

Conservatism and toxic masculinity in gamer culture: An approach to *Magic: The Gathering*

Conservadorismo e masculinidade tóxica na cultura gamer: Uma aproximação a Magic: The Gathering

THIAGO FALCÃO^a

Universidade Federal da Paraíba, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação. João Pessoa – PB, Brazil

TARCÍZIO MACEDO^b

Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação. Porto Alegre – RS, Brazil

GABRIELA KURTZ^c

Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação Social. Porto Alegre – RS, Brazil

ABSTRACT

Based on an ethnographic study conducted between 2016 and 2020, this article discusses the performance of toxic masculinity within social spaces related to the card game *Magic: The Gathering*. It suggests a relationship between the observed behaviors and the reinforcement of conservative values within the *Magic* community during the game experience, to further understand the social dynamics of gamer culture. Such observation stems from the assumption that the community of players formed during the game results from the articulation of two particular sociotechnical contexts: nerd culture and the mechanics inscribed in the design and experience of the game itself.

Keywords: Toxic masculinity, conservatism, games, nerd culture, *Magic: The Gathering*

RESUMO

A partir de um esforço etnográfico empreendido entre os anos de 2016 e 2020, este artigo problematiza a encenação de uma masculinidade tóxica dentro de espaços de convívio relacionados ao *card game Magic: The Gathering*. O objetivo é sugerir uma relação entre os comportamentos observados e o reforço de valores conservadores na comunidade formada a partir da experiência deste jogo, avançando na compreensão das dinâmicas sociais da cultura *gamer*. Essa observação parte do pressuposto de que a comunidade de jogadores formada a partir da experiência desse jogo é o resultado da articulação de dois contextos sociotécnicos particulares: a cultura *nerd* e as mecânicas inscritas no design e na experiência do jogo em si.

Palavras-chave: Masculinidade tóxica, conservadorismo, games, cultura nerd, *Magic: The Gathering*

^a Professor of Digital Media at Universidade Federal da Paraíba (UFPB) and coordinator of the Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação at UFPB. Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6302-2264>. E-mail: thiago.falcao@academico.ufpb.br

^b PhD student in Communication from the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul. Master's in Communication, Culture, and the Amazon at Universidade Federal do Pará, with periods at UFBA and Uneb. Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3600-1497>. E-mail: tarciziopmacedo@gmail.com

^c PhD in Communication and Information at Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul. Adjunct Professor at Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul. Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8730-3383>. E-mail: gabriela.kurtz@pucrs.br

INTRODUCTION

THE POLITICAL DIMENSION of play is commonly neglected, and this fact has two historically problematic epistemological roots. The first concerns play itself and the thought surrounding this phenomenon: play, as to common sense, has never been considered productive or honorable, valiant, or valuable. Its status has always been one of childish entertainment, fantasy, make-believe, fiction, and an impulse that should be suppressed due to its uselessness. Play has never been the pillar for a constructive society, or one invested in development. It is the antithesis of a functionalist paradigm, and even its pedagogical status has been diminished by the phenomenon of mediatization (Hjarvard, 2013). Such perception dates to modernity, in the Latourian sense of the term (Latour, 1993), considering the civilizing project based on reason and the dichotomous purification of complex social phenomena. Even Huizinga (1938/2001) and Caillois (1958/2001), as Trammel (2020) points out, evaded the more obscure dimensions of play, as these did not consider its positive and playful epistemology to be a potentially good social force.

The second epistemological issue is found in the general negligence of the material dimensions of social phenomena: how would it be possible to conceive of the effects of the technical action, or of the preexistent conditions resulting from a formal system, when the subjective aspects always dominate such a discussion? The condition in which the subject unfailingly finds himself in a position of superiority over the object hinders the material dimensions from being involved in just any phenomenon – be it enabling or formative.

To consider the political dimension of play, this must be observed from another episteme. Play, as *ludus*, is not only a “situated action” – but also a programmed, prescribed action. The action performed in play is not devoid of prior meaning, even though it can be transformative. It occurs within an atypically circumscribed context that directs its intentionality and prescribes meaning.

The above thinking guides the argumentation of this work, conceiving of two cornerstones for its development. First, that it is necessary to consider play as essential to understanding a time (Falcão, Marques & Mussa, 2020), for it is a social force as significant as, for example, politics or religion – a status that was highlighted in the works of Huizinga (1938/2001) and Caillois (1958/2001). Second, that the objects need to be considered from their values of association, and not from their conditions of subjectivation. It is not enough to perceive what the object entails, from the discursive point of view, but rather *how* this condition can be perceived in its materialities. Play is the product of its time; its structure, a tribute to it.

This thinking guides the observation of the context formed around the trading card game *Magic: The Gathering* (MtG), or simply *Magic*: a rich community that mobilizes professional and amateur players, referees, content producers, resellers, fans, and all kinds of roles within the creative industry. The experience in this social context illustrates (1) social and power relations that are important to understanding the contemporary social spectrum, besides underlining the fact that (2) these relations can be seen not only in the performance of specific cultural codes, but also in the materiality of technical artifacts that prescribe, in turn, ways of acting in which individuals – players – interact.

This article discusses toxic masculinity behaviors performed within relational spaces related to *Magic*. The discussion stands in the overlap between the historical and cultural relation of masculinity to video game culture, which mobilizes this particular type of performance – one that is less evident yet responsible for associating men to knowledge of and advanced proficiency in computing technology, while part of a structure of hegemonic masculinity¹, as we will explore later.

This observation stems from the articulation that the community of MtG players engages in from two sociotechnical contexts: (1) nerd culture², which we will discuss in depth in this article, and (2) the mechanics inherent to the design and distribution of the game itself, aspects which have previously been explored (Falcão & Marques, 2019) but that we will briefly discuss here. Beyond the discussion of genealogical roots, this study carried out ethnographic fieldwork both in the physical contexts related to the game *Magic: The Gathering* and in the informational contexts used as a support by the actors discussed here. Throughout 2018, in three distinct physical stores located in Northeastern Brazil, we observed an interactional context developed through the practice of MtG³. In this context, we noticed two conditions that guided our analysis of this practice community: first, the lack of female MtG players in the competitive environment; and, later, a ban on discourse related to gender issues in gaming environments and its surroundings.

Seeking to understand these environments, throughout 2018 we monitored WhatsApp groups related to these particular places to look for signs that would explain the absence of women in competitions in physical spaces. This fieldwork allowed us to understand these behaviors and sociotechnical contexts, pointing to gender relations and toxic masculinity in game-oriented spaces and offering a particular understanding of the maintenance of these conversational spaces (“echo chambers” and “safe spaces”) of (ultra)conservative and reactionary discourses (Braithwaite, 2016; Gray, 2014; Mortensen, 2018). In the following section, we will discuss a brief example from our fieldwork on the card game under study.

