

GAINING ADVANTAGE: HOW VIDEOGAME PLAYERS DEFINE AND NEGOTIATE CHEATING

It is all about suspense; it is like someone telling you how an action movie ends. So what is the point in seeing it if you already know how the movie ends?

—*Jake, age twenty-two*

If a game is good and I am enjoying it, it becomes almost part of my life—I will think about it on the bus home, wake up in the mornings thinking, “Aha! I wonder if I could do that?” And [I] close my eyes at night to find flashes of the game rushing around inside my head.

—*Hope, age thirty*

How do game players play games, and does the experience of gameplay extend beyond direct interaction with the game itself? Beyond thinking about what games do *to* players, there is still a comparatively small amount of research concerning how players themselves organize their gameplay time and space(s), how they make choices about which games to play and why, and what else might be involved in their gameplay experiences, beyond a console, a controller, and a comfy seat.¹ Some researchers have explored how women enjoy games.² Others have analyzed the communication and community practices of FPS players.³ Likewise, T. L. Taylor and Mikael Jakobsson have looked at player dynamics in *EverQuest*, studying how power gamers play the game in ways quite different from more casual gamers, even if they put in the same amount of time.⁴

Still, comparatively little is known about game players' experiences, especially when compared to a field such as television studies, where the audience is still presumed to be more passive than a game player. As players actively engage with games, they don't do so in a vacuum. Players have various ideas and information about games before they begin playing,

and they gain further knowledge as they progress. Key components of that information flow include knowledge about supplemental materials such as walkthroughs, strategy guides, and the employment of cheat codes.

One way to contextualize such new knowledge is by thinking about player activities through the lens of gaming capital. As previous chapters have demonstrated, the paratextual industries associated with games, including magazines and enhancement devices, have helped define how players should play games, in addition to how they might evaluate and think about them. Yet such industries can't dictate the terms of use; individuals are active in how they choose to use (or not) such items as well as how they view such things relative to the games they play. Neither side (the player or the industries) has total control, but power differentials do exist. The construction of such industries and elements helps set the terms for debate as well as frames what is debated. And even as paratextual industries have helped to create a thriving system of gaming capital that individual gamers may draw from or contribute to, that very system of capital is sometimes at odds with some of the means of achieving capital.

As we seek greater knowledge about the cultural impacts of videogames, the experiences of players themselves demand attention. This chapter addresses one part of the larger question "How do people play games?" by examining players' uses of supplemental items during gameplay, how they define what is and is not cheating in reference to those items, and then, what actions they ultimately take in accordance with their beliefs and reasoning. In doing so, this chapter offers a more detailed exploration of how gameplay is experienced by a selection of players, and what is involved in that gameplay in terms of the use or rejection of a growing paratextual industry.

Cheating in Games: Breaking Unseen Rules or Violating the Spirit of the Game

First, what does it mean to cheat in a videogame? How can one cheat? Asking such questions forces us to consider the issue of just where the rules of a videogame can be found, and then determine how they could be secretly broken or bent for personal gain. Where are the rules? One easy answer is in the instruction manual that comes with a game. The manual often explains the objective of the game, the background of the characters and the situations, how to use the interface (controller) correctly, and what

the player needs to do to win the game. It can give pointers for advancing through the game and serves as a (more or less useful) reference to consult during gameplay. But even if instruction manuals describe an objective and detail what characters can do in the game, they don't truly give the player the rules. And many players don't even read the manual and seem to get through the game just fine.

The rules of a videogame are contained within the game itself, in the game code. The game engine contains the rules that state what characters (and thus players) can and cannot do: they can go through certain doors, but not others; they can't walk through walls or step over a boulder (except maybe a special one); they can kill their enemies, but not their friends; and they must engage in certain activities to trigger the advancement of the story and the game. All of these things are structured into the code of the game itself, and thus the game embodies the rules, *is* the rules, that the player must confront.

Lawrence Lessig writes about the code of the Internet, but his observations also apply to games. He believes that code regulates, and "as the world is now, code writers are increasingly lawmakers."⁵ He also maintains that at least in reference to the Internet, our rhetoric about its "essence" hides the truth that this space is constructed, and that real choices have been made about what processes or activities are privileged or discouraged. Although he is correct in assessing current beliefs about the Internet, something different has occurred with games. Here, too, code is law and constructs the rules of the game. But for game players, this rule of law is not a hidden construction, and is also, for some, open to question and even alteration.

