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Turnt, Trippy, and Tipsy: Video Games, Drugs, and Allo-Ludic Play

Abstract: This article offers a flexible method for analyzing drug representations in video games as they map onto lived social realities outside the game with a particular focus on US cultures. While drugs have received ample attention in popular culture studies—especially in film and television studies—game studies has been slow to produce systematic analyses of these important cultural artefacts expressed through the video game medium. Drawing upon Donna Haraway's cyborg politics and Steven Conway's ludic framework (with the addition of allo-ludic play), this essay offers game studies scholars a flexible—perhaps even a "turnt"—taxonomy for analyzing the imbrication of virtual drugs inside the game and oppressive, discriminatory, and inequitable conditions of life in America outside the game. Through a brief analysis of stimulants, depressants, and psychedelics in Triple-A and indie games, the essay argues for the importance of studying drugs in video games to understand the complex, intersecting histories of the rise of the video game medium alongside the changeful histories of US drug policies, laws, and enforcement.

Keywords: drugs, video games, ludicity, social justice, American culture, alcohol, play

1. Introduction

As part of a larger project that investigates the parallel cultural histories of the rising dominance of the video game medium and the changing tides of US drug policy, enforcement, and rhetorics, this article establishes a flexible and changeful—or "turnt"—taxonomic framework for analyzing drugs in video games. While drug representations in new media have received extended scholarly attention with regard to popular forms like film and television, analysis of drugs in games remains relegated mostly to passing reference or an occasional article. This interdisciplinary cultural study investigates how covert and overt drug representations and the phenomenology of virtual highs map onto out-of-game lived, material realities

as mediated by drug cultures, rhetorics, and institutions (like law and medicine). As such, video games have also been integrally tied to these disparate, changing, and oftentimes oppressive narratives concerning drugs, addiction, medicine, and policing, the medium itself even being publicly charged with being addictive, not unlike a drug. By analyzing the various imbrications between drug culture(s) and video games, players and scholars alike can begin to see how these cultural narratives shape the experience of an entertainment medium that has grown up, as it were, during one of the most profound periods of change in recreational drug use, policy, and enforcement in the United States.

Following Adrienne Shaw and Bo Ruberg's call for game studies to move beyond rigid player taxonomies, narrow definitions, and simplistic analyses of video games divorced from their material and social realities, the following historical contexts provide intersectional frames through which to understand the various and often overlapping modes of oppression related to drug policy, policing, and sentencing, a lived reality for many of the most marginalized players within gaming communities (Shaw and Ruberg xviii). While game studies—itself a diverse, inter- and multi-disciplinary global community of researchers, designers, and scholars taking a variety of approaches to studying games—has seen an increase in research that attends to social contexts and social justice over the past decade, the idea of a "playful researcher", as Shira Chess terms it, has not. Building upon Paolo Ruffino's work on creative game studies, Chess describes such a role as being "not just to inform; it is to disrupt, produce anxiety around, and influence as a kind of dramatic intervention into a product", an intervention that finds only occasional company in a field still heavily influenced by less playful, more static frameworks, however useful they might otherwise be (Chess 12). This article's turnt taxonomy finds its theoretical footing in Donna Haraway's cyborg politics put alongside Steven Conway's framework of gaming ludicity. These theories are deployed throughout against the backdrop of post-structuralist conceptions of reading and meaning-making (Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Wolfgang Iser, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, Marshall McLuhan, etc.) that emphasize the role of reader, contexts, and the playfulness of language in meaning formation beyond totalizing understandings of authorial intent. Indeed, players make meaning as they play in a gameworld, and such play can transgress the (intended) structure of that game text (Piero, *Video Game Chronotopes* 22–24). By thinking through the relationships between drugs and games with both Conway and Haraway, ludic play becomes charged with the uncertainty and undecidability that governs lived reality, including the semiological narratives and cultural contexts that bear on video games, despite the ostensible stability of the algorithm.

