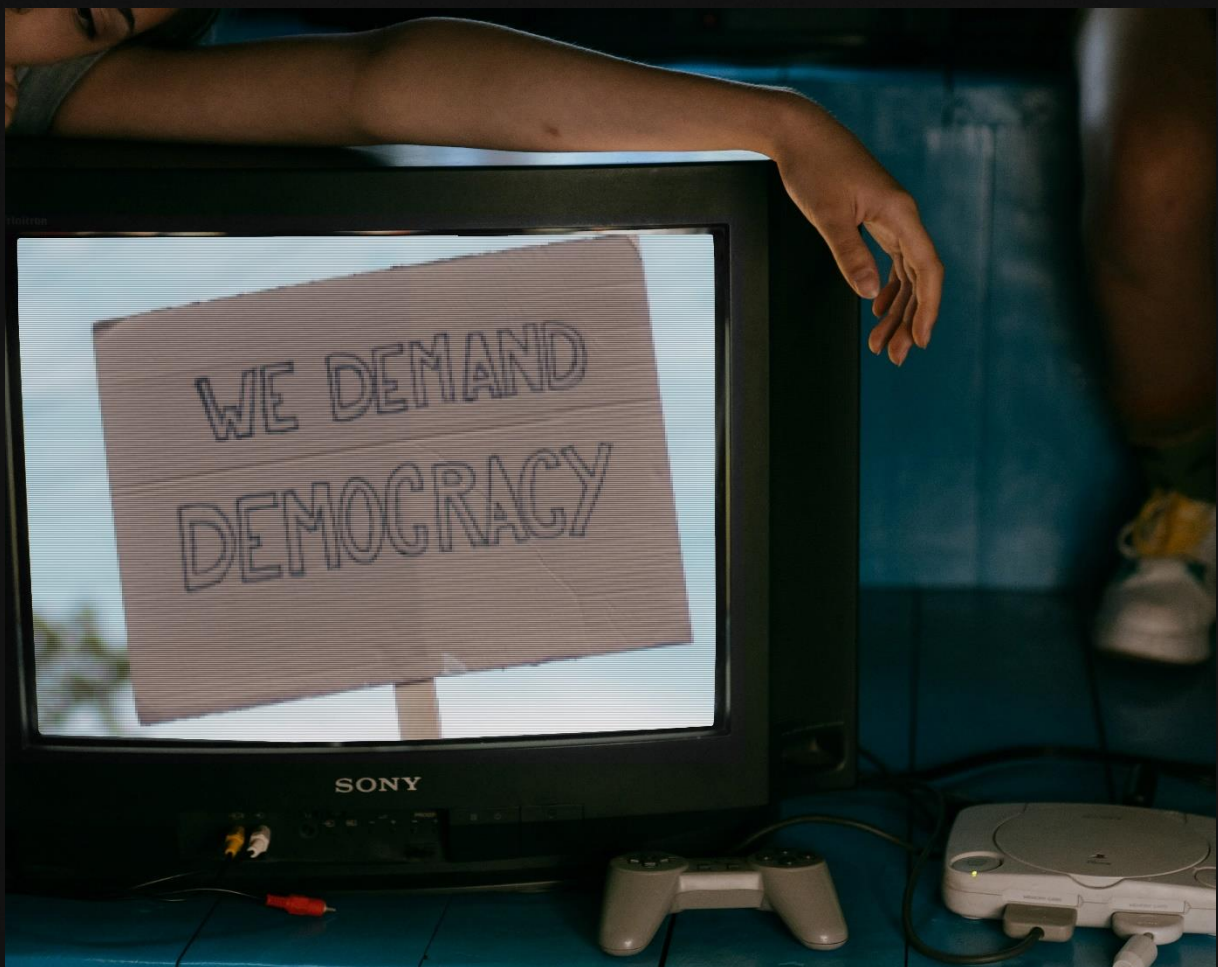


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Untitled. © Collage by Felix Zimmermann. Photos by cottonbro, Pexels, and Fred Moon, Unsplash.

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Special Issue

Democracy Dies Playfully. (Anti-)Democratic Ideas in and Around Video Games

edited by

Eugen Pfister, Tobias Winnerling and Felix Zimmermann



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At the Edge of Utopia. Esports, Neoliberalism and the Gamer Culture's Descent into Madness

Thiago Falcão, Daniel Marques, Ivan Mussa and Tarcízio Macedo

Abstract

This article discusses the controversy regarding Brazilian Senate Bill No. 383, which deals with the regulation of esports activity in the country. We analyzed the conversation about the hashtag *#TodosContraPLS383*, a repudiation movement organized on *Twitter* in November 2019, to engender an argument that criticizes (1) the relations between the games industry and its practices of governance and (2) how individuals assimilate neoliberal discourse within this culture. From an ethnomethodological approach and through qualitative analysis that employs ATLAS.ti to collect and make sense of the data, we reconstruct a narrative that debates anti-regulation rhetoric, exposing gamer culture's relationship with neoliberal ideology.

Keywords: Esports, Neoliberalism, Gamer Culture, Brazil, gameenvironments

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Since their inception, game studies have significantly followed American and Eurocentric reasoning. The implications of this condition are manifold. This article highlights that it is necessary (1) to perceive that this Anglophonic nature points towards a cultural and political dimension that is necessarily modern, from a positivist standpoint. Thus, it is also imperative that we produce (2) a movement of social and cultural re-evaluation that sets in motion epistemological dimensions that relate less to the evolution of the North-centricⁱ argument and more to a necessary revision to contemplate other identity dimensions.

