Gaining Advantage: How Videogame Players Define and Negotiate Cheating

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses players' uses of supplemental items during gameplay, how they define what is and is not "cheating" in reference to these items, and then, what actions they ultimately take in accordance with their beliefs and reasoning. To do that, an analysis of the results of in-depth interviews with 24 game players and an open-ended survey of an additional 50 players is conducted to determine their views on how they define cheating in games, including which elements they see as cheating, those they don't, and why they draw the line where they do. Likewise the paper explores what activities they then engage in, and their reasons for various cheating behaviors. By doing so, this paper offers a more detailed exploration of how gameplay is experienced by some players, and what is involved in that gameplay, in terms of use or rejection of supplemental items and information.

Keywords
Cheating, cheats, walkthroughs, codes, players, rules

INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to cheat in a videogame? Scholars are beginning to study this question. Reynolds has explored the ethical systems related to cheating behaviors [9], while Foo [3] and Foo & Koivisto [4] have investigated griefplay. Kuecklich [6] has developed a typology of cheats, and believes that "the study of cheats foregrounds the fact that games are embedded into a larger social and cultural context with undeniable links to the world we inhabit" [p. 9]. This paper adds to the knowledge we have about cheating, by going to the players themselves. It asks how players define cheating in their own gameplay, and how they make sense of the activity, for themselves and in the wider gaming universe. Their practices suggest that cheating cannot be considered in the abstract, but instead must be conceptualized as a constitutive element of all gameplay.
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Notes on method

As part of a larger project, I conducted in-depth interviews with 24 self-identified game players ranging in ages from 14-41. Of that group, 11 were girls and women. I also conducted an open-ended survey of 50 game players ranging in age from 19-32, who were part of a college-level course on digital games and culture. All subjects from both samples were active game players. Interviewees were recruited through a snowball sampling method. Initial interviews were with university students that responded to a call for gamers; others were recruited through gamer web sites. All respondents have been assigned pseudonyms. Interviews and surveys were conducted between May 2001 and May 2004.

DEFINITIONS: CHEATING GIVES AN "UNFAIR ADVANTAGE"

Running throughout all responses was the feeling that cheating creates an unfair advantage for the cheater. Although many times this advantage was in relation to another player in a multiplayer game, it was also mentioned in regards to single-player games. Cheating was more than just *breaking* a rule or law—it was also those instances of bending rules, or "re-interpreting" rules to the players' advantage. The three categories that follow should be thought of as lying on a continuum, as players often had an exception or two for different situations.

Anything except my own thoughts

At one end of the continuum exists the purist. This player would take the position that anything other than a solo effort is cheating. This group sees strategy guides, walkthroughs, cheat codes, and hacking as all being cheating. For example, one player states that "using information from a site, purchased guide or telephone hotline in order to get round a problem, kill an enemy, solve a riddle, gain a skill or something like that—without having at least tried to solve the issue yourself—is cheating" (Hope, 30).

Why would a player be concerned with seeing guides and walkthroughs as wrong? Aarseth's formulation of gaming's "aporia-epiphany" structure is helpful. Aarseth explains that in spaces like adventure games, there often arise "aporias" or gaps that are "local and tangible, usually … concrete, localized puzzle[s] whose solution eludes us" [1, p. 124]. We must search for a solution to a puzzle to move past the aporia. The moment when we grasp the logic of the puzzle is our epiphany. "This is the sudden revelation that replaces the aporia, a seeming detail with an unexpected, salvaging effect: the link out" [p. 91].

The key is the emotional "aha!" moment, when you either realize that you overlooked an important clue, or you have painstakingly solved a difficult problem. The use of guides and walkthroughs reduces or eliminates satisfaction. The player is, essentially, looking up the epiphany in a book. While players themselves admit that such use is acceptable to salvage a failing game, they reject the over-use of such items in the first game round as cheating. They may be objecting to being cheated out of the epiphany, or the emotional gratification of the epiphany. While they are not breaking any rules, an essential aspect of the gameplay—excitement—is reduced further with each glance through the guide.[1]

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[1] Often times, even the guides themselves advise players to use them sparingly, in order to not spoil the excitement of figuring things on their own. One of the guides to *Myst* at gamefaqs.com admonishes players to try and play through the game without consulting the more detailed

Code is law

A second group doesn't see the use of items like walkthroughs and guides as cheating, but does draw the line at cheat codes and hacking the game code. Here also people accept the possibility of cheating in single-player games, where the manipulation of code for its own sake can be enough to draw the line.

Players do make distinctions between using codes that have been created by game developers, and code that players design to hack or alter the game code. Yet for this group, use of both amounts to the same thing: cheating. There is an echo here of the danger of "epiphany loss" mentioned with the first group—one player mentioned that use of codes to win a fighting game would be a "hollow win" (Sally, 24). The difference here was in the level of interference with the game—a player would have to actively alter the game rules, break the rules, in order to gain the advantage.