Haraway's 1985 "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" continues to serve as a germinal essay in cultural studies, posthumanism, and new media studies among a wide array of other fields. In disrupting the longstanding oppositions and hierarchies of human–animal, organism–technology, physical–non-physical, and nature–culture,

Haraway imagines a cyborg ontology "resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity" that is "oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence" (67). The cyborg is a networked being that embraces partiality (over totality), polyvocality, connection, and the changefulness of threshold play, particularly the "*pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and … the *responsibility* in their construction" (Haraway 66). Viewing the world—and video games—through a cyborg perception enables players and scholars to see the threshold (i.e., boundary) experience of play itself, a topic I have written about at length elsewhere (Piero, *Video Game Chronotopes* 53–63). Players make meaning as they play, unlocking the potential agency to unpack, queer, or otherwise complicate the dominant narratives, images, mechanics, and play experiences related to drug representation and use through critical interpretation. In addition to hacking, glitches, speedrunning, modding, and other procedural interventions, the gameworld becomes a cyborg space that transcends the limits of the game itself. The analysis of drugs in games and their multifaceted connections to out-of-game drugs, drug use, and drug discourses requires a flexible mode of analysis, such as the one Haraway provides, even though some scholars might prefer a more fixed, "reproducible" analytical framework privileged by Western colonialist discourses.[1] This taxonomy may, therefore, be disorienting to some readers with its resistance to the scientific averaging away of that which cannot be reduced to data or (ostensibly) stable categories: contingency, playfulness, alterity, and undecidability.[2]

Powering this turnt, cyborg taxonomy are the ludic effects of these drugs, which I describe using Conway's model of ludicity in games ("Hyper-Ludicity"). In attempting to better describe the experience and design of ludicity—the Latin *ludus* primarily meaning "play" or "game"—Conway, building upon Roger Caillois's theory of play, offers a flexible framework of analysis that demonstrates how games offer players empowerment (hyper-ludicity), resistance (contra-ludicity), and even deprivation of play (hypo-ludicity) as a means through which to keep players engaged, playing, and otherwise in a flow state (Conway, "Hyper-Ludicity", "We Used to Win"). This is important to this study of a cultural history of drugs in games because virtual drugs are most often consumed to effect a particular hyper- and/or contra-ludic effect. All drugs are ludic, insofar as they each play with sense.

Building upon this framework, I also add "allo-ludicity" to the spectrum, "allo" deriving from the Greek meaning "other" or "differently", to express the larger disorienting change of sensation, feel, and atmosphere that games can evoke ("allo-, comb. form."). The allo-ludic encompasses a *sensoria* of play that "defamiliarizes"—in Viktor Shklovsky's sense of the literary term (11–12)—a particular set-

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[1] For more on archipelagic thinking and metaphorical literacy in game interpretation and scholarship, see pp. 121–25 of my *Video Game Chronotopes and Social Justice*.

[2] For a more detailed critique of the hegemony of quantificatory thought, see my "Dialogical Numbers: Counting Humanimal Pain in J.M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*".

ting, haptic play experience, or sensation for the player.[3] The allo-ludic as a term captures a significant disorienting, changeful, perceptual, and sensory alteration of the gameworld that, crucially, "others" the feel and atmosphere of the game for the player. As an illustrative example, an otherwise hyper-ludic moment, such as consuming a power pellet in *Pac-Man*, also dramatically alters and disorients the player with regard to the gameworld: music changes and quickens, non-player characters (NPCs) flash, game rules radically change, and so on. The hyper-ludic, therefore, induces an allo-ludic experience that significantly others the play experience and game feel in a disorienting way. By contrast, a hyper-ludic moment in a role-playing game (RPG) whereby one equips a stronger longsword that empowers players to deal more damage is not allo-ludic because there is no significant, disorienting change in the feel and sensation of the game for the player. Drugs in games can be both hyper- and contra-ludic, giving players more energy, speed, and health and at the same time punishing them with vertiginous effects or lowering the player's strength, stamina, health, or other abilities. Additionally, they can also be (though are not always) allo-ludic in how they engender changeful experiences for players beyond a *single* ludic rule, mechanic, or object alone. Drugs' allo-ludicity can change the colours, sounds, the feel of the game environment, along with a character's sense of balance/footing in that world. Put another way, the allo-ludic might also be characterized as the overarching experience of ludic alterity: the gameworld becomes significantly less familiar, more othered. This is important because, at bottom, "play involves a close contact with alterity within a mutable system" (Piero, *Video Game Chronotopes* 99). Beyond drugs in games, the allo-ludic is a useful addition to Conway's framework for any games wherein play evokes a changefulness of sensation, sense, and what game designers call "game feel" (Anable 43–46).