The first iteration of this process deals with the idea of play in what we will address as a hegemonic way, one that, by seeking to define this phenomenon, dangerously reduces it to particular perceptions of life in the Northern hemisphere. The work of Juul is an excellent example of this dimension, in the sense that his classic model of games (Juul (2005, 23) aims to provide a context-independent model that judges what is and what is not a game – an approach based on classical and traditional views that appear to be neutral but are heavily biased toward a western worldview. His definition of play draws boundaries, meanwhile trying to underscore specificities that may or may not fit inside its limits. This construction has been re-evaluated as initiatives work to decentralize or relativize these hegemonic positions that structure the studies about video games. Efforts such as those of Penix-Tadsen (2016 and 2019) and Mukherjee (2017), in turn, are working precisely to offer possibilities of interpretation and reflection that recognize the instances of the Globalⁱⁱ South as producers of meaning, discourse, practices – and not just as markets ready for consumption.

Understanding this condition is essential here because it reveals a political state of interpretation of social reality that ignores certain contexts that defy the dominant paradigm of identity, class, gender, and race. It echoes the perception of the situated performances of play that Thomas Apperley discusses (2010, 18), by stating that "the digital game ecology is shaped through myriad and plural local situations that collectively enact the global." This concern is present in Penix-Tadsen's (2019) argument, which insists that it is necessary to go beyond generalist contexts since much is lost when we ignore local specificities to the detriment of global aspects in the perception of a phenomenon. Thus, it is imperative to recognize that the discussion about play should contemplate particular geographical aspects to grasp specificities that otherwise would be overshadowed by the North-centric hegemonic

experience. This article aligns itself with a range of efforts that seek to "redefine video games and game culture from the perspective of the global south" (Penix-Tadsen 2019, 26), as it assumes the need to embrace not only the concepts and issues of an Epistemology of the South, as Santos (1995) has pointed out, but also the conflicts on which it focuses. Also, recognizing that this debate follows the necessities of "learning that there is a South; learning to go South; learning from the South and with the South" (Santos 1995, 508).

This reasoning implies reflecting on social and cultural practices and contexts of reproduction of play that pays attention to its local particularities, enabling research that is oriented by this condition to decode cultural patterns and structures that transcend the notion of play without necessarily reifying or purifying it.

Epistemologically, it is necessary to "look at video games in culture rather than games as culture" (Shaw 2010, 416), implying the understanding of play as a social force that permeates contemporary social and technical networks and whose observation can certainly yield scholarship about processes and situations within these. Thus, the cultural demonstrations that embody the phenomenon of play are subject to agential forces that activate epistemological and ontological structures, performing a particular perspective of the social that favors the emergence of certain economic and political conditions of neoliberalism – to the detriment of others.

This article discusses a particular articulation of Brazilian gamer culture and its crossing with the country's politics: the occasion of the proposal of a Bill for the regulation of esports in Brazilⁱⁱⁱ and how the movement reverberated on social media. Drawing from the controversies originated from this event, we address the following question: what are the main aspects that characterize the online discourse present in Brazilian gaming culture's response to this regulation attempt? Our argument stems

from the observation of an intense intertwining between play, late capitalism, and neoliberalism in the processes of institutionalization and mediatization of the competitive practices perceived in esports.

Considering the genealogy of esports and its process of negotiation of the status quo and how it involves several agents and institutions (Macedo and Falcão 2019, Taylor 2012), that range from independent grassroots movements to large corporations such as Blizzard Entertainment, our observation of this particular hashtag #*TodosContraPLS383* (All Against PLS 383, our translation) suggests the existence of a coordinated movement operated by corporations that seek to influence and lead the discourse about the regulation in Brazil. We address this particular process as a form of colonization of play, in the sense that it is perceptible how corporations openly profit from the understanding that processes of regulation are naturally bureaucratic and corrupt. By shaping up the narrative (i.e., the subliminal ideological underpinnings that articulate the discourse) behind this antigovernment perception, these actors take control of it, directing it at their will.

First, let us discuss PLS 383/2017 (Rocha 2017). Proposed by Senator Roberto Rocha (PSDB/MA, Brazilian political party) in October 2017, and forwarded to the Senate's Committee on Science, Technology, Innovation, Communication and Informatics (CCT) and the Senate's Committee on Education, Culture and Sport (CE), the original text of the project has six articles, under esports regulation: 1) institutes rules that must be followed by all who engage in the activity in Brazilian territory; 2) incorporates the esports practitioner in the athlete nomenclature; 3) institutes several specific objectives of the practice, among which to promote citizenship, valuing good human coexistence; develop educational and cultural sports practice, regardless of creed, race and political, historical and/or cultural and social divergence; contribute to

improving the intellectual capacity of practitioners; going as far as fighting hate and going against ethnic, creed and gender discrimination; 4) ensures that esports will be fomented, disseminated and standardized by the confederation, federation, leagues and national and regional administration entities; 5) institutes the *Electronic Sports Day* (*Dia do Esporte Eletrônico*, our translation) on June 27th, the date that marks the foundation of the Atari Company – the sixth article only confirms that the law comes into force on the date of its publication.

The original text also presents justifications for the regularization. It outlines a brief argument on esports, highlighting that the process is required, so the practice does not suffer "lethal perversion." So it can develop itself as "[...] free of creed, race, and political divergence, historical and cultural and social, fighting hate and discriminations of gender, ethnicity, and creed, that can be presented subliminally to the subject-players in games" (Rocha 2017, 3).