¹Hegemonic masculinity is understood here as a pattern of practices that allow men to be dominant over women (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Evidence indicates that current western conceptions of masculinity are the result of a military, social, and economic history undertaken by the capitalist states of the Northern Atlantic (Connell, 1993). The male player's masculinity thus emerges from these contemporary western spaces through an increasing value given to work and effort, both of which are central themes for the creation of hegemonic masculinity.

²In this text, nerd will be defined as a specific person that has a high technical interest with obsessive or exclusive dedication on a given subject, especially technological and/or linked to themes like fantasy, science fiction, video games etc. The expression, as we know it, was coined in polytechnic institutes between 1930 and 1940 and has evolved since then, being added to the dictionary around 1979 thanks to the crucial role of television in the popularization and dissemination of nerd culture in the United States, just as with the correlation with the term geek (Lane, 2018).

³An important part of the observation data that composes this study results from the participation in institutional groups that belong to these spaces on the application WhatsApp, used by the community for its various functions that range from maintaining the networked conversation to structuring competition practices for MtG.

AN APPROACH TO *MAGIC: THE GATHERING*

Although play, in its broadest sense, have been extensively studied within social and human sciences, including by emblematic thinkers in these fields (Goffman, 1961; Simmel, 1983, among others), discussing play in its strict sense and the social relations it establishes remains a challenge, especially in interdisciplinary and neighboring contexts. If we discuss sports – a particular type of socially accepted organized play – the issue is dissipated by the latent knowledge coming from the cultural interaction with the rules of football, volleyball, or even the eccentricity of some Olympic sports. When we study video games or even the growing board game culture, the problem intensifies: how can we understand the internal aspects of a culture if we do not understand the technical aspects that guide it? Each one of these cultures around video games, in their many contemporary representations, is mainly driven by aspects of the design inherent to each of these technical contexts (Falcão, 2014).

Magic, the game that organizes the social context observed, has extensive and complex rules, competitive formats, and most importantly, social contexts that surround it. Created by Richard Garfield – an American mathematician, inventor, and game designer – *MtG* was the first modern trading card game (TCG) to be invented, and it is not merely a simple card game. The best way to describe it is to quote one of the clichés used by the community: “It’s like chess and poker at the same time” (Morris-Lent, 2015). The game is structured by players combining cards to reach an end goal: victory. The TCG is played competitively by two players in a battle that marries expertise and rules – a mental, agonistic skill – with the luck of drawing ideal cards at the right timing – which is perceived as randomness. Different from chess or poker, which have a limited set of pieces – 32 in the case of chess, and 52 cards in a deck – since 1993 *Magic* has had additions to its set of *pieces*, which in this case are cards that can be combined with others for specific effects.

Two basic aspects make *Magic* different from traditional card games that use 52-card decks: first is the fact that it relies on a strong diegetic aspect in its design, which is intrinsically linked to the way the game is codified by the game design team at Wizards of the Coast, the company responsible for its publication. *Magic* simulates a duel between two *planeswalkers*. In the argument that acts as the fictional base for the game, innumerable planes of existence occupy a *multiverse*. Though this narrative dimension might appear to be irrelevant, it is not: the characters and worlds created by Wizards of the Coast are the main tool used to elaborate advertising strategies and reach the audience on social media (Švelch, 2020).

The structure that enables competition, in turn, is the other factor that distinguishes *Magic* from other classic card games: to play, a player needs a deck – a collection of 60 cards that will be used in the game. These cards are previously organized according to a personal playing strategy and can come from any of the dozens of game expansions. The variable aspect of the game's structure is interesting from a design standpoint: *Magic* has, due to its design, a very particularly emergent gameplay (Juul, 2005) that is guided by a game plan but that depends on drawing the necessary cards in a movement of near randomness⁴. Thus, in order to succeed it is necessary to make judgments based on what one expects of one's adversary, one's own deck, and finally, by relying on luck.

To conclude this explanation and return to the central discussion about the behaviors identified in the communities of practice, it is necessary to highlight that access to these cards is not particularly equitable: *Magic* is sold in booster packs – packets that contain cards organized by their rarity – with 15 cards each, of which only one is rated *rare* or *mythic*. This ratio affects how often a card can appear and impacts the quality of a card in its design: rare cards are usually more powerful and versatile, casting the game in one's favor through their absolute value.

The rarity of the cards is a more relevant factor than one might imagine at first glance, since the player can only acquire a card in two ways: they either buy a booster and count on luck to get the desired card, which has a considerably low probability, or they buy the card from specialized stores that resell specific cards – called singles – in a practice that the community terms the “secondary market.” Depending on the factors of rarity and demand and considering its importance at a given moment, the price of a *single* card can vary from a few dozen to a few hundred Brazilian reals.

Thus, the very design of the game is geared towards very specific player audiences. A brief search on a site dedicated to *MtG* shows, at the time this article was written, “cheap decks” in the range of \$290 (Griffith, 2020) and particularly expensive decks in the range of \$1400 (Zeranol, 2020). *Magic*'s main demographic is made up of people who interact with the so-called geek/nerd⁵ culture⁶ that tends to be masculine, white, middle class, cisgender and heterosexual (Salter, 2018; Salter & Blodgett, 2017). In her work on race, gender, and deviation in video games, Gray (2014) states that a discussion of the masculinity portrayed in and by video games needs to be understood through a variety of lenses. In the next section, we resume this historical discussion on the construction of masculinities in nerd culture and how this aspect has overlapped in the context of video games, in general, and in *MtG* in particular.

⁴ A tutorial for how to play MtG is available at: Wizards of the Coast (2017).

⁵ The expression geek, with the connotation we have today, appeared in 1980 and became popular in the following decade, used in a correlated manner with the term nerd. For Lane (2018), the term geek has been used to replace the old nerd in common usage.

⁶ Recently, specialized literature has argued that the terms nerd and geek cannot be simply defined, mainly when the complexities of their everyday use are taken into consideration. Despite the differences, we opt to employ the term nerd in the vast majority of cases, understanding it as the semantic equivalent of geek, because both can include technoculture gamers, and from the natural and intrinsic exchange between the key ideas of the expressions – the obsession devoted to a given pursuit, intelligence, technology, and male gender, for example (Lane, 2018).

One consideration regarding the ways of experiencing *Magic* is important to frame the work presented here. The emerging question addresses an incongruence in the fact that this article discusses the toxicity of gamer culture, even though *Magic* is a TCG rather than a video game. One point must be taken into consideration: the technical and symbolic intersections noted by Švelch (2020) in his discussion concerning the process of mediatization undergone by *Magic*. The fact is that the ecosystem in which the practice of this game unfolds is a continuum composed of a physical, in-person dimension and a media, platformed dimension.

