

The Aggro Club: Metagaming as Agency and Performance

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INTRODUCTION

The notion of competition has always been central to the activity of playing, especially in the sense in which it welcomes - or encourages - growth through technical expertise, seeking to transcend the idea of randomness. This tension between forms of play was enough for Caillois (1961) to articulate them into distinct categories - *alea* and *agôn* - implying a distinction between luck and technique. Taking this categorization as a basis, it is important to realize that it is only valid in a context where the addressed games are designed as a reflection of a modern society, based on rigid dichotomies and impervious to the logic of the Cultural Industry.

Considering the context of production of mass cultural goods traditionally explained by the notion of late capitalism (Jameson, 1991), it is agreeable that the strategy game, once represented by a model of emergence (Juul, 2005) whose main characteristic was the fact that it was self-contained, that is, unitary, confined to a box with distinct contents, has become a serialized product whose pieces vary mainly in level of power and rarity: the card game. This reasoning takes us from a context in which the combination of pieces is balanced and stable to one governed by the notion of *metagame*.

Card games, both in their trading and collectible formats, beget intense competitive environments, highly populated by semi-professional, online, metagame communities that aim to game the game. These cooperative communities exchange information to amass the best possible game strategies, which include the best cards to play and style of playing. Metagame communities often create deck archetypes that help shape player behavior, both framing their performances and offering different perspectives on the philosophy of the game being played. The central goal of these communities is to optimize one's competitive advantage (Juul, 2009). Over time, the best players earn substantial social capital that allows them to have disproportionate influence on the metagame. This creates a hierarchy built upon social dominance that is difficult to diffuse. Under the influence of dominant players, peers pressure new players to adhere to competition-optimized play styles that constrain player behaviors.

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This paper, then, aims at discussing the social relations of power enacted by the metagame community of the most successful digital card game available today, *Hearthstone: Heroes of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2012-). Our argument stems from the fact that even though the metagame is perceived as a technical articulation, in the sense that it is, *per se*, a combination of operational elements, it is worth noting that it also exerts other forms of agency (LATOUR, 2005). Namely, it is presented as aesthetic and performative, considering that it embodies not only an arbitrary combination of cards, but suggests *how* these should be played, enabling, thus, social behavior dependent of this symbolic system.

Beyond these critically-oriented readings, naturally, lies the main goal of a deck archetype: to win. And the results achieved by these archetypes are the ties that bind behavior, aesthetical forms and capital, both social and economic. Aesthetics and performance are vectors to competition, given that most players must buy booster packs to have access to rare and more competitive cards. The balance of the game for the player, then, hinges upon having the right cards versus having the skill/will to play a given archetype: economic and social capital are intertwined in this relationship.

One way of observing how these propositions crystallize in social forms and phenomena is certainly to accompany actors who collaborate in their development. In an ethnographic effort, therefore, we entered the Facebook community "Hearthstone - Way to Pro", formed mostly by Brazilian players, seeking to identify the way in which players create and adapt to the global notion of metagame, and how it exercises agency in Communities, mediated by cultural aspects. Considering this is an ongoing research, the questions that guide our effort are: how are these communities organized around the idea of a global metagame? Given the nature of competition, what forms of capital thrive in these *loci*? How do these relations of power shape behavior in particular online communities devoted to Hearthstone? Finally, how is professionalization perceived in relation to the creation and adaptation to the elements of the metagame?

OPTIONAL BIO

Thiago Falcão is Adjunct Professor of the Journalism Course at the Federal University of Maranhão and Visiting Professor at the Post-Graduation Program in Communication at Universidade Anhembi Morumbi (UAM), in São Paulo, Brazil, where he obtained his postdoctoral degree in Film Studies. His research background was mainly oriented to the apprehension of *World of Warcraft's* various aspects of social life, through the use of ethnomethodological approaches. He was the proponent and is the chair of the Games track of the annual Conference of the Brazilian Society for Interdisciplinary Communication Studies - INTERCOM.

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