While this article attends to US drug and gaming culture for the sake of scope, it is important to note that such issues regarding games and drugs span the globe and neither originate from nor centre around American culture. The games analyzed below hail from countries around the world, each game a product of its own culture(s) and each deserving of a separate analysis from that standpoint. These games developed abroad also, however, operate semiologically as cultural imports within a system of differences that constitutes US games and cultures; as such, the interpretive analysis rests not on selecting games developed only in the United States but instead on interpretations that trace how those games operate in the contexts

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[3] McKenzie Wark writes about *sensoria*, describing it as "a plurality of cultural, technical, and social forms of apparatus through which the world is known" (5). She later adds to her considerations of how we come to know the world: "Rather than attempt to cure misperception through reason, or unreason through sensation, perhaps it's a matter of mapping the borders of different bundles of reason and perception as they congeal together in particular ways of knowing" (Wark 5). The allo-ludic attempts precisely such a mapping in and across moments of gameplay wherein the rational rule and a sensory change mingle together to engender a changeful, threshold experience for players, one that is disorienting in its alterity.

of US cultures, histories, and norms that US players bring to the game, given their popularity and influence. It is also worth mentioning that prohibitive and inequitable US drug policy has shaped global drug policies and cultures throughout the 20th century in ways that would require much more space to address. Using this ludic framework alongside a cyborg politics, this essay proceeds to analyze some culturally and historically inflected instances of stimulants, depressants, and psychedelics in games. Due to spatial constraints, the other drug categories and more extensive examples and histories I attend to in my larger study of over 150 drugs in games going back to the 1970s must wait for a larger venue, categories including steroids, medical drugs, psychoactive compounds, and opiates. The games chosen for analysis here from that larger work were selected to illustrate the diversity of how games feature drugs in various ludic ways across genre, decade, studio size, and narrative themes. Similarly, franchises like *Saints Row*, which include large amounts of drugs and drug references (and the added complexity of parody), would require a much larger space and, frankly, deserve their own dedicated space of analysis. It would be easy to focus this analysis on, for example, three games with heavy drug content—it would be neater, perhaps more convincing, but such an approach would erase the messy, complex nature of drugs in games, which include but are not limited to Triple-A games with heavy drug content. Drugs also appear within indie games, queer games, and as brief moments in games that otherwise are "not about" drugs: this article makes space for such games in its turnt taxonomy. Here and now, a handful of illustrative examples are provided to establish (1) the relevance of studying drug cultures and histories in games, and (2) the usefulness of a cyborg-ludic approach to these histories.

2. Stimulants: The hyper-ludic drugs we all want to hit

One of the most familiar drug experiences in games involves stimulants: drugs that energize, strengthen, speed up, and intensify a character's abilities. Sometimes these in-game drugs are modelled and named after out-of-game drugs—such as tobacco in *L.A. Noire*, *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, *World of Warcraft*, or *Fujiwara Bittersweet*, to name a few—and at other times they occur as their own Franken-drug creations that blend out-of-game drug names, properties, and effects. For the purposes of this article, the class stimulants will be used to describe any in-game item or effect that increases strength, speed, endurance, combat abilities, or energy beyond the character's typical maximum performance. These uppers generally provide hyper-ludic effects for players, helping them defeat enemies, solve puzzles, or speed through a level. With that being said, stimulants in games inform a host of player experiences, including allo-ludic and hypo-ludic play or sometimes just NPCs consuming a drug in the background or in a cutscene. One of the earliest instances of a stimulant drug in a video game is *Pac-Man*, first re-

leased in 1980 on arcade machines. Without any direct drug references in the game, the veritable "power pellets" Pac-Man consumes fit the description of a stimulant drug: they make him faster, stronger, able to then pursue and consume the ghosts that have turned blue (in vertiginous fear), and able to clear the maze quicker. The power pellets or "energizers" as they are sometimes called result in drug-like, hyper-ludic effects for the player. As previously mentioned, they are also intensely allo-ludic insofar as (1) the music changes to a quickened pace, (2) the pursuing ghosts become the pursued, (3) the ghosts (Blinky, Pinky, Inky, and Clyde, all of whom have slightly different AI movements) turn blue with a frightened, anxious expression, and (4) Pac-Man changes speed and turns into the aggressor in a game wherein he otherwise spends his time fleeing the ghosts. As such, the stimulating power pellets radically change the game environment, characters, and temporality, and the play is inverted and energized.