There have always been attempts to go beyond the rules in videogames. If we state at the outset that a player must abide by the coded rules in a videogame, what might cheating include? For some, it means going beyond the instruction manual to friends, strategy guides, and gaming magazines for hints or walkthroughs explaining how best to advance through a certain area. Help like this has been around since at least *Nintendo Power* magazine, which as discussed earlier, provided players with extensive guidance to help them play games and find all of the hidden secrets in a game. Cheating might also include the use of cheat codes that when entered into a controller or keyboard, produce a certain (beneficial) effect, such as a complete restoration of health, unlimited ammunition, or more powerful weapons. Cheating might extend to the use of a GameShark, which enters codes electronically to a game system to unlock

other features. Cheating might involve altering the code of the game itself, secretly, to gain advantage in multiplayer games. It might also include paying real money for game currency or items, through such sites as the independent International Game Exchange or Sony's Station Exchange. Those aren't the only ways to cheat, and some players would definitely not label them all cheating, but this is at least an idea of what could constitute an advantage for a player.

But how prevalent are certain constructions of cheating? Do all players see cheating in the same way? How do individual game players define cheating for themselves? This chapter investigates those questions, and offers a variety of views and insights into why the definitions vary, and what this can mean for individuals as well as groups of players.

Gamers, Game Players, Gamegrrls, and Gamegeeks

As part of this project, I conducted in-depth interviews with twenty-four self-identified game players ranging in age from fourteen to forty-one. Of that group, eleven were girls and women. Two interview methods were employed: half the sample was interviewed face-to-face, with each interview being audiotaped and then transcribed; and the second half of the interviews were conducted over e-mail, with questions initially e-mailed to participants recruited from several sources, and then follow-up e-mail(s) sent for clarification and expansion of certain answers. I also conducted an open-ended survey of fifty game players ranging in age from nineteen to thirty-two who were part of a college-level course on digital games and culture. All subjects from both samples were active game players (with variation in the types of games played, the hours played, and experience levels). Interviewees were recruited through a snowball sampling method, identifying more game players from those first interviewed (initial interviews were with university students who responded to a call for gamers, and others were recruited through Web sites such as womengamers.com and joystick101.org). All interviewees and survey respondents have been assigned pseudonyms, or chose one for themselves, for identification purposes in the study. Interviews and surveys were conducted between May 2001 and May 2004.

This chapter explores several issues, including how respondents chose to define cheating in their own terms, both as an abstract concept and

related to game playing; if respondents cheated or not in actual gameplay and why; how this reconciled with their definition(s) of cheating; and what actual material and social elements they used, including such items as walkthroughs, strategy guides, GameSharks, hacks, cheat codes, online sites, help from friends, and any other artifact or source mentioned.

Players' Definitions of Cheating

This section looks at how peoples' definitions of cheating vary and what the differences could mean to us, and does not take into account subsequent player actions. Here, my interest is in how people define the actions they will or won't take, rather than which they actually choose. The way players talk about cheating appears to fall into three categories, with one overarching theme. It's important to note that players' answers sometimes spanned categories, but when they did, there was always a logical progression in how they did so.

Overarching: Cheating Gives You an Unfair Advantage

Running throughout all the definitions 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 regard to single-player games as just an unfair advantage in general. And it was mentioned as well by players who thought walkthroughs "were" and "weren't" cheating, and those who felt you could "certainly" or "never" cheat in a single-player game. The common thread appeared to be that cheating was more than just *breaking* a rule or law; it was also those instances of bending or reinterpreting rules to the players' advantage. Players actively made ethical judgments about gameplay that extended beyond the coded rules of the game.

Even as digital games can code in rules for players to follow, there are also "soft rules" that are negotiated. Those rules can be broken more easily than the game code or "hard rules," but to many players they are still important in understanding the bounds of acceptable gameplay and how far one can push those boundaries before an accusation of cheating is made.

The three categories that follow all draw from the unfair advantage conceptualization, but begin to draw distinctions between certain actions

and items that when used, can constitute cheating. These categories actually might better be thought of not as separate but as lying on a continuum. That allows for players' more fluid practices to be taken into account as well as to see linkages between concepts.