It is, in our opinion, methodologically unfruitful to explore this distinction: our ethnographic research pointed to an absolute intersection between the physical space of local game stores (LGS) and the experience on the platforms on which the game can be played. Such condition, combined with the fact that Wizards of the Coast itself publicly stated it was elevating *Magic* to the e-sport category⁷, in our perception, is more than enough for the TCG/platform distinction to be seen as a mere technicality that does not hold up to observation of the day-to-day life in this community⁸. This denotes that our approach to the game must be directed not to the platform specifically, but to the entire infrastructure, which is precisely the work undertaken in this ethnography. This implies, as well, that it is possible to notice nuances in these relations from any perceived contexts – which leads us to confirm that constructions of masculinity and toxicity emerge from both nerd and gamer culture.

⁷ As discussed by Chase (2018).

⁸ The platforms are usually used as a support for training or experimentation, whereas the local competitions are naturally perceived as having greater importance, since they are sanctioned – i.e., recognized – by Wizards of the Coast.

NERD CULTURE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINITIES

The confluence of social forces that drove the cultural transformations of the 1960s and '70s was crucial for the development of video game culture (Robinson, 2007). Multicultural social movements such as counterculture, for example, offered conditions for the transformations in technology to be broadly and gradually accepted and structured into a pattern that, given time, would establish the sociotechnical environment of cyberculture (Salter, 2018). These cultural conditions were also appropriated by other more specific cultural niches, which experienced a particular segmentation oriented towards young middle-class white males, between the ages of 18 and 25 and enrolled in higher education (Robinson, 2007).

Understanding this context is fundamental to building a critical insight into a nerd culture that is intrinsically connected to the acknowledgement that technological ability has garnered in social life (Salter, 2018). The emergence of this identity, in particular, has caused a growing questioning of the bases on

which it is based (Kendall, 1999, 2000): West and Fenstermaker (1995) state, based on the idea that all social relations are informed by gender, race, and class, that the origin of nerd culture is strongly linked to the ideals of hegemonic western, and more specifically from the United States, masculinity.

It is recognized that across time and geographic locations, masculinities are transformed and translated into distinct forms, depending on the location and various other existing tensions in the society (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Reeser, 2010). The potential of a new form of masculinity, at any moment, to be culturally exalted over the other preexisting hegemonic forms (Connell, 2001) makes the scenario even more delicate.

For Chandler (2019), hegemonic masculinity – that is, in terms of power – is a predominant approach in masculinity studies. The foundation of hegemonic masculinity is found in an understanding of female existence as a potential sexual validation for men, while they compete amongst themselves to win this “sexual object” (Gray, 2014). Gray reiterates that hegemonic masculinity consists of a set of practices that place women in a continuous state of submission. Chandler (2019), in turn, refers to hegemonic masculinity by what he believes to be its current nomenclature – *toxic masculinity* – for it evokes insight into the construction of masculine identities in relation to their toxicity (Chandler, 2019; Kupers, 2005).

From this approach, the previous definitions equally support an understanding of toxic masculinities as socially regressive masculine traits that nurture domination, devaluing women, homophobia, and violence (Kupers, 2005). This objectified and expropriated understanding of femininity characterizes toxic masculinity (Chandler, 2019), which, in video game culture, is conceived as predominant and from which the community is frequently stigmatized by the strong correspondence with traits such as homophobia, misogyny, racism, and tendency towards hostile and violent behavior – all expressions of toxic masculinity.

Considering this discussion and the cultural context documented in various works in the field of game studies (Chandler, 2019; Massanari, 2017; Salter, 2018; Salter & Blodgett, 2017), the performance of masculinity in video games is closely related to nerd masculinity – and this is intimately related to technological mastery in the game environment. In its conception, video game culture was guided by the promotion of a militarized masculinity, through the varied practices of game design and narratives centered around war scenarios (Johnson, 2018).

Besides that, the very structure of the video game market makes it unfeasible and risky to develop inclusive games that propose a restructuring of perceptions of femininity and women⁹. A major factor in this is the conventional understanding of the *player's* identity as being associated with a specific demographic – male,

⁹ Although recently both the AAA video game industry and independent producers have been exploring multicultural and inclusive themes, besides challenging constructions around concepts of masculinity and femininity, these games represent only a small portion of the total industry output. Besides this consideration, this movement can also be seen as a precorporation strategy (Fisher, 2009), in which the industry appropriates ideological content, not to endorse it, but to use it for its commercial potential.



white, cisgender, heterosexual, and middle class (Gray, 2014; Johnson, 2018; Murray, 2018; Robinson, 2007; Salter & Blodgett, 2017) – whose representation has been a key part of the power structures shaped in video game culture for decades (Braithwaite, 2016). With the rise of digital technology – and the culture related to it – starting in the 1980s, and especially in the context of US culture, being a nerd also came to mean having an aptitude and intelligence in areas that deal with technological knowledge. In this context, the image of the nerd also reaches greater acceptance, given the broad sociotechnical overlap and growing appreciation of technology (Salter & Blodgett, 2017).

Nerd masculinity is most visible when members of this culture consider themselves attacked by some product or action, usually of a multicultural nature, that provokes an outcry on forums and in communities that harbor and foster nerd identity, causing members to repudiate en masse the source of the grievance (Salter & Blodgett, 2017). These individuals' strategy consists of lobbying on forums and social networks as to make any discourse in favor of diversity and multiculturalism inviable. They compose what Massanari (2017) calls *toxic technocultures*, a concept used to “describe the toxic cultures that are enabled by and propagated through sociotechnical networks such as Reddit, 4chan, Twitter and online gaming” (p. 333).

The relation between this nerd identity and established cultural hierarchies, which embodies hegemonic masculinity, interrupts the promotion of a reconciliation by the nerdism (a group of nerds) to its position in the context of contemporary pop culture. The archetypal model of the hypermasculine nerd¹⁰ – an identity constructed by the rejection of both feminine constructs and culture and traditional athletic masculine aesthetics (Salter & Blodgett, 2017) – only outlines the substitution of a traditional hypermasculine ideal¹¹ for another standard that continues to maintain hegemonic masculinity within pop culture.

In this regard, although nerds having achieved relevance as a cultural icon represents a significant change (Salter & Blodgett, 2017), this aspect continues to preserve the dominant position of men and the subordination of women (Connell, 2005). Though a movement for greater diversity in media production in this context exists, the idea within which the nerd was construed and the white cis-heterosexual men that represents it seem to hinder female inclusion and participation in the content, actions, and communities of practice of this culture.

Burrill's (2008) notion of *boyhood* is particularly useful to illustrate our point: it proposes a regressive nature of masculinity in the first world capitalist context, where external pressures force men into a masculine childhood.