Arriving at this borderline space brought us to the *Twitter* movement that discussed the regulation of esports in Brazil: the flow of messages using the hashtag *#TodosContraPLS383*, which was accompanied by a sentiment of repudiation of State interference in the national gaming scenario. The collection^{iv} and analysis were performed using the software ATLAS.ti, which allows an automatic gathering of tweets through a hashtag search. This collection, however, is limited to the past seven days of posting, and, even so, it does not guarantee the universal gathering of the total of tweets. Thus, it is not possible to regard the corpus and analysis presented in this article by their quantitative value. It is a qualitative and exploratory analysis to interpret the mechanisms that corroborate for the production of the collected

speeches. In this sense, although ATLAS.ti does not allow for a statistically robust collection of data, we can overview the main themes and narratives that emerge from the analyzed hashtags.

As Hutchins (2008) and Taylor (2012) explore, esports emerge as a phenomenon of high social, political, and economic relevance. Not only do they move a large number of resources around the globe, but also (2) they enable the gaming industry to (re)frame the gaming experience, thus producing a network effect that affects from game design practices (games now need to be streamable, speedrunnable, organized into leagues and championships) to consumer practices. The emergence of esports, therefore, does not occur in isolation but mobilizes a vast network of agents, institutions, and powers that seek to conform a specific experience, a particular production of social fabric that, as we will argue from the results of the empirical exploration carried out, seeks the stabilization of structures of inequality characteristic of late capitalism and neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism, Scourge of Contemporaneity

To properly understand the phenomenon, we are dealing with in this article, we need to undertake a tour through the video game industry, considering that it exists both as an enabler and a prime product of neoliberal circumstances of exploitation. The video game industry represents one of the driving forces behind the neoliberal economic and ideological system (Crogan 2018, 680), based on a perception of the production of technology as an arbitrary breach of paradigms of "nihilistic character in its exclusively capitalist neo-liberal motivation" (ibid.). This paradigm incurs in a condition in which systems of production and labor exploitation actively conceal distributed layers of less-than-obvious meaning in the product of their engineering:

game designs, graphic interfaces, visual and sound features with particular capabilities to feed the neoliberal affectivity of players. This reasoning derives from the idea that economic and cultural and intellectual forces influence both the way games are designed and produced and the guidelines that conduct our understanding of what it means to play (Möring and Leino 2016).

If the historicity of digital games demonstrates its close relationship with industrial capitalist ethics, the constitution of esports, as we have argued in another work (Falcão, Marques and Mussa 2020) proceeds from that foundation and updates it to a platformized society (Gillespie 2010, Srnicek 2017, Van Dijck, Poell and De Waal 2018). However, instead of seeking a causal relationship between digital games and neoliberalism, we are interested in observing the thoroughness in the negotiation between them in esports' configuration.

Our strategy to understand how neoliberalism acts upon contemporary play is to frame it as we would data, platform, or surveillance capitalism (Couldry and Mejjas 2019, Srnicek 2017, Zuboff 2015). This analogy is fruitful because in both cases – platformization of daily life and colonization of play – the modus operandi of capitalism and neoliberalism mimics similar patterns: the establishment of the conditions of exploitation with the central narrative being the assertive data is “the new oil” (Sadowski 2019, 4), which constructs discursively and materially the idea of this new source of wealth that is naturally available.

The strengthening of this narrative promotes and (re)produces processes of expropriation of daily life by capitalism, transforming our understanding of the social in favor of continuous production of data, considered wealth by the capital. We witness, thus, the naturalization of narratives that allow the colonization process in

the domestication of the contemporary subject and that understand sociability as inseparable from digital social networks, for example. The process of colonization of contemporary games and its effects under neoliberal rhetoric is similar to that of platformization so that we can establish parallels. It is essential to understand how capitalism and neoliberalism seek to establish the conditions in which the subject begins to relate affectively to cultural products, especially games and, more particularly, esports.

The process of commodification and colonization is broad, and we may approach it through the work of Robert Mejia and Ergin Bulut (2019), who focus on the close relationship between neoliberal logic and the functioning of what is usually called casual games. Wrongly considered the opposite of the competitive games that figure as the center of the controversy exposed here, they are reinterpreted by the researchers not as a game genre, but as markers of a historical period in which the video game industry appropriated the notion of "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2007) as the main engine of its business models, treating the game as an inherently positive value:

"The point is not to suggest a singular neoliberal and neocolonial casual gaming configuration, but rather to illustrate how casual gaming tendencies towards in-game purchases, monetization of personal data, and the ideological and economic reliance upon systems and representations of domination render, for vast swaths of the global population, these ludic practices untenable and optimistic in the cruelest way." (Mejia and Bulut 2019, 163)

This analysis provokes fundamental points: the elevation of the game, play, and fun as objects of desire; the reproduction of neoliberal values in the structure of rules and distribution of games; as well as the relationship of the previous factors with the competitiveness inherent to the world of esports. The first condition, according to the

As we will see below, the rhetoric adopted by those involved in the #TodosContraPLS383 movement points out to a principle of glorifying the self-realization of the individual who manages to reach the pro-player status. Its success is the exclusive result of effort, dedication, and talent. It is in this context that clashes of institutionality happen, and we can observe the minutiae that compose the social field of esports. The process of mediatization and sportification (Turtiainen, Friman and Ruotsalainen 2018) of particular esports – as well as its more significant presence in the mass media – creates spaces for negotiation for the conduct of pro players in their comfort zones (their channels on *Twitch*, *YouTube* and *Twitter*) in addition to professional spaces (interviews, official broadcasts, branded content).