“Anything Other Than Getting through the Game All on Your Own”

At one end of the continuum or spectrum would be the purist. This player would take the position highlighted above—believing that anything other than a solo effort in completing a game is cheating. Players here define cheating quite broadly, such as “when you use external sources to complete a game” (Tina, twenty-eight). Yet this position quickly becomes qualified, or is a bit of a straw person, as players in this group usually modify their statement along the lines of “anything other than getting through a game all on your own, with the exception of having a friend in the room helping you figure things out” (Mona, thirty-two). Even the most hard-core purists admitted to asking a relative, spouse, or friend, when they got stuck in a game. And for this group, the “ask a friend” lifeline seemed acceptable, but was couched in terms of “but only if you’re really stuck,” meaning that you had already tried to figure out the situation on your own first.

Along those lines, this group sees commercially published strategy guides, Web site walkthroughs, cheat codes, real-money trade, and everything “beyond” that as all being cheating. For example, one player states that cheating is “using information acquired outside of the game and your head to get items, find shortcuts, etc., that you wouldn’t otherwise, while playing earnestly” (Jessica, twenty-five). Likewise, another player explained that “using information from a site, purchased guide, or telephone hotline in order to get around 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, thirty). While this group sees the use of items like walkthroughs and strategy guides as cheating, even they generally maintain that the use of such things is “acceptable,” but in specific situations only—such as when the player has already tried repeatedly to solve the puzzle or kill the boss (or so on), but can’t and is thus stuck. At that point, the player might stop playing the game out of sheer frustration and a real inability to progress further. It appears that even if it is labeled as cheating in that instance, it is considered OK.

Likewise, if a player has already beaten or completed a game, and wants to play again to explore new areas or try new things, the use of guides and other items becomes acceptable. A forum on the game magazine *Electronic Gaming Monthly's* Web site that asked the question "Do you use cheat codes?" was answered by numerous players, the majority of whom responded that the use of such codes and other items was fine, once they had completed the game and were on at least the second round of play.⁶

It's important to keep in mind that the players defining cheating in this grouping are all referring to single-player games. These are not games where a person is opposed to another player—only to the machine (multi-player cheating is discussed in the third theme). While there is much talk of "only cheating yourself," which may not be serious, these players do still see cheating in games where the player is not competing against anyone but oneself as well as in games that are multiplayer. How can that be, when cheating is normally defined as gaining an unfair advantage over another player?

This particular formulation of cheating can be better understood by referring to Johan Huizinga's concept of the magic circle as well as Espen Aarseth's discussion of aporias and epiphanies in adventure games.⁷ For Huizinga, play can only occur in a magic circle that sets the boundaries for the game to played, where "inside the play-ground an absolute and peculiar order reigns . . . it creates order, is order."⁸ What bounds the circle are the rules of the game.

As discussed before, the rules of a digital game are contained within the programming of the game itself. Yet players also acknowledge certain soft rules in defining for themselves how far one could perhaps venture outside the circle for help. This is certainly not the breaking of rules such as the cracking or hacking of codes that form other definitions of cheating but is instead a more complex negotiation of cultural systems of support in gaming culture. How far will players move into that support system? At some point, players must make individual decisions about what they will and won't read, who to ask and for how much information, and so on, in playing a game.

For this group, gameplay is a bounded experience, and the use of almost any external item or resource could be considered cheating. Acceptable gameplay, then, is limited to interacting solely within the game world and cannot include other elements. The more interesting question

is what are the implications of doing so? If we can see the benefit of such support (getting past a point where one is hopelessly stuck), is there a drawback as well? If one is only cheating oneself, why would a player be concerned with seeing guides and walkthroughs as wrong in any way?

Just as the magic circle defines the rules of the game, Aarseth's formulation of gaming's aporia-epiphany structure lends clues to this puzzle. Aarseth explains that in digital games such as adventure games, there often arise aporias or gaps that are "local and tangible, usually . . . concrete, localized puzzle[s] whose solution eludes us."⁹ We must search for a solution to a puzzle, or the correct strategy to defeat an enemy, to move past the aporia and continue on with the game. The moment when we grasp the logic of the puzzle or determine what attack to employ is our epiphany. "This is the sudden revelation that replaces the aporia, a seeming detail with an unexpected, salvaging effect: the link out."¹⁰

While Aarseth does not speculate further on the instance of the epiphany for the player, it seems that it is frequently an emotional "aha!" moment, when the player either realizes that she overlooked an important clue or she has painstakingly solved a difficult problem. The greater the struggle is, the more satisfying or bigger the epiphanic moment. Taking this back to the use of guides and walkthroughs, such items will either reduce or eliminate the satisfaction derived from having an epiphany. 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 or in a second play, they reject the overuse of such items in the first round as cheating. Perhaps they are 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 and satisfaction—is reduced further and further with each glance back through the guide.¹¹

Code Is Law: Breaking the Rules of the Game

Midway across the continuum is a group that doesn't see the use of items like walkthroughs and guides as cheating but draws the line at items such as cheat codes, unlockables, and alterations of the game code itself. Here again, people accept the possibility of cheating in single-player games (as well as in multiplayer games), where the manipulation of code *for its own sake* can be enough to qualify.

