

GDPO Situation Analysis

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Villainous, Alien, and Killable: Narrative and Regulatory Norms Surrounding Drug Users in Video Games¹

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Subject

Both regulations and depictions of drug use in gaming contribute to the suppression regime around drugs. Drug users and dealers are portrayed as violent, destabilising forces that are rightly met with violence. Regulators and creators contribute to the stigmatisation of drug users by encouraging drug use to be in the most of violent games. Taken together, this helps to legitimise the use of punitive and securitised measures against dealers especially.

In particular, this Situation Analysis will use Grand Theft Auto V (GTA V) as a case study as it encompasses many common trends, while also being the 3rd top-selling game of all time with over 85 million copies in circulation.³

¹ This Situation Analysis was produced as part of a GDPO collaboration with Central European University's School of Public Policy (see <http://gdpo.swan.ac.uk/?p=494> for more information)

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³ Grand Theft Auto V alone sold slightly less than Pokémon Red, Blue, Gold, Silver, Diamond, Pearl, Ruby, and Sapphire combined. It is only surpassed in sales by Minecraft and Tetris. Compared to other media, it beats the bestselling album of all time (Thriller, 47.3 million sales), the most-viewed World Series game (60 million viewers in 1986), and all of the Harry Potter books (The Chamber of Secrets is highest with 77 million sold).

Analysis

The war on drugs has rarely been fought exclusively by security and judicial establishments. In much of the West, social forces were mobilised against the supposedly moral terror of drug use. In the landscape of the 1970s to the 1990s, the war on drugs was fought heavily in the media. Superheroes fought drug dealers, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles told kids that ‘drug dealers are dorks’, and Pee-Wee Herman talked about crack-cocaine. Video games and video gamers grew up with the tag line ‘Winners Don’t Use Drugs’, while drug dealers were easy targets in games like NARC in the 1980s.

Recent AAA and AA⁴ console and computer gaming represents a massive, and fast-growing segment of global media consumption often overlooked by observers. It is worth noting, however, that purely mechanical drug use on the part of the player is often treated differently. This paper will primarily examine how the player interacts with drug users and drug dealers and how the industry treats the interactions.

Drug users are the Other

There are a lot of drug users in GTA, but there is one that handily encapsulates industry trends surrounding hard drug users: Trevor. One of GTA V’s three protagonists, Trevor is a ‘meth addict’. Trevor is also depicted as violent, unstable, psychopathic, bipolar, a criminal savant, and is an implied non-heterosexual rapist. The cocktail of being an ‘addict’, psychologically unstable, possessed of a near-alien intelligence, and an indiscriminate sexual predator makes Trevor as ‘othered’ as humanly possible. The general depiction of Trevor is closer to an alien, animal, or force of nature. He is even potentially killed at the end of the game at the hands of the player.

While Trevor is an extreme example, he is indicative of how gaming in general treats drug users and especially addicts. They are typically not characters whom the player is supposed to identify or sympathise with. Commonly, drug users are marked enemies, characterised as violent menaces outside and against society. The player is not asked to consider the humanity of drug users while slaughtering them en masse.

Marijuana usually does not count

There is, however, a significant difference with marijuana users. In GTA V, Franklin, another of the three protagonists, uses marijuana. Rather than being depicted as an ‘addict’, he is the most put-together, least violent, and most honourable of the protagonists. In fact, the depiction of marijuana in the game is treated as less destructive and less morally-damaging than alcohol. Another protagonist, Michael, is a rampant alcoholic, and his addiction is treated as more a sign of poor character than Franklin’s habits are. Franklin, or any other pot-smoker, is never characterized in the same way as Trevor. Marijuana is generally depicted as silly, making people at worst into comedy relief hippies or Rastafarians. This pattern is true throughout the rest of the GTA series, as well as gaming in general. However, there are usually deviations when it comes to marijuana dealers.

⁴ Refers to the size of the company. AAA includes the largest companies (EA, Activision-Blizzard, Ubisoft, etc), while AA is a less accepted term for medium-sized, non-indie companies (Paradox Interactive, Iceberg Interactive, Deep Silver, etc.).

Drug Dealer as Shorthand for Killable

There is a serious idea in gaming that drug dealing should be dealt with violently. In GTA for example, all of the protagonists are drug dealers. Most of the player characters are also openly violent. Police efforts to brutally subdue the dealer are not only depicted as entirely justified, but violence is literally the only way to stop the dealer in the GTA series. Even military intervention is depicted as justified to stop the drug-dealing player character. The same is true going the other direction. If the player-character meets a drug dealer, they will almost always have the option of killing them at some point. All of this is depicted as justified, cathartic, or heroic. In fact, the first several missions with Trevor in GTA V are spent violently murdering drug dealers.

Drugs in the Games Industry

Games, like all media, reflect and are reflected by those that consume it, and reflect and are reflected by the businesses that made it. In this case, the regulatory policy of business does a lot to reinforce these trends, while simultaneously reflecting global drug frameworks surprisingly closely.