Much of what separates esports from the casual or non-competitive games model belongs more to the realm of appearances than to that of the internal mechanics of a game: they may have different designs, and still promote fundamentally similar processes of commodification, colonization, and exploitation. Here we recognize that a competitive aesthetic proper to contemporary capitalism develops, which, incredible as it may seem, is completely dissociated from the competition itself. We may observe this phenomenon in the competitive aestheticization of games that did not previously present such aspects, appropriating themselves in a particular way to that of the esports industry.

It is necessary to emphasize that it is not a question of stating that competitive play's logic and aesthetics give rise to neoliberal affections in players. The aesthetic dimension implied above leads us to a more complex conclusion: the agonistic aspect of the game adapts to act as a gear in the neoliberal discursive machine, becoming a tool for it. Thus, one of the objectives of this analysis is to offer emphasis to the polysemic character of the media experience of esports. We seek to do this by

sociological principles that allude to Latour's motto: "follow the actors!" (Latour 2005, 12). The nature from which this situation occurred, in turn, alludes to the dimension of the *experience* referred above. It implies decoding a phenomenon that would otherwise be invisible and undocumented.

This epistemological orientation favors the understanding of *loci* that, we believe, has been neglected or misinterpreted by Brazilian scholarship. Communities articulated around supposedly controversial and irrelevant topics – such as *4chan*, some *Reddit* communities, or even articulated groups akin to Anonymous – have often shown a penchant for reactionary or extremist speeches (Mortensen 2018). Due to their heterogeneous conditions and the material nature of the networks (Gillespie 2010, Srnicek 2017), these spaces tend to become echo chambers (Mortensen 2018) permeated by feelings of anger and male hyper aggressiveness. This fact explains why it is necessary to try and comprehend economic and political processes that are cause and consequence of this behavior and decode these contexts, to demystify the forms that play takes in these specific conditions of existence under the aegis of phenomena such as late capitalism and neoliberalism.

Thus, we should declare that approaching the matter of esports regulations in Brazil was not intended: it was merely a *detour* of our observation. The nature of the conversation proved to be unavoidable: a mixture of aggressiveness, improvisation, and a vague political awareness that resembles the prevailing *ethos* attributed to gaming culture due to the number of ethnographic efforts undertaken in the field of game studies (Chess and Shaw 2015, Mortensen 2018). Thus, this study used an ethnomethodological inspiration to follow up on the conversation around PLS383-2017 on *Twitter*, aiming to discuss the discourse of actors concerning esports and their perception of the politics behind the idea of regulation, as we will detail further

below. To rebuild this narrative from an analytical principle, it is necessary to understand the liminal aspect of the relationship between gaming and mass media cultures, especially regarding the relationship between work and leisure in post-industrial societies. By observing this particular discourse and exchange of opinions on *Twitter*, we reaffirm our role as interpreter of a culture invisible to the Brazilian mainstream.

Methodological Procedures

This article debates the rebuttal of the current proposal for the regulation of esports in Brazil (PLS383/2017) on *Twitter*, provoked by the holding of the second public hearing in the Brazilian congress on 11/21/2019^v. The collected manifestations took place in November 2019, between the 20th and 27th. The tweets, therefore, anticipate the hearing and also contain their repercussion on the following days. Before we move forward, this last argument demands an immediate preamble to be addressed to the context of this research to profess its importance, solidify our arguments and provide a contextual overview of the discussed controversy to those reading this paper.

It is essential to underline that the scope of the media coverage on the PLS took place, for the most part, on the specialized news outlets that cover video games and esports, such as sections of the Brazilian branches of Sportv and ESPN focused on games. In 2018, at the occasion of the project being processed by CCT, the Economic Affairs Committee (CAE) and through the CE – the last *locus* where the last two public hearings took place – traces of the repercussion on the regulation controversy of esports in the country were found, for example, in one of the first articles on the subject published by the digital newspaper Nexo in July 2018^{vi}.

The article signaled the dissent among politicians, players, teams, and companies in the sector, despite the bill continuing to progress into the Senate. The story emphasized that one of the points most criticized by the private sector and by players was the lack of their inclusion in the process of formulating the bill, as well as the claim that regulation of the activity in Brazil is unnecessary. In addition, it highlights the audience's concern through social media, fearing that these regulations might trigger a convolution of the sector by bringing more bureaucracy or taxes into esports (Roncolato 2018). The agency in charge of the production and news broadcast from the Senate showed, in three published articles, the controversy generated by the PLS processing. It is possible to observe that the speech presented by the actors directly involved in the project, reported by Nexo in 2018, is reproduced the following year in articles published by Agência Senado in 2019.

In general, "players, teams and video game development companies fear that the current wording of the proposal will hinder the growth of the sector and isolate Brazil from international competitions" (Baptista 2020, our translation). They also contest the legitimacy of the self-proclaimed representatives of esports in Brazil and criticize the exclusion of games considered violent from the esports category. Game development companies, teams, championship organizations, and publishers also argued that esports occur in platforms that are products, and therefore are the intellectual property of companies (Baptista 2019b and 2020).

Many pieces of evidence indicate a widespread opposition to this attempt at regulation. A brief incursion through different posts that refer to the subject on the Federal Senate's official *Facebook* (Senado Federal 2018a and 2019a) page or *Twitter* (Senado Federal, 2018b) reveals the construction of a discourse that reproduces a particular anti-regulation rhetoric, that has its foundation based on neoliberal belief.