For example, one player talks about cheating as “altering the framework that has been set forth, either something like what I understand is done in some online games where the code is actually altered to assist a certain player or using a cheat code” (Roy, twenty-six). Likewise, another player believes that “cheating is when you unfairly take advantage of ‘quirks’ in the game to further the development of your character in the game or your progress in the game itself” (Sally, twenty-four).

Players make distinctions between using codes that have been created by game developers, and those that players design to hack or alter the game code. Yet for this group, the 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 said that the use of codes to win a fighting game would be a “hollow win” (Sally). But for this group, there appeared to be a distinction between, on the one hand, asking friends and consulting guides, and on the other, using code to win. 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 (unfair) advantage.

For this group, as for Lessig, code is law. Players acknowledge that items such as cheat codes are readily available and accepted in some quarters, but the reconfiguration of game code is the central key to what constitutes cheating for them. Here the bending of rules is shifted—lines are drawn more closely around the game itself and further from “outside” elements like walkthroughs, which this group sees as acceptable. While actively hacking the game code is a clear rule breakage, the use of codes to unlock items or benefits not earned through gameplay becomes the bending that is deemed unacceptable. The magic circle bounding play contracts; to push or bend the boundaries involves the use of code, rather than using outside information or items. At this location along the continuum, cheating can involve other players, but can still be a single-player issue.

You Can't Cheat a GameCube, You Can Only Cheat Another Player

Finally, a third group of players defined cheating as only existing in relation to another player. These players more closely aligned with J. Barton Bowyer, who characterizes cheating as a social activity: “to cheat, not to play the game that reflected the norm, indicated that there was

another world, the world of deception, in which people did not play the game, your game, but their own.”¹²

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, twenty-four). Similarly, other players talk about cheating as “breaking the rules or finding a loophole (like a bug in the code) to gain an advantage against someone else who is playing by the rules” (Niles, age not given). It is also implied here that cheaters are using hacks or other enhancements that other players are not—they are hiding their advantage. This should be distinguished from groups of players that, for example, all agree to play a game where player killing (PK) is allowed; in that situation, killing a fellow character would not be cheating, yet playing on a server where it is banned would be.

For this group, cheating is necessarily social (or antisocial), involving others. The use of items such as walkthroughs or code devices in a single-player game is acceptable because, by definition, one cannot cheat a machine or oneself. Those items may further progress, but they do not make another player worse off. Cheating means the introduction of deception and possible chaos into the game world, which is shared with other players. Since players are unaware of who may be cheating, uncertainty and distrust increase, especially as players move from multiplayer games at home with friends and relatives to online games that can feature thousands of unknown colleagues and opponents. Eventually, cheating (or its rumor) can lead to the breakdown of games—such as the problems that have occurred with *Diablo* and *Speed Devils Online Racing*.¹³ While some correctives can be attempted (such as the creation of the company Even Balance and its PunkBuster product to stop cheating in online games, discussed in chapter 6), at other times game worlds are simply abandoned due to the rampant cheating.

For this group, the magic circle admits many players, yet the “game” being played differs by player. While deceiving others is the key to cheating, that can include hacking or altering code, exploiting systems, or socially exploiting other players. To cheat is to deceive others, but to make it appear that you are not doing so. The bounds of the magic circle have been cracked in some way, yet only the cheater can perceive the change.

Do What I Say, Not What I Do: 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:

I've cheated in games before because sometimes it is fun to not play by the rules or get that "god mode" feeling. (Abe, twenty-two)

Yes, I find some games far too difficult, and due to my lack of patience I will find a code to make me invulnerable or allow me to skip levels. (Noel, twenty)

Yes, I have cheated, but no one was taking the game seriously anyway! I mean, *everyone* was cheating! We all knew. It was funny. So, my cheating was OK because the rules were redefined. (Cathy, twenty-one)

I have *definitely* cheated in games. I cheated in *Diablo II* online and I had to agree not to cheat before I started playing. . . . I like to have any possible advantage against people who do not necessarily want to play fair with me. (Pete, twenty-two)

As these excerpts demonstrate, players who may define particular actions as cheating have few qualms about actually using that information or resource, at least in specific circumstances. They usually feel the need to justify their actions, however, given the generally negative connotations associated with the term cheating. Notice even in the above examples that players talked of "everyone else cheating" or other players who don't want to play fair to begin with. Likewise, even in single-player games, the activity of cheating is justified—games are too difficult or there is fun in playing god.

