

Other Playings – Cheating in Computer Games

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ABSTRACT

How can cheating in computer games be approached theoretically? As of yet, theorists have shunned the subject of cheats, maybe because of its elusive nature. Furthermore, cheats have a tendency to destabilize carefully balanced theories. If, for example, one regards digital games as cybertextual objects, as some theorists do, it becomes immediately obvious that cheats offer a convenient way of decreasing the effort it takes to traverse the text. Therefore, a theoretical approach to cheating must take the context of games into account. Games should be regarded not only as texts, in which cheats can be used to skip certain passages, a practice known as *tmesis*, but also as media that foster new forms of symbolic interaction between individuals, and as cybernetic systems, in which cheating performs a sort of ‘re-entry’ of the environment into the system itself. Thus, by borrowing concepts from literary studies, media studies and systems theory, we should be able to gain new insights into a largely neglected part of gaming culture.

Author Keywords

Computer Games, Cheating, Gaming Culture

CHEATING AS AN AESTHETIC PHENOMENON

Cheating is an aspect of computer games that has thus far received scant attention from the discipline of game studies. But cheats are clearly an important part of gaming culture.

There is hardly a gaming magazine or website that does not offer cheats, and special publications in electronic or book form complement this already abundant supply. Furthermore, there is hardly a game that does not come with either built-in cheat modes, or design loopholes that can be exploited by cunning gamers. In other words: whenever we play digital games, cheats are an option. Whether we actively employ cheats or not, the experience of playing a game is always influenced by the possibility of ‘illegal’ manipulation. If one defines aesthetics as the rules that guide our perception, as the Greek root of the word suggests, an aesthetics of digital games must take into account these ‘illegal’ modes of interaction.

In multi-player games, cheats do not only change the experience of the cheater, but the experience of the other players as well. In a game like *Counter-Strike*, players equipped with automatic aiming algorithms, or ‘aimbots,’ are so vastly superior to other players that their avatars are virtually invulnerable. In many cases, the real challenge for ‘professional’ cheaters quickly shifts from competing with other players to trying to outwit the cheat detection systems of the game servers. At this point, cheating turns into an ‘illegal’ activity, whose pleasure presumably derives to a large extent from the fact that it is prohibited.



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WHAT ARE CHEATS?

To define cheating proves a difficult task, since cheats are almost as diverse as the games to which they pertain, and resemble each other only superficially. While it is certainly true of most cheats that they give the player an advantage that the rules of the game do not allow for, this is not always the case. Some cheats simply change the way things look. For example, graphic depictions of blood and death animations are usually removed from games prior to their publication in Germany and other countries.

Employing 'blood-cheats' to restore the gore does not constitute a breach of the game's rules, but it often requires a direct manipulation of the game files ('patching'). Usually, players are expected to manipulate these files only indirectly, i.e. through their interaction with the game. Therefore, accessing and altering them directly must be regarded as a practice that goes beyond the game's intended use. Can we define cheats as 'using a game in a way that is not intended by its designers,' then? This seems problematic, because it is not always possible to determine the 'intended use' of a game. A mod like *Counter-Strike* can be seen as a way of playing *Half-Life* that was not intended by its designers, but it is not a cheat.

Walkthroughs, i.e. detailed instructions on how to get through a game, are another common cheating strategy, especially in adventure games such as *Tomb Raider* that require a lot of puzzle-solving. Clearly, the designers intended these puzzles to be solved, so the criterion of 'counter-intentional use' does not apply here. Still, this practice gives players an advantage they would not possess otherwise, and can be likened to cheating strategies such as peeking at other players' cards in a game of Poker.

In fact, cheats seem to have only one thing in common: they change the way players experience the game. They do so either by literally changing the look and feel of the game environment and the objects therein, or by rendering the obstacles put up by the game's designers instantly surmountable, or by increasing the strength and abilities of the players' avatars to such a degree as to make them vastly superior to all the other players. A working definition of cheats should therefore be based on their ability to change a player's perception of the game-world, rather than their manipulative or even destructive qualities. This enables us to distinguish different types of cheats by the ways in which they change the players' experience of the game.

TOWARDS A TYPOLOGY OF CHEATS

Cheats can be classified into a whole range of categories, the broadest of which are platform, game mode, and genre. By platform, I refer to the differences between PC, console, and arcade games, which pertain mostly to the ways in which cheats are entered into the machine. While PC games usually allow direct access to the game files, console and arcade games do not offer this possibility. In many cases, this means the range of possible manipulations is much larger in PC games.

The term game mode is used here to differentiate single-player games, 'closed' multi-player games (usually played over a LAN or privately owned servers) and 'open' multi-player games (usually played over the internet on public servers). While cheating in single-player games affects only the person playing the game, cheating in multi-player games is often a source of conflict. Closed multi-player games do not offer the anonymity of the internet, therefore cheating is usually not that much of a problem. But in open multi-player

games cheating can destabilize whole game-worlds, and therefore, much time and effort is spent on anti-cheating measures.

Genre is another useful category in classifying different kinds of cheats. As I have pointed out elsewhere, computer game genres can be mapped onto a triangular matrix, according to their specific levels of narrativity, interactivity, and openness. In this model, the term interactivity refers to the frequency of the players' physical interaction with the game, while openness refers to the range of actions the players can choose from. Thus, a fast-paced action game like *Space Invaders* scores high on interactivity, but has a comparatively low level of openness.