For this group, as for Lessig, code is law [8]. Players acknowledge that items such as cheat codes are readily available, but the alteration of game code is their key for what is "cheating." The lines are drawn to reflect the game itself, and place peripheral elements like walkthroughs as within an acceptable zone—they don't alter code. Actively hacking game code is a clear rule breakage, and the use of codes, and items such as GameSharks is deemed unacceptable. Code equals law.

You can only cheat another player

A third group of players defined cheating as only existing in relation to another player. These players aligned with Bowyer, who states: "to cheat … indicated that there was another world, the world of deception, in which people did not play the game, your game, but their own" [2, pp. 300-301].

One person described cheating as involving "… wrongdoing. Someone has to be worse off because someone else took unfair advantage. … You can only cheat another person" (Ralph, 24). It is also implied here that the cheater is using hacks or other "enhancements" and hiding their advantage. This should be distinguished from groups of players that, for example, all agree to play a game where "PK-ing" is allowed—in that situation, killing a fellow character would not be cheating, but playing on a server where it is banned, would be.

For this group, cheating is social (or anti-social) by definition. Cheating means the introduction of deception and possible chaos into the game world. Eventually, cheating (or its rumor) can lead to the breakdown of games—such as *Diablo* and *Speed Devils Online Racing* [7].

For this group, code is also the key to cheating, but it is not the mere use of code, but its use for the purpose of deceiving others. The bounds of Huizinga's magic circle have been hacked, yet only the cheater can perceive the change [5].

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walkthrough, unless the player is absolutely stuck. Additionally, the commercial strategy guide for the Nintendo game *Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* actually seals the information about the final battle and end of the game in a separate envelope at the end of the guide.

CHEATING AS A DAILY PRACTICE

Although players have definite ideas about what does and does not constitute cheating, most of them engage in the practice on a regular basis. However, they usually feel the need to justify their actions, given the generally negative connotations associated with the term cheating. Even in single player games, the activity of cheating is often justified –games are too difficult, or there is fun in playing god. When examined systematically, player reasons for cheating fell into four categories, described next.

Because I was stuck

The most cited reason that players offer for cheating in games is *getting stuck*. That failure happens because either the player or the game does not 'measure up' in some way relative to the other. These situations occur with great frequency, in both heavy and more moderate game players. Individual players run up against roadblocks to their playing in many instances, which can include unsolvable puzzles, unbeatable enemies, and game bugs, among other things.

Virtually every player I have talked with will use some form of help or cheat to get unstuck, whether they define it as cheating or not. Such actions are perfectly rational, as without the help, it is unlikely that gameplay could even continue—the game is instead put aside in frustration and anger.

Yet even as players know that they are trying to salvage some fun out of the game, and have no intentions of 'further' cheating, they often justify their actions. For example, Mona explains:

> If I'm stuck on a level and just cannot figure out what to do next, I'll look at the walkthrough for just that part, but not for the whole game. In that way, I can get on with the game, but I haven't spoiled all of it. (Mona, 32)

Players may be justifying their behavior because cheating has a negative connotation. Additionally, game pleasure comes from achievements, and when achievements come from consulting a guide or using a code—rather than the players' own creativity or skill—the pleasure is hollow.

These justifications suggest that when players cheat to get unstuck, they are performing an instrumental action relative to gameplay. Codes, and hints are tools that the player employs to restart a game that they cannot play—either because their skill level does not equal the games' imagined audience, or because of faulty game design. It is not about extending the game or enhancing it, but about re-entering the game. Here, cheats are the 'key' that allows players back into the game and give back the possibility of pleasure.

It's fun to play God

> "I have cheated on certain occasions in some offline shooter-type games, simply to make the game more enjoyable and long lasting." (Drew, 27).

Other players report cheating for the pleasures it can bring. For the most part, this group referred

specifically to playing either single-player games, or being in situations with friends where cheating was condoned (raising the question of whether this would actually be cheating).

Here, contrary to the player using a cheat to get back into the game, a cheat is used to bring even more pleasure to an already pleasurable experience. The player may have already completed and beaten the game once, or is curious about secrets or options within the game. Players are often invested in getting a complete gameplay experience, and for many of them, that includes doing 'everything' possible in a game.

In such situations, players may or may not see such activities as cheating. For those that do, they are careful to stress that they only do such things after they have beaten the game once already. For example, Tom explains that

> "The help that I use is usually unlimited weapons; no damage; sniper-fire for all guns. I cheat so I can go back and have fun [but] … only when I have already beaten the game and started over with codes." (Tom, 21).

Enjoyment can also be tied to completion or deeper knowledge of a particular game. Gamers are aware of the extras in games, and are intent on experiencing as much of that content as possible.