When players do decide to cheat, what is it they are using or doing? Most often, it's the benign activities that players engage in—asking friends for help with solving puzzles, going online to consult a Web site or walk-through with tips on how to beat a specific opponent, or the steps necessary to gain a particular weapon. Clearly the Internet has been a boon to game players, as the availability of what is likely gigabytes of free information makes playing games more fun, more communal, and easier to do.

Almost all players utilize free sources of information—asking friends and family in person and strangers online, and consulting informational

sources on the Internet. Next in line are print sources such as strategy guides. Many players do not admit to using such sources or at least to purchasing them on their own. At that stage money is involved, and a greater need must be identified than one simple problem (or the player must have a larger investment in a game, such as being a fan of the series) in gameplay. Following guides would be (legal) technological devices such as the Action Replay and GameShark. While those products are more versatile than a single title guide (being able to hold codes for many games), they also carry with them a greater stigma of cheating and offer one central type of cheating—the entering of codes—that does not appeal to all players.

Finally, coming in last are real-money trade and tip lines. None of the players who I talked with admitted to using real money to buy in-game currency, items, or accounts. That is probably due to the stigma that the practice still carries for many players as well as its violation of most games' terms of service agreements. I'll discuss such dedicated cheaters more in the next chapter, and will offer a more detailed account of real-money trade in chapter 7. I also couldn't find any players who admitted to calling a game tip line for information, although a couple of individuals did mention that someone they knew (a "friend?") had done so. Tip lines seemed to offer the least utility, and especially with the prevalence of information on the Internet, tip lines were seen as a waste of money, and it is questionable how many still exist.

Yet beyond the constraints of money and convenience, which certainly play a certain role in individuals' cheating and noncheating behaviors, why did people cheat? They cheated for different reasons, each of which is discussed in detail next.

To Cheat or Not to Cheat: What Made Me Do It?

There is no one single reason why people will cheat (or "enhance their gameplay experience") 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 there are multiple reasons for player cheating that 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
- difficulty
- limited scenarios
- rough patches or just bad games

Cheating, or however such 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) can help to better understand the gameplay experience.

Because I Was Stuck

It may seem obvious, but individuals want to play games and succeed in some way at them.¹⁴ While learning can come from making mistakes and failing, too much of such negative “learning” destroys the pleasure in playing and may ultimately end the game. The most cited reason that players offer for cheating in games is *getting stuck* and being unable to progress any further. That failure happens because either the player or the game does not measure up in some way relative to the other.

Although researchers have begun to investigate the differences between play styles and the interests of men and women (and boys and girls), there is little information concerning the actual skill levels of different players across different types of games. It would probably even be difficult to determine what skills to measure and how to measure them—either in a game, over time, across game playing, or by any other yardstick. Even without such information, however, we can guess that player skill varies enormously, and the challenges that various games offer also differ, along with design competencies. And even among the best players, gameplay difficulties can occur, such as when a highly skilled 2D platform gamer moves to 3D FPS games for the first time. Different screen-reading tactics, methods for controlling the interface, and recognition of iconic elements all come together to create an experience that can be exciting and fresh, but also confusing and potentially discouraging.

Those situations occur with great frequency, especially as we move away from considering the abilities of the hard-core or power gamers to the more casual (and much larger) game-playing audience. Individual players run up against roadblocks to their game playing in many instances, including but not limited to:

- a puzzle they cannot solve
- an enemy who cannot be beaten
- a level with no obvious end point
- an unclear objective
- bugs that inhibit certain actions

Virtually every player I have talked with will use some form of help or cheat to get unstuck in the above situations, whether they define it as cheating or not. Such actions are perfectly rational, as without the help, it is unlikely that gameplay can even continue—the game is 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 still often try to justify their actions. For example, Mona explains that

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.

