

The Gambification of Children's Toys: Play, Consumption, and Media Practices in Brazil¹

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RESUMO

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PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Games; Brinquedos; Microtransações; Gambificação; Loot Boxes.

Introduction

This paper addresses the relationship between children's toys and video games micro-transaction dynamics, with special attention to two specific phenomena that mediate this relationship: first, the strategies of mediatization and how these help design the access to these toys; and how such design is considered exploitative due to the use of gambling dynamics that are universally shunned by the video games industry, but still thrive, both in video games and in the toys market in Brazil.

In the wake of the rise of contemporary video games as the most prominent form of children entertainment of the last three decades, physical, analog toys were sidelined - reduced, in importance, to mere counterparts in the experience of the phenomenon of play. The rise of mass media during the post-war period was very significant for this phenomenon, especially if we look at it from the 1980s onwards when the neoliberal

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expansion and the globalization process transformed the content of Saturday mornings in the USA into daily morning content in Brazil.

This relationship between media structures and playful practices, as we know, is unavoidable. Stig Hjarvard, in his book on the mediatization of culture and society, discusses the phenomenon, underlining the fact that play has become particularly immaterial in its constitution and experience. 'Immaterial' is, notably, an excellent term to characterize the phenomenon. Hjarvard, in his work, uses it in such a way as to underline the materiality of the toys of yesteryear, pointing to the role they assumed of anticipating, for children, places, and roles in the social world of which they would be part as adults. Immaterial is also the term used to characterize labor that produces commodities such as information, knowledge, and affections, which have no material form in themselves, but which find physical representation - are embodied - in the contemporary entertainment industry and manifest themselves materially in the myriad of toys accessible these days.

To a great extent, play has become a mental activity involving imagination, planning, simulation, communication, role-playing, etc. (...) Children's toys seldom resemble the inventory of mother and father's worlds. Instead, they are very often part of a fantasy world, situated in a distant past or future, a faraway galaxy, or a supernatural environment.

Child's play was extensively mediatized. This means that the very logic of the media now overlaps with the phenomenon. The act of 'make believe', which has accompanied humanity since its earliest times, is violently mediated, nowadays, by endless franchises controlled by multibillion-dollar corporations. And not only early and middle childhoods are affected by this condition - but infancy also deals with it, as we can see in Holzbach's article on the Brazilian cartoon hit Galinha Pintadinha - or as you may know it, Lottie Dottie Chicken. Of course, there are alternatives and forms of resistance to the industry - and I don't intend to paint a pessimistic picture that doesn't recognize the benefits of a media-oriented education. The scenario, however, frighteningly takes place, especially when we move from the sphere of children's entertainment per se and enter a more 'paratextual' dimension of consumption and contemplate all sorts of accessories and utensils present in child development.

2. Enter Video Games

One of the most pernicious effects of neoliberal capitalism is the colonization of play: the appropriation of creative and playful dynamics in favor of the accelerated pace of production and accumulation assumed as a rule by post-industrial societies. The corruption of the ludic impulse in favor of the production of instrumental materialities, sociabilities, and subjectivities. This problem was explored by several scholars in the field of game studies but did not go unnoticed by philosophers and cultural theorists - thinkers such as Byung Chul-Han, Jonathan Crary, and Mark Fisher, among others, who paid attention to the discussion, underlining how the use of game mechanics in the management and maintenance of the world of work eviscerates the ludic sense of activity, reducing it to the insidious carcass of neoliberal productivity.

These opening remarks likely sounded repetitive for some of us: the discussion about the issues that permeate the process of the mediatization of culture and society have been largely addressed by several researchers who document its various aspects. To ponder, then, how children's toys are imbued with elements of the media's narrative worlds, has become trivial - but what about a media that, in addition to a narrative component, has a specific material dimension in its experience?

The point of this paper, then, is to emphasize that video game culture has contributed to the dynamics of mediatization with more than just its narrative worlds. Take, for example, the concept of gamification - how game mechanics become a part of everyday activities. Even if this practice claims to be structurally linked to the core of a game, it only takes advantage of the behavioral framework based on stimuli and responses. This structure, which frequently downplay playful meaning in detriment of technical efficacy, is particularly visible in the development of platform capitalism if we consider how platforms reward the most faithful and frequent users with reach and engagement, establishing grading systems to measure the individuals' worth, reinforcing certain behavior and punishing deviations from it.

When we add elements of randomness to this kind of systemic behavior, the experience gets complicated. This is the case, for example, of games that offer advantages and facilities from loot boxes - consumable digital items that when opened yield other items to users of a platform - players of any game, for example. A loot box is a virtual item that contains not an item, but the probability of other particular items - often cosmetic items that will not change the game's experience per se, but rather impact the social status of the player. This is the case of Fortnite, for instance, which earlier this year had to

redefine its system because of a class action that problematized forms of access and, above all, contractual rights of disaffirmation. The problem lies in the ways to access these loot boxes and, ultimately, how they affect game states in general. Loot boxes are one of the main monetization devices of today's video games, being generally accessible through microtransactions, a business model based on transactions that move small amounts of money, but whose current game design actively encourages their recurrence. Combine this availability with the fact that these boxes are easily accessible to those who can afford them, and you have the perfect setting: games where you can literally pay to win - or at least pay to advance faster.