Another way to assess the support or consent is to observe the scoreboard that measures the people's assessment of the bill in the Senate's *e-Cidadania* online platform. According to an article published by the Senate's Agency (Baptista 2019a) on the second public hearing, on the morning of November 21st, a few hours before the activities began, the voting score on the website's poll counted around 8 thousand No-votes – meaning, those opposed to it – against approximately 6 thousand votes in favor of the regulation. While the Permanent Subcommittee's debate on Sport, Physical Education, and Formation of Base Categories (CEEEFCB) of the Senate's CE was taking place, internet users opposed the proposition using the hashtag *#TodosContraPLS383* to manifest. By the end of the hearing, as a direct consequence of this conversation, over 33 thousand internet users rejected the project, in an approximate percentage increase of 438,125%. With a current total of 49.415 thousand determined votes, so far, the majority (43,050, which equals 87,1%) disapproves of the idea still in progress^{vii}.

It is also worth noting that, in terms of expanding the controversy, we understand that the PLS383/2017 problematic reaches beyond *Twitter* manifestations. Our interest in the movement *#TodosContraPLS383*, however, is in the way that this discourse revealed to us the contours of the process of colonization of play by the capital. We interpret the presented narratives by these subjects, therefore, as clues or traces that, along with other data sources, will help us better frame the research problem addressed in the future.

After collecting data, the second stage was to encode the collected tweets from the main narratives found. Although they deal with the same subject, there is a latent discourse variety in the production of these actors. Different aspects of the controversy materialize in the multiplicity of discourses found. Out of the total of 571

tweets accounted for, 180 were encoded. This total number decrease refers to the redundancies in the tweets, or, also, to extracts imported in the collection that do not present any narrative layer beyond the subject itself (tweets only with the hashtag #TodosContraPLS383, for example). The coding produced a total of 37 different codes from the found narratives.

It is essential to highlight that this article does not exhaust in depth the possible developments of the controversy so that we can assume the construction of a micro ethnography of communication. However, it is undoubtedly in its methodological perspective that we seek inputs for norms of conduct and ways of doing. We articulate this narrative because we undertake an ethnomethodological approach that calls for the reading of certain aspects of the controversy we are working on. As said, this is not necessarily an ethnographic contribution, but neither can we say that there is no *entrée* or knowledge of the field: since we observe the community's daily life systematically.

Our contact with this controversy was intuitive, considering our familiarity and involvement with the field. We often observe phenomena in esports from our continuous contact with the field without necessarily doing any systematic data collection. If there is an impromptu component in the constitution of this research, it is worth emphasizing that the construction of this narrative obeys the rigor necessary to understand the discussion evidenced there. This dynamic, which is particular of the ethnography method (consisting of ethnographic method and practice), confirms that "[...] while the practice is something programmed and continuous, the experience is discontinuous, unforeseen" (Magnani 2009, 160, our translation), unintended and by

chance, even. Nevertheless, one induces the other, one derives and depends on the other; discipline (ethnographic practice) and indiscipline (ethnographic experience) coexist in this study.

Being able to capture these unusual moments depends on how much time is spent in the field and the establishment of familiarity within a community that allows one to glimpse them. The standard argument among many of these scholars lies in the perception that familiarity and personal experience must be taken into consideration, but that it is also one of the conditions for elaborating research. The researcher's trajectory, place of speech, and subjectivity are also responsible for raising a series of concerns throughout their study. The researcher's biography, therefore, "legitimizing the place of scientific speech" (Martino and Marques 2018, 224).

Approaching the Controversy

Our first reaction upon observing this movement on *Twitter* was one of legitimate surprise: how could the gamer community – casual players, professionals, commentators, corporations, among others – position themselves so vehemently against the regulation of an activity so central to their lives? The surprise, however, did not last long, and gave way to the perception of a one-sided conversation centered on a deep contempt and hatred against the State and the Left, and based on an overstated and idealized free market as the driving force of development.

This condition is potentialized by the profile that we detected in these actors: they are primarily children and teenagers who increasingly support a discourse of discrediting the notion of a State, delivering their hopes and desires to private corporations. This context implies two demands: on the one hand, it is necessary to understand the

proliferation of those ideas and, at the very least, to offer perspectives that are not based on the incomprehension of particular social realities. On the other hand, it is necessary to identify the actors and discourses that consciously contribute to the reverberation of these ideas and intensify their strength inside the gaming community. Roughly speaking, we come across individuals who place more trust in Blizzard or Riot Games than in federal, State, or local governments.

The prevailing narrative in the sample, with 38 occurrences, concerns the negative aspect of bureaucracy. It associates the process of regulation with a bureaucratic purpose that would be, in essence, harmful to the industry. These statements identify bureaucracy as a sign of overcomplication, implying that regulation necessarily occurs at the expense of an emerging, spontaneous and *uncomplicated* process. The narrative rests on the premise that the consolidation of the esports industry would happen as a natural development of Brazil's private sector activity, needing no State intervention.

Tweet 1^{viii}

"The State destroys everything that its hand touches, we don't need to bureaucratize something that is already working, we don't need the State here #TodosContraPLS383." (HerctonElric 2019)

Tweet 2

"FUCK MAN THIS COUNTRY IS FUCKED ISN'T IT. They wanna tax and complicate esports in Brazil even MORE, seriously, my disbelief of these senators grows with each passing day... #TodosContraPLS383." (arielmatheuss 2019)

Tweet 3

"Virtual sports are already considered a sport by the Pelé Law, or something like that. Now comes the #PLS383, with the excuse of regulating virtual sports, whose intention is to bureaucratize and exclude certain genres of esports. Just another intervention of the State #TodosContraPLS383." (fernandovrechwr 2019)

The tweets above are representative of this perspective in different ways. Firstly, they imply that Brazil's esports scenario is already *working properly*, independently of any State action. From that, we can infer some other patterns, such as a sentiment of independence on the part of the gaming community; other statements will strengthen that. In other words, these subjects nourish a powerful feeling of pride in a supposed communitary capacity of building an esports scene from the ground up in Brazil. As our corpus shows, this development is thought to happen as a completely autonomous organization, with no connection to a State.