In this instance, cheating is not the instrumental action that it is when a player is stuck—it is more ludic. Cheats here are a playful expression for the player, who is intent on staying within a certain pleasurable frame of mind. For those that do consider it cheating, certain obligations must be met—such as finishing the game first on their own. At that point, the player can turn to such actions. For those that don't consider it cheating, it is pure pleasure.

Hitting fast forward

As Kuecklich explains, some cheats allow players to speed up game narratives, and involve a "condensation of space" [6, p. 4]. Such cheats can take different forms, depending on the type of game being played—adventure gamers may consult a walkthrough to learn how to solve a puzzle, while FPS gamers might obtain a code for unlimited ammo and clear levels more quickly. The player is moving through the game at a higher speed than they would "on their own."

Some players mentioned using codes or walkthroughs to 'get through a game as quickly as possible.' If a game had a particularly involved story, it was often mentioned as the catalyst:

> "I could have figured it out, but I was in a hurry to get to the end. I wanted to see what was going on, what was coming next." (Harmony, 28).

As many RPGs can require 50+ hours for completion, its no surprise that some players would want to finish without investing more than a typical workweek. Such practices do speak to the desire of some players for engrossing but shorter games. Here, codes and hints can be fruitfully employed by the savvy gamer to tailor the gaming experience to their own time frame.

In counterpoint to wanting to witness story resolution, other players simply felt the need for closure with the game, which had failed to keep their interest. The instrumental nature of this

cheat allows the gamer to move on to different games that offer greater promise of pleasure. They may also, in the case of those wishing to complete a story, allow pleasure in the knowledge of the story ending, if not in the actual gameplay.

Being an ass

Finally, there's the person that most of us think of when we envision cheating. This player cheats to gain advantage over other players.

"Sometimes I just feel like being a jerk online and will use cheat programs." (Tim, 32)

"I cheated in *Diablo 2* online and I had to agree not to cheat before I started playing. … I like to have any possible advantage when playing a game online against people that do not necessarily want to play fair with me." (Pete, 22).

Multiplayer cheating was the smallest category for cheating behaviors. Several players admitted to doing such things as using aimbots and hacking game code for the fun of distressing other players. Others pointed to an already cheat-filled situation, and claimed that their own cheating was only to level the playing field. Finally, one player mentioned his prowess in gaming, and declared that superior players had earned the "right" to cheat.

Such players often see themselves as elite gamers that have already surpassed the challenges offered by a game, and so turn to gaming the game itself. And for them, it makes sense disdain lesser-skilled players that attempt the same hacks. As Derek explains,

"If a person knows how to play the videogame, if they've proven time and time again that there aren't many games that … they can't beat then I have no problem with cheating. It's the people who don't know videogames and then they decide they want to cheat so they can run off and play people that are way bigger than them and kill them. … I mean [if] you don't have any actual ability within the game you shouldn't in a way be privy to that knowledge of how to soup your guy up." (Derek, 21).

Such players engage in their activities as a way to cause trouble or disturb other players. Cheating only in order to 'be a jerk' or 'an ass' focuses on the reactions of other players, and may not be tied to actual self-advancement. While players may be breaking or bending rules, they aren't necessarily better off afterwards. Such types of behavior can be categorized as what Foo and others have termed "griefplay" [3, 4].

While griefplay is a good categorization, we can go deeper in analyzing such actions. For example, it may or may not be coincidence that all these admitted cheaters were male. Although this of multiplayer cheaters is small, other sources confirm that the majority of such cheaters are male [Tony Ray, personal communication]. Given that demographic, we could see such activities as enacting a specific form of dominating or aggressive masculinity. Much like hackers, who are mostly male, such cheaters are using the logics of code to demonstrate superiority over certain other players. For some, this may be less confrontational and be through the achievement of wealth by deception of others (as a recent scam on *Eve Online* demonstrates), or it may be through actively defeating others in gameplay, through illegally (or unethically) acquired skills or items.

This area needs more data before larger conclusions can be drawn. However, it is fairly safe to say that the vast majority of game players consider 'the cheater' as beyond the bounds of fair play—often cheaters acknowledge this themselves. Yet, where the line between the 'full on' cheater ends and other activities begin is a blurred line that most players dynamically negotiate.

CONCLUSIONS

There is no one single reason that people will cheat in games. After talking with interviewees, game developers, those working in peripheral industries, and monitoring discussion boards for many games over a period of several years, it is apparent that there are multiple reasons for player cheating which are not mutually exclusive. Further, these reasons can change for individual players in different situations, on different days, and in different games. Perhaps the only constant is the lack of a constant factor.

That's because cheating isn't just about subverting the (game) system—it's also about augmenting the system. It's a way for individuals to keep playing through boredom, through difficulty, through limited scenarios, and through rough patches or just bad games.

Cheating, or however these activities might be differently defined, constitutes players asserting agency, taking control of their game experience. It is players going beyond the 'expected' activity' in the game. Knowledge of how, when, and why people cheat (or refuse to) is essential in helping us better understand the gameplay experience.

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