Even more explicitly, the 1984 DOS text adventure game *Drug Wars* specifically speaks to the geopolitical drug conflicts occurring routinely in the 1980s after two decades of "war on drugs" policies crafted by US President Richard Nixon's administration and then intensified during the Ronald Reagan presidency.[4] The 1980s see the mainstream use of both video games and so-called "hard" recreational drugs, especially cocaine (powder and "crack" versions) and heroin along with cannabis. Reckless politicians and journalists at the time proffered racialized (and racist) narratives to the public about the evils of crack cocaine that demonized Black cocaine users and communities. This coverage often coincided with articles and segments decrying the scourge of powder cocaine corrupting "innocent" white, suburban youth, creating a cocaine–crack opposition in the public mind that became a long-lived trope of racist drug discourse in America. Making precisely such a division, after all, was the intent behind the "war on drugs" at its onset. From its earliest incarnations, Nixon designed this legal and enforcement framework to punish, demonize, and marginalize Black bodies, voices, and communities. As detailed in Antony Loewenstein's analysis, Nixon's lead domestic policy advisor, John Ehrlichman, made their intentions clear:

> The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the anti-war left and black people … You understand what I'm saying? We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or blacks, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities, we could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did. (qtd. in Loewenstein 2)

It is no surprise then that a game like *Drug Wars* and its representations of cocaine and speed, in particular, would kick off a series of games featuring similar drug use, from *Payday 2* and drug dealer/empire games like *Meth Master* and

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4 The "war on drugs" will be kept lowercase and in scare quotes throughout to signal its illegitimacy as, in fact, a war on drugs.

Cocaine Dealer to games like *The Adventures of Crackhead Jack*. Drugs in video games are never simply drugs; they are always vehicles for dominant cultural values, ideologies, assumptions, and norms, which players bring to the game and which are encoded—to use Stuart Hall's term (484)—in the game itself through its creative and technical development. As Paul Manning has written in his landmark study of drugs in popular new media forms, "practices of intoxication are embedded within popular culture", which is always representing it and "associating it with other dimensions of social reality" (13). In *Drug Wars*, the New York "inner city" gets painted as a crime- and drug-laden landscape, one that fits the various moral-panic models of understanding public response to drugs, first set out by Stan Cohen in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* in 1972 (Manning 26). The destructive, racist narratives of "crack heads" as the new folk devils making "our" communities unsafe took hold in the 1970s, growing throughout the 1980s and 1990s. As Manning points out, this "cocaine narrative" dovetails nicely with Reaganonmics, shrinking the welfare state, and ramping up enforcement and imprisonment campaigns (26–27). The flight of white, middle-class residents of the southern neighbourhoods of the Bronx between the 1930s and the 1950s—such "white flights" occurring across the United States throughout the 20th century, buttressed by garden-variety racist narratives—was encouraged, in part, by these narratives of drug dangers in cities, especially communities of colour. While *Drug Wars* is about building a drug-dealing empire, the game moves players into virtual, racialized slums wherein players play poverty, as Adam Crowley has astutely analyzed (76–79), often through drug play.

Given their topological character, video games sometimes reproduce these damaging stereotypes and at other times resist them. In *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, for instance, the stimulant drink Skooma is associated with the racially inscribed and maligned Khajiit, an indigenous race of Tamriel, stereotyped as being thieves and known for their cultivation of moon sugar, which distils into the narcotic drink. In *World of Warcraft*, a luxury-grade brand of tobacco called Grimm's Premium Tobacco is said to be "a delicacy enjoyed by every single person of importance that visited Stratholme", including King Terenas, Uther the Lightbringer, and Highlord Fordring (Wowhead). A stimulant drug that has been similarly devastating to public health, Indigenous communities, and poor communities, tobacco nevertheless is often accompanied in media by cultural values such as luxury, seduction, work ethic, and other values not associated with fear, criminality, or illness. In other games, stimulants are not as much racially coded as they are simply added for their hyper-ludic effects. In *EVE Online*, "medical boosters" often have stimulating effects when consumed, such as increasing the range, speed, or radius of certain attacks. In *The Binding of Isaac*, popping pills is compulsory, and a full range of hyper-, contra-, and allo-ludic effects occur depending on which randomly generated pills appear in each basement. Like most drugs in games, the ludic effects take precedence over stopping to consider the cultural and ethical implications of such virtual highs.