The affectivity behind this sense of community is rather important since consuming and supporting a network of content linked to esports becomes part of a lifestyle, a personality trait of its members. In that regard, corporations struggle to keep important stakeholders – pro players, streamers, casters – continuously engaged in their ecosystem, feeding into this affective network. This very system of affections that tries to distance itself as much as possible from the political domain is responsible for cementing the hatred against the State, which in turn points towards discourses against leftist policies and beliefs. These subjects portray the Left as an organized effort linked to corruption, excessive taxation, bureaucratic institutions, anti-competitiveness, anti-innovation, and economic growth. The same dynamic can be identified in movements with similar discursive tendencies. Mortensen (2018) detects the fear of the so-called Cultural Marxism as one of the main ideological aspects of the *GamerGate*^{ix} movement (Chess and Shaw 2015) – the theory that leftist intellectuals have developed a plan to infiltrate universities and cultural institutions in order to use them to rise to power.

In addition to the bureaucratic dimension of the State, perceptions of incompetence (*The Government is useless*) and ignorance (*The State does not know what it is doing*)

are flagrant. In these discourses, the notion of the excessive bureaucracy of the government is always associated with uselessness and incompetence. Not only that, but the State is thought as a deliberate antagonist of the gamer community, purposely interfering in the economic development of the esports scene.

Tweet 4
“Shit man this country is a disgrace fuck, now they want to end video games fuck you #TodosContraPLS383.” (Samuka05318262 2019)

Tweet 5
“The government and politicians only exist to screw with the life of everyone, ther steal our money through taxes, does anyone out there get happy thinking about politicians? With just a blue or a black pen, they fuck everyone and everything #TodosContraPLS383 #EstadoUtopia #CidadesPrivadasX.” (AustnDrew0x 2019)

Tweet 6
“The State finally noticed another market that is making money and it still had not touched. At first it was “only” a little game, now it moves millions and generates wealth. Now they want to exploit it. But, we won’t let the biggest mafia do that. #TodosContraPLS383.” (Ancapedroj1 2019)

Tweet 7
“Don’t let the State destroy something that was built without it... #TodosContraPLS383.” (bruno02249 2019)

In the set above (tweets 4 through 7), the first tweet exposes extreme dissatisfaction with the existence of a State, reinforcing it as a necessarily negative entity. It is important to notice the specific aspect of this negative perception in the Brazilian context: it does not seem to be an abstract understanding of the concept of the State against the concept of private property, but a particular feeling dispensed against the Brazilian State, that is thought in opposition to other nations that act more positively. The second tweet not only criminalizes the State, but also highlights the perverse character of politicians, framing them as responsible for theft through taxes. The use

of the hashtags #StateUtopia and #PrivateCities suggests the neoliberal ideology as a way out for State interventionism.

Following this thread, we note the liberal, idealistic myth that professes wealth and prosperity as necessary products of hard work. The history of esports is marked by inconsistencies and a tense relationship between capital, market, and affective communities (Taylor 2012). Macedo and Falcão (2019) discuss one aspect of this tension when elaborating on esports as a variation of sports practice, underlining that spectacular and commercial components have always been critical to this industry's growth. However, it is necessary that we turn, in this work, to the Brazilian particularity: it is necessary to explore local historical, social, (geo)political and economic dimensions, tracking antinomies and diversions – such as the intense socioeconomic, ethnic-racial and gender inequality that segments the public of esports, as indicated in recent research by Macedo and Frago (2019). In addition, each sport develops locally in different ways: the emergence of competitive scenarios such as *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (2012) and *League of Legends* (2009) in Brazil differ radically. In each of these environments, multiple actors are articulated that continuously negotiate and prescribe socio-technical relationships; this is an intermittent process that roughly involves production forces, marketing actions, community management and, finally, media practices.

The problem we are dealing with concerns the complexity of the relations between State, capital, technology and affection. First of all, according to the speech present in several demonstrations against PLS383/2017, esports are like privatized sports, intellectual properties owned by companies that, from this perspective, must be able to regulate their own competitive scene. There is no business interest in this environment, nor has there ever been, to constitute its competitive scene as

democratic spaces for participation and debate in sports development. Of course, it is necessary to recognize the role of the economic phenomenon of intellectual property in this issue (Chao 2017). On the other hand, it is also necessary to reflect on what this arrangement produces. Comparisons with traditional sports are inevitable here since many of the standards used in the spectacularization of esports are derived from this ontological relationship. This points to the need for a research agenda that can address these structural components, understanding how this comparison can be undertaken.

Therefore, we must take two factors into account: (a) these esports are run as private intellectual properties working under a business-oriented framework and publicized as platforms of consumption and spectacular events (b) they serve as an environment for practices and affections mediated by neoliberal discourses of late capitalism. These factors call for immediate reflection on the tensions and contradictions they make possible. Consider the 2010 ban on the Ensidia guild from MMORPG *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004) for exploiting a game condition in the Lich King kill race^{xi}, or even the recent ban on professional card game player Blitzchung^{xii} from *Hearthstone* (Blizzard 2014) for alluding to the political conflict between China and Hong Kong on an official Blizzard stream.