¹⁰This refers to a model derived from the dualistic view that represent nerds as both victims and outsider heroes due to the redefinition of masculinity or of the context (Salter, 2018; Salter & Blodgett, 2017). The visual culture of the United States has a strong ideological tendency that characterizes whiteness – and especially the white male protagonist – as a victim and not a hero (Murray, 2018).

¹¹ The hypermasculine ideal is traditionally represented by physical aptitude, interest in sports and beer, and a complete aversion to intellectualism (Salter & Blodgett, 2017).

Burrill stresses that games would be an ideal tool for this manifestation in digital environments, for they serve as spaces of regression, escape, fantasy, in an environment away from feminism – and the non-idealized feminine –, class struggle, and family and political responsibilities. In this escape where men can try to prove their masculinity, it is to be expected, then, that *invasion* attempts constitute threats, bringing issues from the *real world* into this bubble. These movements in nerd culture are responsible for maintaining a supposed desire to *save the past* (Salter & Blodgett, 2017), under the premise that it provided more benefits than the present.

Actions include, for example, efforts to keep science fiction free from supposed political agendas and social metaphors, efforts to protect hypermasculine video games from feminist interference and, in sum, to preserve nerd cultural spaces for the “true” participants who share that experience, identity, and the same set of values, without ever testing or challenging them (Salter & Blodgett, 2017). This argument invites a nostalgic dimension that plays a key role in the construction of the nerd and gamer identity, as well as reveals an approach towards an extreme *conservative disposition* (Oakeshott, 1991), responsible for discursively tinting a determined period with embellishing, romantic, and archaic ideals. The following section will focus on questioning these marks of the past and the ideology that they trigger in the cultural context under study.

CONSERVATISM AS AN OPERATOR IN NERD/GAMER CULTURE

Nerd/gamer culture embodies a tenuous relationship with the past: it evokes a nostalgic longing for a historical period that was not as idyllic or uncomplicated as this culture imagines it to have been (Salter & Blodgett, 2017); a certain sense of gratitude directed towards a past that has supposedly bequeathed fundamental and necessary bases for preservation in the present. Nostalgia, in this case, is an influential cultural and emotional force repeatedly used to defend a conservative ideology¹², revealing the past to be an inaccessible ideal in comparison to the reality of the present (Coontz, 2000).

Oakeshott (1991), one of the main philosophers of conservative thought, sees conservatism as a *disposition*. This means that the will to be satisfied with what is available in the present, combined with the rejection of the desire or search for something new and yet undefined in the future, would be the bases of conservatism: “to delight in what is present rather than what was or what may

¹² Robin (2011) defines conservatism as a reactionary ideology, originally against the French Revolution and, more recently, against the liberation movements of the 1960s and '70s.



be” (p. 1). His vision, thus, reinforces a conservative thinking that affirms the present. Even so, the author acknowledges that conservatism is usually justified in the imminence of a sense of loss, “in the idea that that which the present offers is about to be reaped by some radical political agenda” (Trigueiro, 2015, p. 102).

Trigueiro (2015) stresses the need to relativize Oakeshott’s (1991) concept, insofar as the ideas of present and past are, by definition, connected. While Oakeshott (1991) offers a reading of conservatism from the perspective of an intellectual who is himself a conservative, on the other hand, it is relevant to problematize it with an understanding of the phenomenon from a thinker whose political orientation is diametrically opposite: Robin (2011). This author defines conservatism as a meditation – and a theoretical interpretation – on the experience of holding power, having it threatened and trying to regain it, or only acting to maintain it.

Robin (2011) positions conservative ideas as a “mode of counterrevolutionary practice” (p. 17) that emerges to preserve the privileges, hierarchies, and power of some over others, in the wake of a democratic movement. This critical approach is distinct from Oakeshott’s (1991) definition, whose bases are built on themes like liberty, limited government, resistance to change and innovation as a condition of human nature and character – which, he argues, is resistant to such sudden initiatives – or common values.

In other words, conservative ideology can be understood as a determined reaction, a defense against the attacks of a specific emancipation movement, which in its response consistently absorbs features of the movement it opposes (Robin, 2011). In the so-called “Modern Era” this skeptical tone that is concerned with the preservation of conservatives’ privileges, in the face of possibilities of radical shifts in society’s power structures and hierarchy, is more frequent in the private sphere than in the public one, finding struggles against causes like labor movements and feminism (Robin, 2011)¹³.

Robin’s (2011) argument emphasizes that a classist spirit exists perennially in conservative rhetoric, i.e., that it upholds an idea of banning, at different levels, the liberty and agency of subaltern classes. The author develops a critique that understands conservatism as reactive and contingent to conflicting radical political agendas and programs – without which it loses force and rhetorical power – in addition to being complementary to the left. These political ideals – called conservative, reactionary, revanchist, or counterrevolutionary – originated and grew, according to Robin, in battles and polarization. From the French Revolution to the fights for Black liberation, from decolonization movements

¹³ We would like to highlight that historically the nerd/gamer community thinks of its spaces much more as a private environment than public, given their conditions of access.

to the struggles of First Nations peoples and communities, from the sexual revolution to women's liberation – the changing threat transforms the ways of fighting it (Robin, 2011).

Turning back to the context of nerd and video game culture, members of these communities often seek to affirm their cis-heteronormativity and hegemonic gender roles under the guise of a conservative, nostalgic perspective that denotes an illusory victimhood. Similarly, the online harassment campaign known as Gamergate¹⁴ also had its discourse fueled by nostalgia and displayed a socio-technical manifestation consistent with nerd masculinities and forms of online harassment, threats, attacks, and humiliation driven by various digital platforms like Twitter and Reddit (Massanari, 2017; Salter, 2018). “Gamergaters” – as they became known – punished and defamed their critics, secure in the premise that they needed to be put back in their place: subjugating them is the right path, they argued. The movement's rhetoric suggests the existence of a crusade against feminists and other select enemies, often directing misogynist, antisemitic, racist, homophobic, and transphobic attacks (Braithwaite, 2016; Salter, 2018).

Nerd culture, and gamer culture in turn, are partisans of a nostalgic behavior that is closely related to an extremist *conservative disposition* (Oakeshott, 1991) or (ultra)conservative spirit, as suggested by Coontz (2000). The author's argument focuses on how much the idealized past acts a vehicle for reactionary ideologies, including those concerned with gender roles that try to criticize society in its current state for not maintaining standards of the past (Coontz, 2000). “Nostalgia for a safer, more placid past fosters historical amnesia about these precedents, deforming our understanding of what is and is not new” (p. 12). Part of the rhetoric of nerds and *MtG* players is based on a past-centric perspective of the male gender, in a movement dedicated to maintaining a structure of privileges and misogynistic, cis-heteronormative, and hegemonic social roles.

