

Illegitimate Practices as Legitimate Participation: Game Cheat Sites in a Teen Virtual World

Deborah A. Fields & Yasmin B. Kafai
University of California, Los Angeles, 2128 Moore Hall
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1521
stareyes@gmail.com kafai@gseis.ucla.edu

Abstract: Much research has described the various practices of gaining access and participation in multi-user game communities. Cheat websites that are a prominent part of the game culture and industry have been debated because of their illegitimate nature but received little attention in terms of their educational value. In this paper we analyze the cheat sites created by players for a teen virtual world called Whyville.net, which encourages youth ages 8-16 to participate in a range of social activities and play casual science games. Analysis of a sample of 257 cheat sites resulted in typologies for both the cheats and sites in terms of quality and quantity of science content. A case study of an especially active cheat site and analysis of player-written articles in Whyville's newspaper illuminate the illegitimate and legitimate aspects of cheating in this virtual world. Implications of these findings as cultural artifacts of the game community and as guides for designing informal online learning activities are discussed.

The phenomenon of cheating is gaining increasing traction in discussions of gaming practices in multi-user virtual environments (MUVES). The debate whether cheats are illegitimate has largely been influenced by industry practices to publish short cuts in their magazines, thus legitimizing the dissemination. Even among players there are no clear standards on what counts as cheating and what the repercussions are. According to Mia Consalvo (in press) cheating provides players with *gaming capital*, which can be defined in this context as "being knowledgeable about game releases and secrets, and passing that information on to others. It's having opinions about which game magazines are better and the best sites for walkthrough on the Internet". One aspect of cheating that has received little attention so far is cheat sites, player-generated websites where players share strategies (or answers if applicable) for solving problems in the virtual games. We approached the investigation of cheat sites for Whyville with the following questions: How do Whyville players design cheat sites? What does a site consist of, how do they change over time, who creates them and what are their motivations? Is there any science displayed in the cheat sites stemming from Whyville? If so, what kind of science concepts and skills are targeted on these sites? Moreover, what does this reveal both about the designers of the sites and the nature of the science games themselves?

Research Approach

For our investigation of cheat sites, we drew from two sources, cheat sites available on the Internet and the archive of news articles in *The Whyville Times*. We sampled a subset of 15% of the 257 sites (38 in all) and ruled out sites that were scams (asking for people's passwords in exchange for an advertised raised salary) and sites that only talked about cheating but did not offer answers or directions. Of the remaining sites, 13 were legitimate cheat sites. In a first step, we evaluated the identified cheat sites using the typology developed by Salen and Zimmerman (2004). In a second step, we developed a classification system that delineated the types of sites according to the quality and helpfulness of the cheats (from comprehensive to copies of other cheat sites) and the kinds of cheats listed for various games as they relate to the science in the games (from a listing of answers to more qualified descriptions and illustrations). We also searched in the archive of *The Whyville Times* newspaper and identified over 100 articles that discussed cheating in Whyville. We used these articles to evaluate the ethical discussions surrounding cheating in the world of Whyville.

Illegitimate Cheat Sites outside Whyville

The large number, 257, of cheat sites about Whyville found on the Internet is a clear indication of Whyville's popularity. When we applied Salen and Zimmerman's (2004) typology of cheats, we found that cheat sites for Whyville incorporated all of the types they identified. We have outlined their definitions in the table below and listed parallel types of cheats found on Whyville sites (see Table 1).

Table 1: Typology of Cheat Sites

Cheats	Description	Whyville Cheat Sites
Easter eggs	Special secrets hidden in the game by designers	Unlisted spaces within the game, e.g., Jupiter, Disco Room, the Newspaper
Cheat codes	Actual codes written up by the designers (providing immortality and other benefits)	Indirect parallels in Whyville: - “teleport Jupiter” to get to Jupiter, - “ earmuffs now on” to listen to people whispering online
Game guides and walkthroughs	Step-by-step instruction for finishing a game	Most common cheat on sites: - How to play through a game, - Answers to games - Illustrations for games
Workarounds	‘Legal’ ways of working around game structures	- E.g. House of Illusions: walking through all rooms without looking at anything - Setting up another account to get more clams - Selling or buying others’ extra accounts
True cheating	Really and truly breaking the official site rules (e.g. multi-sessioning)	Stealing others’ accounts through scams that ask for usernames and passwords
Hacks	Intervention on the level of a computer code	Codes that deposit many clams in account (now expired – we were unable to test these)
Spoil-sport hacking	Intervening in a way that brings down the game and is not for the purpose of being involved in the games.	Stealing others’ accounts by hacking into the system (rumors of this happening but unstudied by the authors)

We examined in detail Gamesite2.net (a pseudonym for the site), one of the more comprehensive sites that contained Easter eggs, cheat codes, game guides and walkthroughs, and workarounds as described above. The site itself noted that it had on average 200 visitors a day, in addition to 34 registered users (as of 8 October 2006). It began in mid-2004 and, according to the history posted on the site, went through several versions until in mid-2006 it started regaining popularity. The site owner and designer, a 14 year-old young man, and his three administrators, posted new messages on the home page of the site roughly four times a month, not including numerous responses to messages on the forums. On the home page, the site designer wrote regular updates about “our” progress in developing/researching new cheats for new games or versions of games in addition to cheats or hints about things that were not game-related (in other words not related to a game that would be rewarded with clams). Other Whyville players posted comments about cheats they had figured out in a game, pleas for more or better cheats, and praises for the help offered on the site. While the site designer and his site administrators officially managed and posted the cheats, the activity of gathering and synthesizing the cheats was a collaborative effort, and the leaders gave credit to those who had assisted with various parts of researching and developing the cheats.