Likewise, another player argues that guides:

help me get through certain points where I just need to get to the next point and I'm not *seeing* what I need to see. It's probably 'cause I haven't had enough sleep and I've been overeating in front of the TV for the last few days, but it's a, uh, that's what I use them for, more than anything else. And before I buy a guide I'll call my brother-in-law, Ray, and say "Ray! You've played this game, haven't you? What do I do? Here?" (Harmony, twenty-eight)

Even if players do not see these activities as cheating, they still justify the actions as legitimate in some way:

If I am stuck I will use walkthroughs. I also employ friends' help. I don't consider that cheating because you can justify it in odd ways. That is, using a walkthrough can be like a character's gut reaction. (George, nineteen)

I only use the help as a last resort. In the past when I didn't, I would not finish games when I got frustrated. (Ely, thirty)

Why would players try to legitimize an activity they don't see as cheating? In part, perhaps because cheating has a negative connotation to it and players are aware of such meanings. Many players have also stressed the importance of playing and winning a game "on one's own," and therefore, without outside help. The pleasure of a game often comes from achievements, and as players relate, when achievements come from consulting a guide or using a code—rather than the players' own ingenuity, creativity, or skill—the pleasure is hollow.

Such explanations can also tie back to gaming capital. Although guides and magazines can give players essential knowledge, and thus capital, overreliance (or perhaps any reliance, depending on the player) comes at a cost: admitting to an initial lack of gaming capital, at least in that particular situation.

While gaming capital has evolved, it has done so in interesting ways. Although industries have arisen to help players increase their enjoyment of gameplay, there is a striking contradiction at work. Players are not supposed to need help. If a person claims a certain amount of gaming capital, that capital bespeaks a certain level of expertise, which the player should possess. And so, the use of enhancement devices becomes furtive, in order to save face. Gamers in the know are not supposed to need such things—yet they do. So they may talk of only using them "when stuck" or "when a game is already beaten." Of course, not all players see gaming capital as limiting their options, but the coolness and "elite gamer" attitude fostered by such industries can work against as well as for their efforts.

These justifications, for whatever reasons, suggest that when players cheat to get unstuck, they are performing an *instrumental* action relative to gameplay. Codes, walkthroughs and hints are tools that players employ 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 or enhancing the game but about reentering it. Here, cheats are the "key" that allows players back into the game world and gives back the opportunity to re-create lost pleasure.

Finally, it should be noted that players themselves see these cheats for getting unstuck as “a last resort” and something that does have the ability to diminish their enjoyment. That could be due to either the concern that the use of outside information may destroy the pleasure of the epiphany or a fear of others’ discovery of a player’s lack of gaming capital. Yet players are willing to sacrifice some pleasure or admit to a lack of gaming skill if it means they can continue to play the game.

For the Pleasure of the Experience: It’s Fun to Play God

I have cheated on certain occasions in some off-line shooter-type games, simply to make the game more enjoyable and long lasting (so I didn’t have to start over again and again. (Drew, twenty-seven)

Sometimes it’s good, at the end of a long, frustrating day, to put on the god cheat in *Quake III* and just mow opponents down left and right. . . . It can be very cathartic for me. (Mona)

Although less frequently mentioned, many other players also report cheating for the pleasures it can bring. For the most part, this group referred specifically to playing either single-player games this way, or in situations with friends where cheating was openly acknowledged and condoned by the group. Cheating for pleasure in multiplayer games is discussed in the last section of this part of the chapter, as there appear to be different reasons for that sort of 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 alternative options within the game. In such situations, the paratext surrounding games comes into play—players have read or heard about secrets within games, including things like side quests for powerful weapons, or ways to get the Golden Chocobo in *Final Fantasy IX* or the bicycle in *Crazy Taxi*. The information might have come from friends, Internet sites, or a strategy guide. Whatever the case, players are often invested in getting a complete gameplay experience, and so 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 who do, they are careful to stress that they only do

such things after they have beaten the game once already. Tom (twenty-one), for example, 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.

Relatedly, some players don't explicitly mention pleasure or fun as a reason to cheat but instead talk about wanting to "obtain everything," "uncover secrets," or "explore the game freely and more easily," or doing it "for the novelty." Here, enjoyment is tied to completion or a deeper knowledge of a particular game. Gamers are aware of all the extras now built into games, and are intent on experiencing as much of that content as they can. In that regard, the paratextual industry has succeeded in creating high expectations for game players about what *should* be part of regular gameplay and "how much" content they should be getting.

Cheating, in this instance, is not the instrumental action that it is when a player is stuck—it's more ludic in form. Cheats here are a playful expression for the player, intent on staying within a certain frame of mind, whether or not that action actually constitutes cheating or not. For those who do consider it cheating, it seems that certain instrumental obligations must be met first—such as finishing the game once or justifying the purchase through reference to spending a lot of money. At that point, the player can turn to (or see as justified) such actions. For those who don't consider it cheating, it is pure pleasure.