These episodes reveal a rather undemocratic attitude on the part of the corporation behind some of the most successful esports platforms. They are environments that produce affectivity and move social dynamics of team management, presence and belonging. The mentions observed in our collection reveal a disturbing naivety, especially the belief that individuals are the driving force behind their market, a position that ignores the role of the public sector in similar initiatives, but also the collective action and negotiation between different companies, for example. In other

words, esports ecosystems are not emulations of a democratic system, since their nature is to serve the neoliberal interests of companies, through the exercise of governance and control. This occurs in a specific context where the relationships established are not citizen-State, but consumer-company, although rhetorically this is not transparent.

Finally, the tension between esports and traditional sports appears with greater emphasis in a letter published and signed by the Brazilian E-Sports Ecosystem (2019), whose signatories represent game development companies, managers and owners of traditional esports teams, event organizers and professional players. The letter criticizes the bill, highlighting its inconsistencies with the development of the esports market in Brazil. In one of its first articles, the bill seeks to characterize and bring esports closer to traditional sports:

“Article 3rd: Electronic sports are based on the fundamental principles that govern sports in Brazil.
Sole paragraph. Such are the specific objectives of the electronic sport:
1. To promote citizenship, valuing good human coexistence;
2. To promote the development of educational values of sport based on the concept of fair play, cooperation, participation and integral development of the individual;
3. To develop culture through sports practice, bringing together participants from different peoples;
4. To combat hatred, discrimination and prejudice against people because of their ethnicity, race, color, nationality, gender or religion;
5. To contribute to the intellectual, physical and motor development of its participants;” (Senado Federal 2019b, 1-2).
“6. To ensure access to electronic sports practice without any distinctions or forms of discrimination; [Amendment proposed by Senator Marcos Rogério – Not yet approved].” (Rogério 2019, 1)

Below, we can see how the letter responds to the article cited above:

“It violates the intellectual property rights of the game developers and publishers by establishing that national and international sports administration bodies will establish the rules of the games. The eSports rules are created and established by the company that invented the game, and only it can change the rules. (...) The principles that govern Brazilian sports, in its essence, have the purpose of guaranteeing the free practice, access, and promotion of sports. In eSports, one can only play a game if he or she accesses the server and the software of the company that developed the game (in some cases, for free). *Ensuring "free practice" brings relevant limitations to the very nature of eSports.*” (Brazilian E-Sports Ecosystem 2019, emphasis added by the authors)

The PLS383 article described above clarifies the attempt to bring esports closer to the same potential for social transformation as traditional sports. However, the response from market representatives makes clear the desire to move esports away from this same framework. There is in the discourse an overvaluation of the entrepreneurial role of development and control over the competitive scenario of esports. There would be no room, under this register, to guarantee *free practice*, or even to worry about the social development promoted by esports. To affirm that this free practice limits the nature of esports presupposes, it considers segregation an inherent aspect of this modality, as we can elaborate from Macedo and Fragoso (2019). Gabriel Adami's statement (@gZEROfps – head coach and analyst of CS:GO of the team *Uppercut Esports*), from the public hearing also addresses this point:

“They say the main argument is about social inclusion, popularizing esports, and even calling it an elitist sport!!! How come!? Esports are inherently socially inclusive, a good portion of the games are FREE and designed to reach a wide variety of devices (PCs, smartphones) exactly so as not to leave anybody behind. Everyone has their own avatar, and *what differentiates between players is only their skill*, and even then the games try to organize the players according to their skill level, giving opportunities of promotion according to the improvement of the player.” (Adami 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, emphasis added by the authors)

According to the player, the technical leveling of esports (mainly present in popular esports such as *League of Legends* 2009, *Fortnite* 2017, *CS:GO* 2012) would guarantee a democratic access to them. He also points out that these games do not require much investment in terms of equipment and are mostly free to play. Although this statement is partially true, a number of problems can be raised. Specifically, as Macedo and Fragoso (2019) describe, the technicality involved in esports' practice lies upon an infrastructural layer. While access to the game can be facilitated, high-level competitive practice will require able-bodiedness, a good internet connection, peripherals (mouse, keyboard and quality headset), monitors, streaming cameras. The material conditions for participation in the professional game scenario are, to a large extent, exclusionary and make the supposed free practice impossible.

Interestingly, the *#TodosContraPLS383* movement is mostly led by people with some kind of relationship with the industry, and the interests seem to be quite clear in that regard. In a letter sent to Senator Leila do Vôlei, the role of companies in the issue is highlighted. The first signatory of the letter represents, in Latin America, companies such as Riot Games (*League of Legends* 2009), Activision/Blizzard (*Overwatch* 2016, *Hearthstone* 2014, *World of Warcraft* 2004, *Call of Duty: Warzone* 2020), Nintendo (*Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* 2018), Capcom (*Street Fighter V* 2016), Konami, EA and finally Tencent.

Closing Remarks

What is at play in the context behind the regulation of esports in Brazil? We believe that the research undertaken here is relevant not only for illuminating a problem that, due to esports communities' insularity, usually occurs in a communicative and commonly inaccessible niche. More than that, we believe that the controversy of the

movement #*TodosContraPLS383* exposes articulations of late capitalism and neoliberalism which act strategically in the sedimentation of what is understood as contemporary gamer culture. A system of affections and discourses whose foundation is based on the neoliberal belief in the reiteration of an experience of hegemonic masculinity and necessarily related to the maintenance of privileges for white, heterosexual men.