In her study, Coontz (2000) analyzes the tendency of contemporary society, especially in the US context, to frame the 1950s as representative of a historical period when the family was healthy and therefore ideal. For many, this period became a *golden age* when *traditional* family life prospered. A profound cultural and emotional nostalgia for this invented past was created, independently of this perfect construction being effectively unachievable at any point in history. The recurring argument is that “if the 1950s family existed today... we would not have the contemporary social dilemmas that cause such debate” (p. 46).

Coontz suggests that this discourse implies a return to the family values of former times, which encourages moralization and conservative hegemonic

¹⁴ Gamergate was a misogynist campaign originating within the video game industry and the gaming community in August 2014, after the game developer Eron Gioni published a defamatory article about his ex-partner and fellow game developer Zoe Quinn. It was an act of retaliation after their brief relationship ended (Salter, 2018). So-called gamergaters place cis-heterosexual white men as the typical gamer and the true victims of Gamergate, who are oppressed by constant requests for diversity and at risk of losing their games to others with more inclusivity (Braithwaite, 2016).

ideological thought: “a seemingly gender-neutral indictment of family irresponsibility ends up being directed most forcefully against women” (p. 60), blaming them for the crisis of the traditional family due to the transformation of their roles in society. The insistence on a “return to the traditional family” provides support for the representations of gender and sexuality within the nerd/gamer culture – and the nostalgic rhetoric adopted by its members – to reaffirm the dominant power dynamic to recover the privileges of a past that is supposedly superior to a present seen as degenerate and in decline.

In *Magic*, the players evoke an ideal-type of the past from a nostalgic dimension of identity, as previously stated, structuring the intersubjective fabrics of nerd culture. Just as factions of the conservative political spectrum and the extreme right in Brazil and the United States long for the perfect domestic life of the post-war era, at the height of the so-called “golden years” of the 1950s (Coontz, 2000)¹⁵, the players look to a legendary golden era of nerdism. Such a period never existed outside imagination or the false sense of the past, in the ongoing need to guarantee the protection, privilege, power, male exclusivity and control of technology in certain nerd spaces and activities (Salter, 2018).

The players’ unhappiness stems from discovering that nostalgia is more powerful than reality. This observation leads to a search to internally define what has contributed to the unhappy context experienced today. Their sadness must belong somewhere and the hunt for who to blame falls on, above all, feminists, who are recurrently associated with – in the media, on innumerable online platforms, or in daily life itself¹⁶ – a discourse of *unhappiness* and *anger*, as opposed to the *happy*, submissive conservative wives. Happiness, then, assumes a rhetoric that conceives it as an emotional and economic good that comes exclusively from middle-class homes (Ahmed, 2010). “Feminists don’t even have to say anything to be read as killing joy... they disturb the very fantasy that happiness can be found in certain places” (Ahmed, 2010, pp. 65-66).

Based on philosophy and feminist cultural studies, Ahmed (2010) addresses a provocative critical cultural analysis to the imperative of *being happy*. The author accurately shows how happiness has historically been used to justify submission and social oppression, upheld through various techniques of violence and subjugation in service of maintaining a social pact that privileges the rights of some over others (Ahmed, 2010). Her approach also reveals how a defiant oppression can cause unhappiness, the affective and moral labor performed by the “promise of happiness,” and how it is promised to only those who wish to live their lives the “right way” – i.e., the one that is socially validated.

¹⁵ With the consequent return to the traditional family and, in the national context, to the golden moments that they believe to have existed during the Brazilian civil-military dictatorship.

¹⁶ As can be seen, for example, in videos produced by youtuber Bruna Torlay (2020).

Thus, feminists and other critical groups are easy targets for the players' frustration with their communities and lives. While the uncritical and political validation of various nerd media, products, and derivatives is regarded time and again in this culture's environment, feminists or any other distinct individual are seen as villains (Salter & Blodgett, 2017). Starting from a line of thought similar to Salter and Blodgett's (2017), we can suggest that thinking of women and minority groups as members of these communities cracks the image of the player as a solitary and disagreeable man. Any attempt to disrupt this shared environment, or to view these subjects as visibly different, generates acts of toxic masculinity.

In this regard, the players' sense of nostalgia also highlights two key aspects of this culture: (1) the close ties between the player and a male gender identity; and (2) the player as a consumer category whose time-consuming hobby is being diminished by the growing popularity and access to games today: "For some players, there is a genuine sense of loss, watching games becoming mainstream and accessible" (Juul, 2010, p. 151). As performed during Gamergate (Braithwaite, 2016), this sense of loss is related to the gamer masculinity, so much so that opening to new groups is seen as an attack on men and the identity of the "original members." We have here a perception that relates this behavior to a certain romantic ethos belonging to the *conservative disposition*, which is usually positioned as a voice that cries out about the threat of losing power.

Again, the use of this identity as a weapon is central to rhetorical strategies and hate campaigns targeting female audiences, as observed in the Gamergate case and documented in the vast research trove on the topic (Braithwaite, 2016; Salter & Blodgett, 2017). The nostalgic artifice evoked also employs an understanding of suffering as part of what makes gamers exclusionary, thus being used to offer them a certain moral superiority and justify their aggressive and misogynistic claims as a form of defense that actually disguises the hatred hidden in a moralizing campaign against a certain *threat* to their domain (Braithwaite, 2016). This attitude of victimization seeks to cloud relations of dominance maintained through control and assertion of technological power (Salter, 2018). This form of power is manifested in competitions for status and respect that are imposed among and on other men, from which women are repeatedly excluded, states Salter (2018). We will further elaborate on these and other issues in the following section.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Considering what has been discussed thus far, it is necessary to further explore the local practice of *Magic* to observe the production and performance of toxic masculinities. We used an ethnographic and anthropological approach that combines the experience and cultural gateway of the places of consumption and proliferation of the game, with the observation of support communities on the WhatsApp application. Such a methodological composition sought a more complete observation of the interactions and used digital devices to adequately illustrate the phenomenon.

The issue that stands out in this decision concerns the fact that the behavior observed in the LGSs alone is not sufficient to describe how these places give rise to toxic or reactionary behaviors: our observation indicates that local performance is, many times, the culmination of a relationship cultivated on other platforms¹⁷. In the case of LGSs that host very private scenes, involving a limited number of players – as opposed to events like a grand prix (GP) or a larger competition –, the experience is communal and personal. WhatsApp groups work as extensions of the physical space of the store, within which one can establish relationships because of/with the game. These communities are commonly used to keep the actors involved, both in the dimension of the game – serving as an outlet for discussion on technical aspects, media repercussion, or even commercial launches – and in a broader experience, guided by values shared by the various groups represented therein.