Time Compression: Hitting Fast-forward

As Julian Kücklich explains, some cheats allow players to speed up the narrative of games and thus involve a "condensation of space."¹⁵ 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 more quickly, while FPS gamers might obtain a code to give them unlimited ammo and therefore clear levels at a faster rate. Importantly, though, the player is moving through the game at a presumably higher speed than they would "on their own."

Kücklich doesn't explore specific reasons for players choosing (or not choosing) such cheats, and although conceptually they may go together

fairly well (the walkthrough hint and the unlimited ammo code), often players do see distinctions between them. As mentioned before, players tend to draw lines based on how “conceptually close” the cheat is to the game. For some players, walkthrough hints are OK, but codes are too similar to altering the structure of the game itself. Although both might achieve a similar end (that is, fast-forward), they do remain distinct for some players.

And yet, different players do employ such cheats. Players specifically mentioned using codes or walkthroughs to “get through a game as quickly as possible” to achieve some sort of completion. If a game had a particularly involved story, the story was frequently cited as a catalyst for the action:

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)

I am more interested in the advancement of the game’s story than the value I place on the game’s ability to challenge me. (Steve, twenty-one)

Players can become involved in a particular story line, and want to see the conclusion without investing the required time to accomplish all the game-given tasks. And as many RPGs can require fifty-plus hours to complete, it’s really no surprise that some players would want to arrive at the ending without spending the equivalent of more than an entire week of paid work to get there.

Such practices by game players do speak to the desire of some players for still-engrossing but less-lengthy games. Codes and hints can be fruitfully employed by the savvy gamer to tailor the gaming experience to their own time frame, but other players (or potential players) may be put off by the required time investments and not even attempt such games.

In counterpoint to wanting to witness story resolution, other players simply felt the need for closure with the game and wanted to hurry to the end point.

Just to get a game over with. (Kris, twenty-four)

When I give up on the game, so I don’t want to invest the time to finish it, but I still want to see how it ends. I paid for it. I might as well see the ending. (Tim, thirty-two)

Here, the instrumental use of cheats returns, as they help players achieve a goal that is not entirely in line with the developers' original intent. The story isn't mentioned as a driving force for finishing the game, leaving us to speculate that players may also desire a certain amount of closure for its own sake—either being able to say that one has finished a game or the self-knowledge of completion. Some players also suggest that more interesting parts may be coming, and they wish to get past the “crap” and hopefully find more engrossing subject matter.

The instrumental nature of the cheat is in evidence, as it allows the gamer to move on to different games or activities that offer more promise of pleasure. In the case of those wishing to complete a story, the cheat may also allow pleasure in the knowledge of the story ending, if not in the actual gameplay.

Being an Ass: Multiplayer Cheating

Finally, there's the person most of us think about when we envision the cheater. Playing against others, either online or in person, the cheater is the player who everyone else loves to hate.

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

I think I cheated (multiplayer) because I was an ass, and/or I wanted revenge against another player. (Victor, twenty-one)

I have *definitely* cheated in games. I cheated in *Diablo II* 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 who do not necessarily want to play fair with me. (Pete)

Multiplayer cheaters were the definite minority of the players I interviewed. Players offered multiple reasons for such behavior, and most acknowledged that it was wrong or at least illegal to cheat in those ways. Several players admitted to doing such things as using aimbots and hacking the game code for the fun of causing distress and anger in other players. Others pointed to an already cheat-filled situation, and claimed that their own cheating was only to level the playing field. And one player mentioned his prowess in gaming, declaring that superior players had

earned the right to cheat. By contrast, he felt that those without elite gaming skills were the ones not deserving of the greater abilities to be gained by cheating.

That last informant was illustrative of the “game the system” type of cheater who others have written about.¹⁶ They tend to see themselves as elite gamers who have already surpassed the normal challenges offered by a game and so turn to gaming the game itself for exploits. In keeping with that approach, it would make sense for such players to express disdain for lesser-skilled players who attempt the same hacks. As Derek (twenty-one) 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 can keep them like, you know, 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 who are way bigger than them and kill them. ’Cause that’s just not, I don’t know, 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.