A series of mobile games glorifying Philippine president Duterte murdering criminals or zombies serve as a telling example for many of the narratives and mechanical trends discussed previously. However, the specifics of this case are confusing and misleading as much of the violence against drug users and dealers was implied by killing zombies instead of humans. Furthermore, the controversy and eventual removal of these games from the Apple store does not reflect industry views on drugs or violence. Rather, it is an expression of a longstanding industry taboo against current events games (Syrian Civil War, Foxconn suicides, etc.).⁵ Stories relating to depictions of non-fiction drug use are rare and often controversial, not because of industry views on drug use, but due to other narrative, mechanical, or business norms.

Most of the real drug policy in the games industry comes in the form of video game ratings systems, the two largest and most important being the ESRB and PEGI systems. Both are industry led and have little government involvement but nevertheless try to follow government policy closely to avoid direct regulation.⁶

Both systems are not forgiving to drugs of any stripe. Any form of narcotic or synthetic drug, fictional or otherwise, immediately raises the age rating of the game. More than a passing mention of drugs is enough to raise the PEGI rating 16, and the ESRB rating to T for Teen.⁷ Positive depictions of drug use usually correlate to higher ratings, usually PEGI 18 or M for Mature. By making drug use less glamorous, content creators can often get their games classified under the most profitable PEGI 16 or T for Teen ratings. The ESRB even has directly stated guidelines about marketing anything that glamorises or even depicts illicit drug use.⁸ PEGI, meanwhile, will give a game their highest rating if drugs restore the player's health, as that constitutes encouragement of drug use by their standards.⁹ The jury is out on whether parents pay much attention to the rating system, especially in Europe, but the content standards send a clear message to creators: no drugs.

⁵ Lien, Tracey. 'The Apple Obstacle for Serious Games.' Polygon. June 21, 2013. Accessed May 06, 2018. <https://www.polygon.com/2013/6/21/4449770/the-apple-obstacle-for-serious-games>

⁶ Brownlee, John. 'Study finds game industry is self-regulating itself more effectively than film or music industries.' Geek.com. September 20, 2010. Accessed May 29, 2017. <https://www.geek.com/games/study-finds-game-industry-is-self-regulating-itself-more-effectively-than-film-or-music-industries-1285220/>

⁷ PEGI label and rating overview: <https://pegi.info/page/what-do-labels-mean>.

The ESRB's database of ratings. Reference or use of drugs never correlates below a 'T': <https://www.esrb.org/ratings/search.aspx>

⁸ ESRB. 'Principles and Guidelines for Responsible Advertising Practices.' Electronic Software Rating Board. Accessed May 29, 2017. https://www.esrb.org/ratings/principles_guidelines.aspx

⁹ Parentinfo.org. 'PEGI games ratings explained.' Parentinfo. 2014. Accessed May 15, 2018. <http://parentinfo.org/article/pegi-games-ratings-explained>

Given these rules, there is a clearly proscribed way to depict drug users in video games. The easiest way to avoid 'glamorising drug use' is to never let the player or any of their allies use drugs.¹⁰ The second easiest way is to have the villain, whom the player is usually supposed to kill, be the one using or selling the drugs. This is where content and regulation overlap. Giving games that feature drugs a higher rating forces them into a more violent category of game and gives designers the idea to 'really justify that M rating'. This means that violent games are more likely to have drugs, and games with drugs are more likely to have violence, since the game is not going to get less highly rated. In addition, games are not allowed to depict drugs as positives, even if the drug in question is a medicinal painkiller used as intended.

It is unclear whether this shift in ratings has a concrete effect on sales. Few games companies release sales figures for games that ship less than one million units. Most market research is currently either broadly estimated or locked behind paywalls.¹¹ Outdated and largely circumstantial evidence points to M and PEGI 18 ratings being potentially better selling, but the subject has not been thoroughly explored.¹²

Conclusion

The policies of the games industry and the government, as well as the international anti-drug framework, permeate games entertainment. Through both creators and regulators, suppression and stigmatisation of drugs is accomplished in a very tangible way. Governments may treat drug dealers with punitive measures; video games help legitimise this through play. Gamers, a massive and growing segment of the population, both learn these attitudes and participate in them through the simulation of games. By creating an atmosphere in which drugs are both met with violence and used by the violent, video games make the suppression regime fun.

¹¹ The main estimator is VG Chartz: <http://www.vgchartz.com/methodology.php>

The main market research group is NPD: <https://www.npd.com/wps/portal/npd/us/industry-expertise/video-games/>

¹² Kuchera, Ben. '2010: 5% of Games given M Rating, including 29% of Big Sellers.' Ars Technica. March 21, 2011. Accessed May 06, 2018. <https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2011/03/in-2010-5-percent-of-games-were-rated-m/>

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