When a player buys a loot box, he or she does not buy an item directly - but the very possibility of it - and if in some games this possibility is just cosmetic, in others it contains elements that directly affect the course of the game, accelerating the progress for those who invest money in the platform. On many of these platforms - Art of War: Legions, for example - progress is so slow, and so demanding, that players feel compelled to invest in the game. These platforms, usually accessible from mobile devices, use a sense of collecting and persistence, seeking to retain the player's attention through a design that rewards as much time as possible online. As important as the ways to access these loot boxes is the fact that, depending on the game, they bring items that can only serve to customize avatars within a game, but they can also contain items that transform the game experience itself, facilitating a player's progress through the challenges offered by it.

There is, then, a relationship between the randomness characteristic of gambling and the design of these platforms. Even though they cannot be considered proper slot machines, these games are certainly influenced by the gambification process. The term, coming from the expression "to gamble", describes the introduction of psychological and technical mechanisms typical of casino machines and games of chance in contexts that were previously free of these - in games for smartphones, as is the case. For legal and practical purposes, the experience of these games is not considered gambling and supposedly these do not cause exactly the same effects - even though there is little evidence to support this. It is undeniable, however, that there are some gray areas in the discussion, and that it needs to be watched closely.

In March of 2021, the Public Ministry of Brazil decided to accept the request of the National Association of Centers for the Defense of Children and Adolescents

(ANCED) against companies involved in the games industry and to address the problem of loot boxes, an issue that has been an important part of gamer culture for a long time and has always been controversial, to say the least. This fact puts into question the design of certain platforms: if we consider the fact that hierarchies are being built within games not only through skill or chance, but through the purchasing of power, the very notion of competition disappears, swallowed up by socioeconomic differences. The game, whatever it may be, develops an internal political economy that is not guided by technical expertise, but rather towards types of capital accumulation - economic or social.

Furthermore, the point is that most games that use this business model do so in a predatory way: in addition to the game selling not an item itself, but the chance to get it, it also implements stimulating mechanics. the investment. A game like Art of War: Legions, for example, offers for sale not a usable Hero, but a chance of winning a mere fragment of it by playing a roulette wheel, in which a player would have to invest a great deal of money in order to guarantee a solid reward. The same happens in many other titles: the list goes through free-to-play games for mobile, like Hawk: Freedom Squadron (XXX) or Into the Dead 2: Zombie Survival (XXX), and moves on to larger games and audiences, as Free Fire, by the Chinese company Garena, one of the targets of the ANCED class action, and one of the most important games in the Brazilian esports scene at the moment, due to the broadness of the audience it manages to reach.

Where Gambification meets Children's Toys

While considering the debate about the mediatization of play, we usually tend to discuss the issues of paratextual and narrative experience - and naturally, these are of great importance in understanding the contemporary media landscape. The point here is that in addition to this discussion, there is a less obvious one, which concerns not children's toys themselves, but the access to it. Brazilian toy stores are full of 'surprise' toys, which are marketed through a model very similar to the marketing of loot boxes, which raises questions about social dynamics that need to be investigated.

'Surprise' toys, as they are known in Brazil, are usually sold in an opaque package, and only allude to the possibilities within each one of them. There are literally dozens of brands of these toys on the market, which vary in price and often cost quite representative amounts, if we take the minimum wage in Brazil as a basis. A brief discussion with a toy store manager revealed an internal stratification, dividing this experience into 'impulse'

toys and 'premium' toys. The former are cheaper and have a shorter time of interest, while the latter are quite important not only for the size of the market itself, but also for giving rise to media practices such as unboxing - which has moved a relevant market for YouTube children streamers.

Some of these toys, like those associated with the Fortnite franchise, are doubly affected by the mediatization process, as they are materially represented as the same loot crates that were banned from the game - except that as far as the toy market is concerned, they are still there. In this specific case, buying a physical loot crate gives you access to some accessories and a limb part - an arm, a leg - of an action figure that must be collected through this form of commerce.

This dynamic can be compared, for example, to the same one implemented in collectible and trading card games, whose form of commercialization is through closed booster packs that offer an experience arguably similar to that of gambling. I was able to observe closely, in an ethnographic study on Magic: The Gathering that lasted four years, that the act of opening a booster pack rarely related to the technical and practical aspect of the game, and often simply underlined an economic aspect, in which the individual was looking for cards of great value to sell them later - making a profit, as in a lottery.

This condition alludes, finally, to a particular process I briefly mentioned earlier as the colonization of play, in the sense that it is perceptible how corporations openly profit from the lack of understanding and action about the processes involving technology and the platformization of video games. Moreover, when we move to toys that have children as a target audience, it is necessary to reflect not only on the forms of access, but mainly on the social dynamics agenda developed from these items. If we consider, therefore, a discussion on ethics and design of experience, and how these can impact consumption by children - and specifically on the context where these are being marketed - it is necessary to discuss these business models, so that we can understand what kind of effect they produce - in the short and long term.