Yet in addition to the act of earning the right to cheat, players such as Derek and others also engage in the activity as a way to cause trouble or disturb other players. Cheating in order to “be a jerk” or “an ass” focuses on the reactions of other players, and may not necessarily be tied to actual self-advancement in the game. While players may be breaking or bending rules to do so, they aren’t necessarily better off at the end of the session. Such types of behavior tend to be categorized as what Chek Yang Foo and others have termed “grief play.”¹⁷

Much like hackers, such cheaters are using the logics of code to demonstrate superiority over certain other players. For some this may be less directly confrontational, such as achieving great wealth by the careful deception of others (as a scam on *Eve Online* reveals), or it may be through actively defeating others in gameplay, by illegally (or unethically) acquired skills or items.¹⁸

I’ll explore this concept and important exceptions to it in the next chapter. Yet it is fairly safe to say that the vast majority of game players consider the cheater as beyond the bounds of fair play—and often the

cheaters acknowledge this themselves. Mostly, however, where the line between the full-on cheater ends and other activities begin to appear is a blurred one, which most players dynamically negotiate.

Conclusions

This chapter has investigated how players define and enact game-playing practices that could fall into the category of cheating. All players define cheating in a game as an activity that confers unfair advantage to the player. Yet that's where the consensus begins to break down. In their operational definitions, players identified different items and activities as cheating or not. From the purist to the purely social, cheating ranged from anything outside "one's own thoughts" in a single-player game to activities that had to make other players worse off. What can such a range of definitions tell us?

First, it reminds us of the diversity of play styles and practices that players bring to their games. Although it can be tempting to think only of the *Counter-Strike* hacker or the gold-buying player subscribed to an MMO, cheating, as defined by players themselves, can encompass a wide variety of actions. Second, that diversity points out the different ways that players make distinctions. For some players, the game world is defined quite narrowly—it is the game's code itself and the player—and all else is conceptualized as ideally out-of-bounds. That player wants to experience the game on its own terms, believing the game world to be cohesive enough to provide all the clues and skill builders necessary to complete it. Of course many games (or players) fall short of that expectation, at least occasionally. But that is how the purist approaches the game and sets about playing.

Next is the player who defines the game situation more broadly: the game world admits the game as well as help from other people, walk-throughs, and guides. Here, the line becomes the code of the game itself; altering it is the boundary line that players do not wish to cross—or at least during the first pass on a game. The physical code is the limit, yet the player allows other items and help into the game world.

Finally, there's the social player who only sees unfair advantage as something that can be expressed with other players present. Items and

activities that are freely available to all are by definition not cheats; only secret activities used to best or gain advantage over others can “count.” The game world in this instance must contain other players in order for cheating to potentially exist. And it must result in gain for the player.

If that’s the range of how players define cheating, how do their actions measure up? It would be easy to argue that player definitions are based on ideal situations and their actions reflect actual playing difficulties, but while this is true to some extent, that explanation misses some key elements of cheating behaviors.

As mentioned, getting stuck is a major reason for cheating, and while making better games might diminish that problem, it will never be eliminated. Players have widely different skill levels as well as patience thresholds for different games, on different days, in different situations. Game developers will always be limited by deadlines and budgets to finish products, perhaps before they are all truly “done.” There will always be times when players get stuck, or do not have ninety-plus hours to spend finding every secret item and location in a game. Likewise, even a twenty-hour game may be too long for some players, who would prefer to spend ten hours playing, see the ending, feel a sense of completion, and move on to another game. For all such reasons, people will cheat or use items others consider cheating.

Yet beyond instrumental reasons to cheat, there are purely ludic ones as well. Being playful—running around with ninety-nine lives or a bobble head—can be immensely satisfying for its own sake. It may have nothing to do with advancing the game or gaining skill. The player is gaining more enjoyment from the game, in a variety of ways.

The instrumental and the ludic, moreover, come together in social spaces, when the cheater enters the game. To be about more than grief play—which implies a solely ludic approach—the cheater incorporates instrumentality into his activities. The cheater gains the advantage and has fun in doing so. The enjoyment might differ from the form described above, as it often comes at the expense of other players (to be an ass), yet it is still about pleasure in the game.

To conclude, what does such knowledge tell us? Paratextual industries have created products and practices that play a contested role in players’ experiences. They may contribute to the acquisition of gaming capital, but

for some players signal its lack. Players carefully negotiate the use of such items in their gameplay, and there is a diversity of approaches in that use. Players are active and thoughtful, accepting and resisting various forms of guidance, help and cheats. Their activity indicates the complexity of the gameplay experience, which this chapter has only begun to explore. That investigation continues in the next chapter, which examines the cheater in greater depth. It asks who such players are, and how the cheater performs a critical role in the world of multiplayer games.