Thus, it is indispensable that we study these platforms, because ultimately many of the situated behaviors are contextualized or justified by the relationships construed in this dimension, which strengthens the continuity of the social experience, rather than the perception that forums, social networking services and other digital devices promote an ephemeral communication¹⁸. This set of additional devices thus provides benefits so that players are permanently together in the game networks. The digital devices that support the continuity of the communal experience of the game facilitate, in turn, the conversation surrounding other topics. Memes, news, and political content circulate with considerable ease, stirring people up and inspiring certain behaviors.

Protected by the impression of anonymity and by what Gray (2014) calls *toxic online disinhibition*, individuals who are particularly quiet in personal interactions in stores prove to be eloquent defenders of their ideas, suggesting that in-person social interactions are often considered sacred events, since it

¹⁷ We refer, once again, to Massanari's (2017) concept of toxic technocultures, which transpires with equal hostility on online communication networks seen as safe spaces (Braithwaite, 2016; Gray, 2014) for the dissemination and advancement of extremist and ultraconservative discourses, practices, and communities.

¹⁸ Mortensen (2018) highlights the dimension of this persistence and continuity when discussing Gamergate and its use of spaces as "echo chambers" that foster hatred and violent behavior. Braithwaite (2016) offers a similar perspective.

is there that the *playing* happens. This guides two conditions that contribute to this methodological digression: (1) that the practice of the game invites a behavior of respect for fair play – a truce, however subtle – since (2) combative behaviors are often shown in the support communities.

The research that supports the observation undertaken in this article dates from 2016 and has participants and observations in several states in the country, which we visited and followed, albeit briefly, in groups like those described above. In this iteration, we present a compilation of events observed in stores in Northeastern Brazil – one in João Pessoa, Paraíba, and another in Teresina, Piauí –, whose documentation took place in-person throughout 2017 and 2018, as well as on the previously described digital supports.

As can be inferred from this outline, an understanding of the geographic locations of these spaces remains to be discussed: one must note that what is at play is not only the individual *Magic* player, but also the identity aspect performed from belonging to these states in particular or, more generally, the Northeastern region. The visits to the stores were always one or more times per week, with fieldwork lasting from one to four hours per day, at times in order to engage in the competitive environment, and at others to simply enter into conversation and observe the movements of the players and the community as a whole. We recorded over 500 total hours of local participant observation and thousands of chat lines on WhatsApp.

The following incident was chosen for it included the presence of women in the environment, in both a discursive and physical in-person dimension. We would like to stress that the presence of women on the WhatsApp application or at in-person competitions is rare. Our objective, finally, is to problematize how the manifestations of toxic nerd/gamer masculinity occur in these environments, from this incident.

The setting of the spaces dedicated to *Magic* is, in general, heterogeneous: each of the *stores*, commonly called LGSs, have its own parameters. All, however, are organized with a series of tables with chairs facing each other, as one would see at a chess match. On the table, the players lay out their playmats – rubber mats that keep the cards from being damaged by contact with the tables – and play their matches, which vary according to the game formats.

It was in one of these spaces, in João Pessoa¹⁹, that we came across an interesting development: four youths around 20 years old were playing with a sealed product that works like a board game: they already knew the cards and what type of game it would produce. Such products are usually consumed by

¹⁹ The names of the establishments were omitted to not expose those involved in the case studies presented in this discussion.

casual players and collectors who are interested in the thematic/narrative and material aspect rather than the competitive aspect of the game.

As we observed the environment, we noticed that the topic of discussion among the group was the narrative of the game. One of the younger man was explaining to the group the relationship between Jace Beleren, an archetypal hero, and the villain Nicol Bolas, characters in the *MtG* multiverse. At a certain point in the conversation, a comment about Beleren's romantic interest, Liliana Vess, quickly transformed into a debate around the sparse presence of women in *Magic* stores. This issue is important and speaks not only to the process of subjectivation and production of toxic masculinity, but also to how these environments are established to understand these spaces: as much as they are often projected as places for the socialization and performance of the consumption of nerd culture, the contingent of female audience that frequents them is summarily reduced.

This fact both invites a perception of the construction of male identities with regard to their toxicity (Chandler, 2019; Kupers, 2005) and collaborates so that these spaces contribute to a self-reinforcing dimension. It creates what Mortensen (2018) terms "echo chambers" (p. 791) that advocate a discursive homogeneity, or what Gray (2014) calls "a 'safe' space to discuss and consume stereotypical ideas about race and gender" (p. xiii). One of the observed establishments, in particular, combined a series of functions: it was, yes, a space to practice *Magic*, but it was also a themed café with board games available for the customers. This space – much more than the first one – was often frequented by women, but they rarely developed any relation with *Magic*. It was as if this store held two distinct universes in the same communal space: in one, people ate, drank, and had fun; in the other, the energy was heavy and conflict was palpable.

Returning to the conversation of the four young men, at the moment that the topic was raised, one of them spoke up and started commenting on a media event that had occurred recently: on the program *Encontro*, hosted by Fátima Bernardes and broadcast in the morning on Rede Globo, actress and youtuber Kéfera Buchmann had abruptly corrected a young man on national television, using terms like *maninterrupting* and *mansplaining* (Nascimento, 2018). The mere memory of the episode was enough to enrage one of the young men: "She interrupts the guy and starts talking about 'man interruption' [sic]!" – with a jocular inflection put on the last word.

It caught our attention that this conversation came up in the discussion about the absence of women in the game. Its occurrence implied a knowledge,

on the part of the group, of multicultural topics associated with feminism, a topic generally ignored in circles like this one (Gray, 2014; Murray, 2018; Salter, 2018; Salter & Blodgett, 2017). Ignored or neglected not because toxic or misogynistic behavior would be curtailed, but simply because, by the nature of the space, the topic just does not come up. The masculinity developed and performed in an environment like that of the stores is rarely confronted, since the female presence is almost always at the service level. All the stores we visited employed women – cashiers, general employees, administrators – but they do not participate in the community experience and are practically invisible in the game space.

The female traffic at the game tables is indeed negligible. At the two establishments we visited, only one woman was casually interested in *Magic* and she appeared reluctant to enter the competition.

My reason for not playing competitively is that I have anxiety disorder, competitions make me anxious because of the time limits and since I don't know how to play properly, I need to think a lot about the plays and having a time limit makes me nervous... I think it's intimidating because I was just starting *Magic* and at the store there were only experienced players. Some were nice to me, they were patient and answered questions or recommended a deck, but in general the players aren't very welcoming. (Female player, 2019)

The account is consonant with our observation for it both questions how the figure of women is received in the competitive environment inherent to these establishments and underlines a particularly discriminatory design in the game. *Magic* has an extensive and complex set of rules – more than 100 pages in its manual – and learning them is a time-consuming activity. Besides, applying the rules on the fly – at the right time – is not the same thing as knowing them, which means that the game requires a lot of attention. This testimony reveals a pernicious dimension of *agon*, by Caillois (1958/2001): these competitive spaces seem to foster an inherent hostility in which the peer recognition stems as much from mastering the technical aspects of the game as from sharing certain values of a particular political identity.