3. Depressants: Live in your world, drink in ours

While many ludic drugs engender hyper-ludicity to boost speed, performance, and strength, depressants tend to operate more contra-ludically, but again, the ludic effects of drugs, unlike many other non-drug game items, can span the ludic spectrum even within one drug item; hence, why a flexible, "turnt" taxonomy is needed. Among "downers" in games, alcohol reigns supreme as being the most prevalent depressant in games based on my working review of drugs across game genres. Furthermore, the simulation of drinking is ubiquitous enough to merit its own content warning categories from the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB). Under the "Substances" Content Descriptor on ESRB's website, only six categories are listed: Alcohol Reference, Use of Alcohol, Tobacco Reference, Use of Tobacco, Drug Reference, Use of Drugs. In the world of gaming self-regulation, it would seem that the demarcation of drugs lies mostly on two legal categories that are restricted to minors in the United States and then a catch-all category that makes no discrimination between a puff of pot and shooting up heroin within a game. This emphasis on naming, labelling, assessing, and regulating alcohol and tobacco references in games makes sense given that the ESRB was established in 1994 around the time when high-school tobacco smoking and underage drinking were at their peak according to the National Youth Risk Behavior Survey started in 1991 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Trends", "Youth Risk Behavior"). While both of these trends have been declining during the ensuing decades, newer drugs and vaping continue to be popular among teenagers and young adults. ESRB substance categories, however, remain the same, which is not surprising given that the ESRB "was founded by and inherently reflects the creative and economic interests of the game industry" (Ruggill and McAllister 79–80).

With scant references to sedatives, such as benzodiazepines (e.g., Xanax), Kava, GHB, and barbiturates—the benzo-like sedative Pentazemin in the *Metal Gear Solid* franchise is one exception, having originally been called Diazepam—alcohol is clearly the dominant depressant within video games. More often than not though, games feature alcohol in cutscenes, as part of the virtual world's background, as in-game quest/mission objects, as a consumable or a mechanic, in game narratives, and sometimes as the primary theme of a game. In other words, the use–reference dichotomy used by the industry to classify alcohol use in its games falls far short of reflecting the actual ways that alcohol is presented to and experienced by players. Alcohol abuse and alcoholism are known to be devastating for individuals, families, communities, and public health, and while drinking rates are down among younger generations—despite a rise in alcohol use and alcohol-related deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism)—the longstanding, go-to drug for intoxication in the United States continues to wield a great deal of economic power in the country as a nearly $2 tril-

lion market, with beer leading the sales. Beer-themed video games, like the drunk zombie first-person shooter (FPS) *Zombeer* and the *Diner Dash*-esque *Beer Bar*, then, should come as no surprise. These bartender games are by no means new, as one might recall Bally Midway's 1983 arcade game sponsored by Anheuser-Busch, *Tapper*, where the player must serve patrons beer from the tap at increasingly fast paces amidst Budweiser ads aplenty. These arcade games were mostly destined for US bars, though the following year saw the release of *Root Beer Tapper*, a sanitized version sold to "family friendly" arcades; the game was rebooted by Square One Studios with their 2011 mobile release of *Tapper World Tour*.