In addition, the site was not neutral about what was appropriate behavior on the forum. The owner closely watched forum postings for inappropriate material and advertising of other sites: “every one who swears a lot, spams, or cusses... will be banned.” Looking through the forum, one can see many times when messages or parts of them have been locked or erased by the owner. In addition, other forum participants pointed out things that they thought rude about some comments left on the site. For instance, when one user complained that there were not enough cheats or that the site did not help him enough, another user replied that the site owner did a lot of work on others’ behalf and we should be grateful for the help he provided. While the site recognized that scams occurred, it did not support them and purposefully tried to distance itself from that practice. Besides cheats for science games, the site also provided cultural tips and insider knowledge about Whyville. These included how to access unlisted social spaces (teleporting), how to act and talk on Whyville, where to shop for face parts, how to avoid being hacked, and information about what kinds of people hang out in which locations on Whyville. The site even included non-science game cheats such as how to make your Scion (virtual car on Whyville) invisible, answers to *The Whyville Times* weekly crossword, and a simple computer code that makes throwing projectiles faster. The site even provides “free advertising” for stores that Whyvillians design (Whyville itself only offers paid advertising).

Legitimate Discussions about Cheating within the larger Whyville Community

Cheat sites about Whyville, like the one we presented above, are not a hidden phenomenon; in fact, they are openly discussed in *The Whyville Times* newspaper that constitutes a community forum. Just as in the commercial gaming world (Gee, 2003), cheating is a hotly debated topic in Whyville and the newspaper articles criticize the practice of using cheat sites to increase salaries illegitimately: “when just one person uses cheats it could affect our whole town” (Ickamcoy, 2003). Of the over 100 articles that mentioned cheats in *The Whyville Times* from 2000-

2006, roughly 10% were explicit warnings against scams, reporting on the many imaginative ways Whyvillians have tried to procure others' passwords with the promise of raising their salaries, giving them makeovers, and even claiming to be site designers. Another 30% more generally condemned cheating in salary-raising games, i.e., using cheats found on cheat sites. Others (20%) discussed cheating in the Smart Cars races where instead of going around the track in a traditional race, some players would immediately turn their cars around and cross the finish line, thus triggering a win. These particular articles constituted a long, multi-year discussion about whether this was a valid way to win at Smart Cars. Some utterly denounced the practice while others, including the *Times* editor considered it a rather clever method. Still further, another 10% of the articles concerned cheating in dating relationships, some of them asking whether it was cheating if one had one boyfriend in the 'real' world and a different one in Whyville. Another 20% concerned issues with ballot stuffing, creating multiple accounts in order to have more votes for oneself in elections for Whyville senator or prom king/queen. And a final 10% described and rebuked other forms of cheating on Whyville, including the provocative "stealing from Grandma" referenced in the title of this paper.

Discussion

Our examination of cheat sites in Whyville, an informal free MUVE for teens, took inspiration from what researchers had observed in large-scale online games. Our analyses indicate that the Whyville cheat sites are as sophisticated in number of different cheat types as those for commercial games. The cheats cover the whole gamut: from helping players to make more clams to cheating players out of their clams. If anything, the presence of this large number of cheat sites can be seen as a simple measure of community participation. The players in Whyville are interested in finding out about short cuts and pointers and provide the audience. Thus there is an incentive for designers to create, and even copy, these sites. Beyond purely altruistic motives we can suspect that hosting a site as a designer but also knowing about good ones as a player might just constitute what Consalvo (in press) had in mind when she coined the term "gaming capital." As in many other games, knowing shortcuts represents some form of insider knowledge and thus positions users and designers of cheat sites as legitimate participants of the Whyville community. We found that the cheat sites reveal a great deal about their designers. All are invested in Whyville, in promoting others' success on Whyville, and in displaying their knowledge of Whyville. They view the object of the 'game' as getting a salary to buy face parts and participate in the larger Whyvillian culture. In fact, they value the morals of Whyville as displayed in qualifiers to their chat cheats, asking viewers to read carefully and understand the principles behind the questions. Still further, they have taken the time to learn the inside secrets of Whyville. In addition, the designers often do substantial research to develop their sites and learn how to complete science games. This includes technological research (web development, html, short codes) and scientific research (illustrations of spectra, theories about spinning fast).

In commercial games there are financial issues at stake that place the discussion about cheats in a more economic framework. When, for example, gamers are paid to play certain characters because their possessions can be sold on eBay to other players (Steinkuehler, 2006) or when players purchase bots to accumulate possessions for their avatars, the gaming capital acquired through short cuts has tangible monetary equivalents (Castronova, 2005). In Whyville.net this aspect just entered in November 2006 in game play when the company started offering clams, Whyville's currency, for sale in terms of dollars. It will be interesting to see in which ways the typology and nature of the cheat sites we have investigated will change within this new economic landscape that now provides different incentives for using cheats.

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