This background is interesting because it contextualizes the problem: as the store in João Pessoa – unlike the other store with which we had systematic contact – is a hybrid, working as both a café and board game store, its public is more diverse than in other instances. Its structure is also considerably superior, since it needs to meet other consumer expectations. Resuming the condition

in which the dialogue took place, one could see that that specific space allows for adverse opinions that wouldn't necessarily be discussed in other circles – an undisputed narrative in which only a certain type of actor is permitted.

The scene changed once other people entered the store: young women who know the young men go up to them and greet them, but sit at another table and proceed to place their orders and choose a board game to pass the time. For the *Magic* players, the conversation takes another course since the performance space of masculinity and criticism of feminist ideas is spoiled by the female presence.

Similar discussions were witnessed in other spaces without having to necessarily be provoked, but they rarely ended on an argument that was not conservative or sexist: the reason women do not play competitive *Magic* has little to do with the spaces being commonly impenetrable and necessarily toxic; it's their fault – they simply don't want to play. Even our speaker reluctantly admitted that “maybe the masculine environment is a little scary” (Female player, 2019) when questioned about female friends and acquaintances who are interested in the game but not in the LGS.

Gray (2014) argues that games, like a significant part of pop culture, offer a *safe* space that both acts as a means for the circulation of accepted stereotypes of the other and creates environments to normalize these representations and punish all those different who seek to challenge the hegemonic organization of game culture. In other words, games also represent the dissemination of previously *private* jokes and prejudices that are now often made *public* during game matches and on various streaming platforms and social media services. As stated previously, the nerd/gamer community does not see these comments as necessarily public, since they consider the game space – and even the surroundings – to be private. These indications were visible in the conversations witnessed at the LGS in João Pessoa, but are not limited to it.

Burriel's (2008) notion of boyhood is very useful in helping us understand the previously discussed conditions, since it suggests a spatial maintenance that ensures the absence of the female figure. Under the pretext of their lack of desire, a performance space is designed that offers safety and encourages sexist, misogynistic, and (ultra)conservative discourses. Notwithstanding this condition, our hypothesis underlines the fact that such an occurrence is indeed linked to how nerd culture has developed over the years, but also to the form – in the strictest sense of the word – of the game. Returning to the discussion about the design and distribution of *Magic*, we can approach the issue of the value of certain cards and their combinations and from this infer target audiences and behaviors.

Kendall (1999) points out that the marker of hegemonic masculinity that pervades the nerd stereotype is that of high purchasing power and employability. Unlike games that preserve balance in their experience, in *Magic* players with greater purchasing power benefit from the game design, which implies a demographic predominantly composed of white, cis-heterosexual men with above-average purchasing power. Being at the top of a cis-heteronormative hierarchy makes them, besides ignore the privileges interwoven in their social situation, extremely protectionist of practices they assume to be exclusively masculine²⁰.

Besides the related incident, our experience with competitive *Magic* presented us with an atmosphere that ranged from passive-aggressive to hostile – rarely friendly – that clearly showed the formation and maintenance of rival groups sustained by the agnostic stimulus of reward and symbolic capital inherent to victory (Simmel, 1983). In this regard, it is worth pointing out that the WhatsApp groups are not very different from the personal interaction in stores, as far as hostility and the absence of women go. As the erasure of this presence in communities related to nerd culture is formed, produced by the performance of a boyhood (Burrill, 2008) that eclipses female subjectivity in these environments, one would expect the same to happen in digital contexts, such as the WhatsApp groups that serve as support for the stores – after all, as Braithwaite (2016) stated, social media also operate as safe spaces for the propagation of aggressive and violent misogyny. It is in fact what our observation suggests, since in exclusively male spaces violent attitudes and topics like pornography are commonly present and contribute to the condition.

The relations between the forms of banning, punishment, and identity policing promoted within *Magic* do not show a mere residual coincidence with the Gamergate campaign, but rather are aligned with a long-standing subjectivation process of toxic nerd masculinity that is always available. The recurrence of this set of anxieties, rhetorical strategies, and hate campaigns directed at women and ethnic-racial minorities can and will be used, as necessary, to subordinate the female or other minorities' presence in a space culturally and historically construed under the domain of and for the perpetuation of male power.

The search for legitimacy and equal rights by minorities hurts the basic principle of the imagery present in a considerable part of the gamer and nerd demographic: a society built on the foundation of a false meritocracy that hides centuries of social and ethno-racial debts. This argument, followed by the debate on the class stratification promoted by *MtG* design, is relevant

²⁰ This stratification perceived in the game design itself is subject to variations due to the multiplicity of formats adopted by *Magic*. Pauper, for example, which consists only of cards with a common rarity – i.e., that appear at a significantly higher rate, increasing their availability – is a cheaper format, with decks priced around \$50, according to the *MTG Goldfish* website (<https://bit.ly/3h4SS43>). But it is not adopted in official competitions, since many players consider it to be an introductory format for beginner players or for those who aren't really able to invest in the game. The very existence of the Pauper underlines the exclusionary nature of *Magic*.

because the community of players is not only marked by masculinity and opposition to femininities, but also by whiteness, “the specific dimensions of racism that serve to elevate white people over people of color” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 56). DiAngelo (2011) argues that white North-Americans live in a social environment responsible for shielding and isolating them from *racial stress*, resulting from an disruption of what is considered racially familiar, according to the author. These isolated environments of racial hierarchical protection, that game/play spaces (and situations) can stage with relative ease, produce white expectations for racial comfort insofar as they simultaneously limit the capacity to tolerate racial, and we would add, gender and class, stress. The breakdown of this protection triggers what the author calls *white fragility*.

White fragility is one aspects of whiteness and its effects. It is a state fueled by situations of racial stress, responsible for invoking a series of defensive movements, some of which cover the externalization of emotions like anger, resentment, fear, and guilt, besides behaviors like arguing, silence, and withdrawal from a given stress-inducing situation. These behaviors fulfill the role of reestablishing the racial balance of white people. These disruptions, according to DiAngelo (2011), have the capacity to take on multiple forms and stem from a considerable number of sources (p. 57).

The observed discourses and behaviors allow us to infer that minorities’ fight in search of visibility are symptoms of a condition that we can call *player fragility* and this, in turn, makes up an essential part of the establishment of normative and toxic structures at work within *MtG*. These structures condition and confer the status of banned on all minorities involved in the contemporary battle to renegotiate the gamer identity. The idea of player fragility, in an allusion to white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011) on which it feeds, is understood as a set of defensive reactions, and can be illustrated by Burrill’s (2008) notion of *boyhood*. It is a state in which even the slightest amount of stress triggered by equitable gender, race, class, or sexuality actions become unacceptable, occasioning a variety of defensive movements, punishments, and policing that culminate in the manifestation of various forms of toxic masculinity and toxic technocultures – including multiple acts of violence.