While not much attention has been given to drugs in video games, alcohol use has drawn the eye of a few scholars. In the sole mention of video games in his *Drugs and Popular Culture*, Manning mentions *World of Warcraft* as a virtual world that stages alcohol and intoxication, citing Gabriel Thorens et al.'s study of alcohol use within the game (Manning 137; Thorens et al.). *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*)—an incredibly successful medieval-themed fantasy online RPG—features inns wherein one can buy and consume drinks, which cause the player's view to become tipsy and dizzying, and any number of holiday feasts, festivals, quests, and items that make reference to or involve consuming alcohol. For example, the quest "The Perfect Stout" requires players to collect six Shimmerweed for a local brewer, Rejold Barleybrew, who wants to appropriate this herb used by Frostmane trolls in—according to Barleybrew—their "strange, tribal rituals", a common *WoW* theme of colonialist demonization of the "savage" Other.[5] The systemic domination of colonizers intersects with systems of gender oppression through the privilege afforded to hegemonic masculinity. The drinking games in *WoW* represent out-of-game drinking games in which intoxication often results in the performance of hypermasculinity in social settings, often to the exclusion and even abuse of women. In mapping out "the consequences of the typology of contra-, hypo-, and hyperludicity", Marc Ouellette directly connects these ludic states to "proving masculinity, losing masculinity, and enhancing masculinity" (211–12). A man who can "hold his liquor" despite the contra-ludic effects—including to sexual performance—proves himself; similarly, games often position players in roles of proving themselves worthy of hyper-ludic rewards and progress.

Other video games invent pasts and futures whereby some mix of US history and fiction govern alcohol's use and representation, all the more true given the intersecting relationship between fiction and history (White 23). *L.A. Noire*'s detective-style crime game set in a *film noir* Hollywood style imagines 1947 Los Angeles through the lens of young, white police officers bent on fighting crime and advancing careers. Setting aside for the moment the game's far-reaching narra-

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5   The Troll race is coded most explicitly, according to Jessica Langer, as "black Caribbeans … in terms of accent and appearance … with Jamaican voice actors perform[ing] the Troll accent" (91).

tives surrounding opiates, war, veteran's health, and PTSD, it is worth mentioning here that drinking is a prominent part of this game's setting, which simultaneously pays homage to a genre convention within *film noir* and hard-boiled crime fiction while also encoding cultures of drinking and intoxication in the United States (and across the globe). One murder the player must investigate occurs inside Levine's Liquor Store; detectives attend to crimes and suspects hiding out in local bars; and for one case, the player picks up and inspects a beer bottle for clues. NPCs in the game can be seen drinking, and alcohol can be found in the homes of suspects. In this virtual post-World War II Los Angeles, drugs are often coded in racial and class terms with low-level drug dealers of colour demonized, while wealthy, often white, and well-connected drug lords emerge unscathed. Similarly in *Disco Elysium*, another murder-mystery detective game, alcohol in this dystopian world can be purchased legally at the Frittte kiosk and when consumed increases the player's Physique while lowering Morale. Drugs are so common within the game that some players have opted to do sober runs without the use of any hyper-ludic effects from those drugs. Drugs in the game are usually both hyper- and contra-ludic, which is true to the nature of the *pharmakon*, which in Greek meant both poison and remedy (Piero, *Video Game Chronotopes* 147–49; Derrida 70). Even more interesting is the rhetorical purchase of such a mechanic and how players have responded to it: in a game in which consuming drugs is the norm (even if not required by the game), a sober run becomes a kind of subversive play, one that indicates that playing sober—that is, without the hyper-ludic effects offered by the game—is considered the more difficult route. By giving players the genuine option of whether or not to use drugs in the game, *Disco Elysium* also increases its replay value, an important consideration for games in "the cultural economy of repetition" enabled by how games stage temporality (Hanson 113–21).

And then there are games like *BANG! BANG! Totally Accurate Redneck Simulator*, wherein alcohol and intoxication are a given, and beer bottles alone offer context for the main character's behaviour, the Meta Quest VR game *Galactic Bar Fight* that involves hyper-ludic drinks set within an interstellar bar, and the VR game *Drunken Bar Fight*, which is mostly what it sounds like. *Sea of Thieves* likewise offers tankards of grog for consumption and aesthetic effects; overindulge in one's drink, and characters become dizzyingly drunk and vomit all over other characters and the player's screen. Minor NPCs like Nurse Witless in *Alice: Madness Returns* are portrayed as having severe alcohol use disorder, always in search of that next drink. In the mobile game *Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp*, for instance, players can craft "Vacation Juice" with five Natural Essence, twenty Preserves, one Sparkle Stone, and a few other items, the final product resembling a fruity, tropical cocktail even though no mention of alcohol is made. Many players, it would seem, are "in" on the joke, since recipes exist for an actual rum-based drink based on the game's Vacation Juice (Experience Bar). These examples show just how ubiquitous virtual depressants are in games.