Naturally, it is not in our interest to portray capitalism and neoliberalism as inescapable systems, or to disregard practices of resistance that decolonize the medium. One must conceive, however, that given the centrality of the gamer experience in contemporary life – as well as the recent modeling of the industry around esports – there is an urgent need to understand these *loci*, and to search for alternatives of politicization of the subject in favor of producing a better and healthier understanding of social reality. The narrative, however, points to a grim conclusion. Not only because of the discredit of the figure of the State, but because of the dogmatic connection between affective communities of esports and corporate interests. This seems to be one of the dimensions in which the platformization and the capitalist colonization of play enter in contradiction. Although it is not yet hegemonic, it is possible to observe a growth in the disbelief in platforms like Amazon and Facebook, mainly due to recent scandals involving privacy and surveillance (especially the Cambridge Analytica case). While the colonizing mechanisms of platform capitalism and esports are similar, the affective modulation promoted by companies like Blizzard and Riot Games is certainly much more powerful and successful.

In this sense, although our results point to a strong complexification of the phenomenon of play in contemporaneity, we have devoted our observations to these effects in the context of the Global South. Although global phenomena are indeed perceptible locally – such as platformization, Anthropocene, datafication, and the precariousness of labor relations promoted by late capitalism – it is crucial to reaffirm the differences in the structural conditions of inequality in post-colonial territories. By detecting problems that stem from the phenomenon of colonization of play by capital on a global scale, we argue that the realities of precariousness, exploitation, and expropriation are even more intense in the social experience of a post-colonial country like Brazil.

Finally, although we recognize the contribution of scholarship that points out to emancipatory and educational potentials of video games and the culture enabled by them, our results point to a gamer subjectivity that is domesticated by the agency of neoliberalism and reproduces and re-enacts discourses and practices that reinforce the exploratory genealogy of colonialism. Also, colonialism and coloniality are part of a system of domination anchored in capitalist, ethnic-racial, and heteropatriarchal relations, emphasizing the mediations of capital that facilitate the (re)production of structural inequalities. The attempt to erase the political mediations that appear in the activity of large entertainment corporations is dangerous and requires further work. Regarding media literacy, it is not enough to understand the new cognitive and/or motor skills facilitated by video games' practice. It is also necessary to conceive ways of cognition and understanding that decipher, through a critical and thorough perspective, the rhetorical mechanisms of an industry that uses leisure, sport and entertainment to pursue dystopian and threatening purposes.

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ⁱ By North-centric we mean the larger geopolitical context in which both game studies and the game industry have historically thrived. To understand this, we need to examine how games and their practices in peripheral territories – *third-world* countries or the Global South – have been addressed so far. The North-centric perspective calls for a series of ontological and epistemological assumptions about games that, by themselves, set the agenda for what a canonical game experience is, defining not only what gets to be a game, but also who can or cannot take part in it. For its inception within modernity itself, it is not surprising that game studies are impregnated with a modern ethos in which specific agential capabilities and institutional roles are usually pre-established for players, developers, publishers, and the State, to name a few. Consequently, peripheral territories such as the Global South suffer from the side effects of modernity, insofar as they historically are spaces of exploitation that, at best, try to emulate the *modus operandi* of modernity in their own way. Since the material conditions in the South are radically different from that of the North, we see the emergence of game practices that are somewhat inadequate or invisible for a modern and North-centric game studies paradigm. This paper, therefore, reveals controversies that emerge when a North-centric ethos of game governance faces the material conditions of a Global South country – namely Brazil.

ⁱⁱ The expression alludes to a condition of exploitation, suffering, social exclusion, and silencing in which peoples and cultures of the southern hemisphere have been subjected and dominated, throughout

history, by capitalism, colonialism, and coloniality. The latter two are responsible for imprinting a historical dynamic of cultural and political domination that has circumscribed the meaning of life, knowledge of the world, and social practices to their ethnocentric way and vision (Mignolo 2012).

iii Senate Bill Proposed by Senator Roberto Rocha (PSDB/MA), the Senate Bill (PLS), which is still in progress, is available at <https://www25.senado.leg.br/web/atividade/materias/-/materia/131177>.

iv The dataset used in this paper is available at <https://bit.ly/32saWMY>, accessed 10 January 2020.

v The hearing is available in full at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VC1JdVaheYU>, accessed 16 March 2020.

vi Titled "The discussion on eSports Regulation in Brazil" (Roncolato 2018).

vii Result auto-calculated by the system until 03/16/2020 as 09:15PM. Available at <https://www12.senado.leg.br/ecidadania/visualizacaomateria?id=131177>, accessed 16 March 2020.

viii All tweets were originally posted in portuguese and translated to english by the authors. We chose to reference them by their Twitter handles (omitting the "@"), since most users don't display their real names on their profiles.

ix The *Gamergate* movement consisted in a systematic series of attacks and harassment campaigns against mostly female personalities of the video game development, content production and journalism. It took place under the guise of conspiratorial claims for ethics in game journalism and gave rise to many manifestations of problematic and destructive dimensions of video game culture, such as toxic masculinity and racist beliefs (Chess and Shaw, 2015, Mortensen, 2018).

x Literal translation of the tags: #StateUtopia and #PrivateCities. They are used on *Twitter* to identify tweets complaining about the State and celebrating private initiative.

xi This relates to an incident that happened in World of Warcraft when the Lich King raid – a very high-level challenge requiring several players to complete - was beaten by the Ensidia guild. The developers at Blizzard Entertainment claimed that the players sued an *exploit* to achieve the victory, which caused a controversy within the community and the subsequent ban of Ensidia, An interesting description of the problem can be found in Moore (2010).

xii More on this event in Wikipedia Contributors (2020).