This set of movements, similarly to white fragility defined by DiAngelo (2011), incorporates the external manifestations of emotions like anger, resentment, and fear, besides aggressive behaviors of various kinds. These

behaviors, in turn, work to restore the game as a harmless male pastime, a space of white comfort, and the ethno-racial, gender, and class *balance* and hierarchy of white, cis-heterosexual players, of a pretense and nostalgic original gamer identity, of a narrative responsible for constructing a worldview where white youth, irrespective of traditional definitions of masculinities, are heroes-cum-victims by the continuous advance of an agenda in favor of diversity and multiculturalism.

Thus, the manifestations of toxic masculinity against women and other minorities in gamer culture can be interpreted as an attempt to maintain the nerdy white men's space intact. This defense mechanism reaffirms a rejection of traditional physical hypermasculinity, while constituting another kind of fraternity that offers an alternative staging space centered on a performance of rationality and positivism.

In 2016, after the presidential elections in the United States, Gamergate resurfaced in popular discourse (Salter & Blodgett, 2017). The similarities in the manifestations of toxic masculinity among Gamergate and *Magic* players – though not restricted to them alone – with the far right online movement, the alt-right – and of this with *Bolsonarism* and *Trumpism* – are diverse and in no way should be treated as a mere chance. These relations are reinforced in NBC News' (2017) video report "How Gamers Are Facilitating the Rise of the Alt-Right" by and in Lees's (2016) analysis of the connection between Gamergate, the relations with the White House and how "the 2014 online hate-storm presaged the tactics of the Trump-loving far right movement" (para. 1). "Leading up to the Charlottesville rallies, alt-right organizers used a messaging service called Discord, originally created for video gamers. This is the latest in the history between the alt-right and the gaming community" (NBC News, 2017, para. 1).

These reports show that these links are denser than previously imagined: there is a direct relationship between the discourse of exclusion and subjugation used by players and nerds and that promoted by the so-called alt-right media, which is based on existing communities such as Men's Rights activists and a variety of other movements aimed at men who believe that the past afforded them more benefits and privileges than the present. Our argument, in line with the analyses by Lees (2016) and Salter and Blodgett (2017), is that nostalgic ethos and (ultra)conservatism support both the set of rhetorical strategies and hate campaigns used by Gamergate and the enactment centered on a performance

of (toxic) masculinities by *Magic* players and, more than that, can be read as intrinsic indices of a link to the alt-right.

Although the cluster of dynamics shown in *Magic* and Gamergate is ultimately fed by men's vendetta against women, a particular narrative of reform was produced: an call to *make gaming great again* – whose resemblance to the campaign slogan adopted by Donald Trump in 2016 (“Make America Great Again”) is not mere coincidence. The movement developed continuously in the *MtG* community of practice should not be thought of as an isolated case in a past context, but rather as part of a historical campaign of resistance to the democratic march undertaking by the groups of women and social minorities in subaltern positions against their oppressors in the state, workplace, church, and other hierarchical institutions since the beginning of the so-called “Modern Era” (Robin, 2011).

This context is not detached from the various manifestations of entertainment of our time, be it sports or video games, as reinforced by the analyses of Falcão, Marques, Mussa and Macedo (2020), Lees (2016) and NBC News (2017). In almost every campaign, under various banners – labor movement, feminism, abolition, decolonization, sexuality, socialism – and different slogans – liberty, equality, rights, democracy, revolution –, this resistance occurred with violence and non-violence, openly and in secret, legally and illegally (Robin, 2011). Our argument is to place the movements and countermovements in *MtG* as part of the history of contemporary politics, or at least as one of its histories. They are battles between social groups; between those who hold more power and those who fight for change in historically colonized spaces.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS: WHAT IS AT PLAY?

In this article, we sought to relate the effects of the creation and performance of a toxic masculinity to the experience of the *MtG* community of practice. In the observed stores, the presence of female players is still quite limited and the discussions never reached the topic of their silencing, since access to the game is made difficult. From a less hostile suppression to male players' expressions against the female presence in *their* spaces, what we notice is the production of a masculinity that is based not on difference, but in detriment of it: the fostering of a homogeneous environment that ensures that the spaces in stores and WhatsApp groups is considered safe for the manifestation of violent ideas and exclusion of what is feminine. The identification of players and store owners,

opposed to the female presence in *MtG*, with the figure of Jair Bolsonaro and with symbols and discourses adopted by the far right and ultraconservatism also point to the desire to maintain male privilege and the nerd/gamer identity as it has been conceived and consolidated.

Our analysis suggests that manifestations of toxic masculinities in *MtG*, as conservative modes of practice (Robin, 2011) and set of defensive reactions (DiAngelo, 2011), are reactive, contingent, and complementary to an opposing radical political program championed by women and social minorities – without which these actions lose strength and rhetorical power. The political ideas of a considerable part of the player demographic which generally occupies the right side of the political spectrum and purport to be apolitical, are forged in battle, in an intense battlefield demarcated by real and rhetorical borders (Salter & Blodgett, 2017). Unlike what Robin (2011) suggests, however, an upside-down conservatism – or rather, ultraconservatism – in *MtG* remains in the thoughtless defense of an unchanging old regime or of a thoughtful idolized traditionalism.

It thus assumes a reactionary attitude by showing an insistent inclination to recreate a certain idealization of the past, founded on a supposed “golden era” that contains, in its epistemology, ideational and transcendent traits – typical of non-conservative ideologies – that respond to the immanent nature of conservatism (Trigueiro, 2015). We can call it ultraconservatism. The process of subjectivation of toxic masculinity occurs, in part, by an enactment of violence as an available tool to these players for identity policing. Here the variety of manifestations of player fragility, which often erupts when whites are challenged in their racial worldviews, illustrates the function of reestablishing the racial-ethnic, gender, and class balance and hierarchy of white cis-heterosexual players. Future studies should help to map the multiple forms – spanning various practices of violence – and sources by which player fragility and toxic masculinity act, including different gaming activities and situations.

Finally, this article is first foray that points to the need to explore these environments as performance spaces of political culture, thus connecting observed behaviors and discourses not only to political performances particular to the Brazilian culture – a relation between *MtG* players and supporters of President Jair Bolsonaro in this case – but, above all, subjectivities developed from perceiving the creative industries as part of the neoliberal capitalist ecosystem and from the processes of colonization that Brazil has experienced. Moreover, traces revealed not only in the discourse explained in this article, but in other aspects

of our sampling suggest a link between this conservative and traditionalist (patriarchal) discourse with others of a neofascist nature. Further studies should explore this connection, which seems to converge on the identity of the *Magic* consumer audience in Brazil. ■

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