Video games can also stage alcohol and drugs in ways that foreground marginalized histories of drug prohibition often erased from more dominant public histories. Mo Cohen's *Bottoms Up: A Historic Gay Bar Tycoon*, for example, positions the player as proprietor of a queer speakeasy during Prohibition, navigating alcohol prohibition, police raids, and at times belligerent customers. Similarly, Cohen's *Queertastrophe* is a browser game wherein the player serves drinks to various queer "hotties" while avoiding one's ex-partners. NPCs with drinks are signalled by flashing hearts to help the player remember who has already been served a drink.[6] In many histories of drugs and alcohol, queer experiences are often omitted or otherwise straightwashed by historians and journalists, such as the thriving drag scene in New York City in the 1920s, especially in Greenwich Village. While drag performances in NYC date back at least to the Harlem masquerade balls of the 1860s, the criminalization of alcohol during Prohibition dovetailed with the ongoing oppression and criminalization of queer lives in the city (and across the United States). This created a scenario whereby some mob-run speakeasies that flouted the law became a home to drag shows and contests attracting thousands of people across racial and class lines, an important history at a time when drag shows, trans youth and adults, and LGBTQ+ communities are increasingly vilified, attacked, and criminalized by US laws, Republican rhetorics, and radical evangelical Christian nationalism (Piero, "A Far Cry from Greatness"). Video games offer designers the ability to engage the nuances of complex drug histories, and they offer scholars the space to unpack those histories with an eye towards contemporary social justice.

4. Psychedelics: Old traditions and new frontiers

Psychedelics appear throughout video games in colourful, musically imbued, and hallucinogenic ways. Consumed by ingestion (often as magic mushrooms or some potion), injection, or pill, psychedelics often function allo-ludically to change the sensory experience of the game, including transporting players via hallucination to different places in space and time. More so than other drugs in games, psychedelics play with player perception and "defamiliarize" the gameworld as well as the aesthetic feel of the game (Shklovsky 11–12). Sometimes, as in *Super Mario Bros.*, consuming a psychedelic mushroom will simply cause the player to grow in size, whereas other psychedelic drugs—like the hallucinogenic "Bliss" in *Far Cry 5*—effect visual, haptic, auditory, and movement changes for the player. At a time when individuals, start-up companies, research institutions, and speculative investors are profiting heavily from psychedelic medical research and commodification of drugs like *psilocybe* mushrooms, peyote, ketamine, LSD, DMT, and

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[6] I am indebted to Bo Ruberg for their excellent book *The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LGBTQ Game Makers Are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games* and appendix of LGBTQ+ indie games, where I first discovered *Bottoms Up* and *Queertastrophe*.

others, Indigenous communities that have used these drugs for ages in ceremonial and medicinal contexts are mostly left out of the experience, business, and wealth generated by these endeavours, as Keith Williams et al. have recently discussed. The authors, paraphrasing Walter Mignolo's research, have rightfully taken issue with the "Imperialist baggage" of framing this upsurge in psychedelic interest as a "renaissance" given how the European Renaissance's creativity and economic growth were fuelled by "the riches plundered from the so-called Third World and what are now the contemporary settler states of Canada, the United States, Mexico, New Zealand, and Australia" (Williams et al. 508). Video games have historically appropriated psychedelic drugs and mechanics to contribute to game narratives, player disorientation, and various other allo-ludic effects, though such uses are often plucked from their Indigenous, spiritual, religious, and community contexts outside the game. In so doing, many video games further the ongoing erasure of Indigenous cultures occurring outside the game, something that occurs as much through video-game timespace itself as through specific elements and objects, like psychedelic experiences.

