Playing with Alcohol: A Drink Piece

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INTRODUCTION
Drinking games, games where alcohol consumed as part of the gameplay, have a long history. The earliest known drinking games are 2500 years old and date back to ancient Greece. Although ignored in game studies, research into drinking games have been conducted in diverse fields at least since the 1970s. Existing research has mostly been driven by problem-centered concerns and the ludic component of drinking games has received scarce scrutiny. We argue that bridging this divide can be beneficial for both sides.

DiGRA 2014 call for papers invites scholars to identify domains that have been overlooked or otherwise not given the care they deserve. For game studies the lessons from drinking games are timely: Drinking games embody some of the debated talking points within the game studies community. They nicely highlight the digital fallacy of game studies (Stenros & Waern 2010), promote the importance of material turn in the study of games (Apperley & Jayemane 2012), and call for elaborate theorizations of adult play and playfulness (Deterding 2013). Thus drinking games provide a fresh perspective on games and allow us to question, consider and reframe some underlying assumptions and blind spots of games research.

The proposed paper will be a think piece, or, referees willing, a drink piece. It will start with a short review of existing research on drinking games. We shall exhibit findings from the existing literature and contemplate their connections and contribution to the canon of game studies, identify foundational works that resonate with contemporary games studies (such as Douglas 1987, Green & Grider 1990), and look for works that, when approached through ludology, yield new insights. For example, according to Borsari (2004) drinking game research can be roughly divided to: (a) qualitative studies that explicate the different types of drinking games and the reasons for playing them, (b) quantitative studies that focus on the amount of alcohol consumed, the consequences of drinking games, motives for playing and interpersonal differences, and (c) precautionary recommendations to educate potential players, almost always college students, about the risks of drinking games. Furthermore, we attempt to identify what is missing in the existing literature and explain why this study is needed.

The core of the paper is made up of three interconnected arguments regarding the concepts of playing, player and game when analyzed through the prism of drinking games.
The first relates to the social function of playing. Are drinking games played for their own sake, and if not, can they be discussed as instrumentalization of games or as gamification of drinking? What is the function of a game in a drinking situation, and how does this playful instrumentalization of gaming compare to adaptations of games for external purposes? Furthermore, as drinking and drinking games are expressions of culture, what kind of drinking games are found in contemporary digital gaming cultures? Are ‘party games’ (e.g. SingStar and DDR) a euphemism for drinking games?

Second, drinking games are a particularly interesting example of modding as basically any game can easily be turned into a drinking game. They are inherently social, and the rules are constantly negotiated. More importantly, they are a concrete example of games that mod the player and highlight how all play is essentially about being played (cf. Gadamer 1979, Aarseth 2007). The player is altered due to playing, and the more you play on a given session, the worse you will become (Green & Grider 1990). What are the implications of this for the theorizations of game experience and game design? If there are games for drunk players, are there also games for modified players of different sorts?

Third, we consider if drinking games really are games, and if so, what does that tell us about games. It certainly is possible to describe the systemic essence of drinking games, but, ultimately, that might not be the most fruitful way to capture them. Approaching them as social play renders them as an interesting example of adult play. This approach de-emphasizes the rules and places playfulness, social negotiation and trust at the core. Furthermore, the connection of alcohol to play and creativity is rarely addressed in the literature (for a rare example, see Bateson & Martin 2013).

Studying drinking games is frivolous and playful – both quantities that game studies needs to be reminded of as studying digital games has become useful and proper. This paper is a detour to a silly place, one that offers a vantage point that questions some of the categories and boundaries we have set up for ourselves.

BIBLIOGRAPHY