The *Far Cry* franchise, for example, often uses psychedelics in its games. In *Far Cry 3*, players retrieve magic mushrooms for a doctor who wants to create a medicine from them in the mission "Mushrooms in the Deep". Upon finding the mushrooms, the player experiences disorienting and psychedelic effects from picking the mushrooms—perhaps from some kind of mushroom cloud of spores they are giving off—making exclamations such as "This is new". Upon returning the mushrooms, players earn the "Magic Mushrooms" achievement. Dr. Alex Earnhardt, a white inhabitant of the game's archipelago setting—Rook Island—uses his Oxford education to produce and sell drugs to local pirates. In line with other games featuring the chronotope of the archipelago, white, Western scientific knowledge can be—though by no means has to be—used to "reinscribe reactionary, colonialist habits of thought and player decisions" (Piero, *Video Game Chronotopes* 120). In *Far Cry 4*, Yogi and Reggie stab the player with a needle containing a psychedelic drug without their consent. The assault makes the environment more colourful and engenders some metaphysical reflection, the player asking things like, "Who am I and where do I go in life?" The drug, therefore, is weaponized against the player. A similar situation occurs in *Far Cry 5* where one of the cult leaders—Faith Seed— uses a hallucinogenic drug, Bliss, as a weapon of mind control over the Project at Eden's Gate (PEG) cult members.

Outside the *Far Cry* franchise, psychedelics are used in a plurality of ways, from an Alice in Wonderland-like growth—as in consuming certain magic mushrooms in *Super Mario Bros.* or in *King's Quest*—or one's drink being spiked with ketamine as in *Grand Theft Auto V* to the implication of psychedelics based on rave culture, like in the indie game *Sewer Rave*, or even games centred around psychedelic experiences, like the 1998 PlayStation exploration game *LSD: Dream Emulator*. At other times, psychedelic drugs feature as in-game items associated with

specific missions, like peyote in *Grand Theft Auto V*, or otherwise used as performance-enhancing consumables like the hallucinogenic drug Drop in *EVE Online*. What is interesting for the purposes of this study is precisely how little Indigenous, religious, ceremonial, political, and historic contexts of psychedelic drug use are provided in these games, including the importance of psychedelics in 1960s and 1970s countercultural, anti-war movements.

5. Conclusion: Towards a "turnt" theory of drugs in games

While a more thorough accounting of drugs in games is needed alongside more specific, thorough close readings, this essay hopefully serves as a primer for that work. As I have tried to emphasize throughout, changeful and flexible methodologies work best to understand the complex, dynamic relations of in-game drugs to games, histories, and lived realities outside the game. With Haraway's cyborg ontology providing the philosophical foundation, Conway's theory of ludicity serves the study of drugs in games well, especially since some drugs—unlike many in-game items—cause some mixture of hyper-, contra-, hypo-, and allo-ludic effects. Beyond these items' effects within the gameworld though, the formal study of virtual drugs in games—their representations, narratives, absences, haptics, and mechanics—remains a significant area for exploration by game studies scholars working across disciplinary lines. This essay scratches the surface of a mycelium of intertextual references, mechanics, images, and narratives that communicate important cultural and social realities related to the consumption of drugs, whether for medicinal, recreational, or ceremonial use. In the United States, where a cultural drug revolution is well underway—with MDMA, psilocybin, peyote, ayahuasca, and ketamine legalization and regulation for medicinal use at the forefront—the cultural histories of these laws, enforcement, regulation, and social discourses are deeply entwined with social justice activism.

    With regard to American culture(s) specifically, where widespread intoxication abounds—illicit, legal, and physician-prescribed alike—social problems like racism, sexism, ableism, classism, and corporate greed penetrate discourses of drugs at every turn. Video games are a crucial site for investigating these social realities, crises, epidemics, and injustices if, that is, one is prepared to read and interpret, even playfully so, beyond the intention of the designer(s) or the ostensible unity of the game's ludic structure. Such readings—even queer readings of otherwise "straight"-forward ludic operation—are not as much about the "thing in itself" as they are about tracing the movement of meaning(s) players create within the larger systems and social contexts of their lives. Drugs in games communicate these complex cultural experiences and histories outside the vicissitudes of status quo production and consumption. Put another way, a high score can become a *high* score for player-readers who embrace contingency in their habits of play and

meaning-making. Such methods of play, interpretation, reading, and imaginative praxis, then, can take on an emancipatory character in their unstated commitment to dismantling totalizing, oppressive structures and discourses, even as they relate to prominent drug discourses inside and outside the gameworld.

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