In adventure games such as *Monkey Island*, the level of narrativity is significantly higher than in other types of games, while the levels of interactivity and openness are comparatively low. Therefore, most adventure game cheats serve to remove 'narrative obstacles,' either by 'foretelling' the game's story (walkthroughs), or by offering instant access to higher levels. Fast-paced action games typically have a high level of interactivity, but score rather low on narrativity and openness. Typical cheats for action games increase the games' interactivity, for example by making the players' avatars invulnerable.

A high level of openness is usually found in simulation games such as *SimCity*. Classic simulation games have no narrative progression to speak of, and since the game's pace is dependent on the player, the level of interactivity is also low. Lack of funds and arbitrary restrictions limit the level of openness, and therefore many cheats address these limitations. In competitive simulation games such as *Civilization*, cheats also include strategic hints that give the player an advantage over the other players. Some simulation games

even feature cheats as a regular option in the game's menu.

Adventure games, action games and simulation games can be regarded as genre prototypes, as they are 'pure' manifestations of one of the three interactive modes (narrativity, interactivity and openness). In comparison to those, strategy games and role-playing games must be regarded as hybrid forms, since they typically incorporate two different interactive modes. Role-playing games combine a comparatively high level of openness with narrative progression, while strategy games can be seen as a compromise between interactivity and openness. Therefore, the types of cheats that can be found in these game genres are often a mixture of the cheats found in genre prototypes.

While this general overview of genre-specific cheats does not take into account differences within genres, it draws attention to the fact that each genre has a set of prototypical cheats which are to some degree expected by the game community. In other words, far from contributing to the 'corruption' of games, cheats are part of the definition of game genres. A game can even be regarded as 'incomplete' if it does not feature a certain set of generic cheats. As game producer Gordon Walton points out in regard to *The Sims Online*: "If you leave a cheat long enough, it becomes part of the culture of the game"(Quoted in Wayner, 2003).

There are, according to my brief overview, basically three kinds of cheats: cheats that speed up narrative progression, cheats that increase the player's frequency of interaction, and cheats that enhance the range of the player's options.

Theorists such as Lev Manovich claim that narration becomes "spatialized"(Manovich,

2001) in digital games, i.e. narrative progression is mapped onto the three-dimensional space of the game-world. Speeding up narrative progression can thus be regarded as a condensation of space. The first type of cheats can be seen as effecting a change in the way players perceive game-space, while the second type of cheats changes the players' perception of game-time. Since time is such a crucial factor in most action games, the cheats found in these games are essentially time-savers. For example, cheats that give players access to certain game objects can be regarded as shortcuts from the player's current position to the desired object.

The third kind of cheats is of an entirely different order. Cheats that increase the range of options available can be said to change players' feeling of agency. Just as children learn to differentiate between their selves and the outside world through transitional objects, in digital games, players have the unique opportunity to reset the parameters of their rather stable sense of agency.

THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO CHEATS

So far, computer game theorists have by and large shunned the subject of cheats. If the phenomenon of cheats is mentioned at all, it is usually treated as a trivial aspect of games that requires no further inquiry. Fuller and Jenkins' treatment of the matter is a case in point:

A related feature of the games are warp zones – secret passages that, like De Certeau's bridges, accelerate one's movement through the narrative geography and bring two or more worlds together. Knowledge about warp zones, passwords, and other game secrets are key items of social exchange between game players. More to the point, they have become important aspects of the

economic exchange between game companies and players. (Fuller and Jenkins, 1995:67)

Another example can be found in Barry Atkins' book *More Than A Game*. "The presence of 'cheats' that allow the player to skip forwards in text or acquire a full inventory of weapons and accessories are, as their name implied [*sic*], an unsatisfactory intervention that similarly indicates a failing of reading." (Atkins, 2003:48-9)

The problem of cheats cannot be addressed by using theoretical models that emphasize the aesthetic autonomy of games; a theoretical approach to cheating must take the context of games into account. Games should be regarded not only as texts in which cheats can be used to skip certain passages, but also as media that foster new forms of symbolic interaction between individuals, and as cybernetic systems, in which cheating performs a sort of 're-entry' of the environment into the system itself.

Single-player games

The first context I want to focus on is the single-player adventure game. While the generic adventure game seems to have expired at some point in the early 1990s, contemporary action adventures such as *Grand Theft Auto 3* (*GTA3*) can be seen as their successors. In *GTA3*, players still engage in the same activities as they did in early textual adventure games such as *Zork* – gathering items, killing adversaries, and exploring a maze-like environment. The narrative structure is basically the same: the gameplay consists of repeating the same actions over and over, until the narrative barrier barring access to the next level can be removed.

Certain missions in *GTA3* cannot be played before others have been completed, and the

missions in one part of Liberty City must be completed before the next part of the city can be accessed. That is, unless the player decides to cheat. There are quite a number of cheat codes that can be entered during gameplay in *GTA3*. However, most of these pertain to the action part of the game, and do not influence narrative progression. But if players get stuck in the game, and cannot figure how to complete an 'obligatory' mission they can seek advice from one of the many 'walkthroughs' available.

In many cases, these documents will supply players with detailed instructions on how to complete the mission in question. Therefore, consulting a 'strategy guide' is usually the last resort for players. In an article on adventurecollective.com, Jeremiah Kaufman describes this predicament as follows: "I am sure you have all experienced the feeling of being stuck. Not only can you not figure out the solution and move on, but the illusion forms that there is no solution."(Kaufman, 2000) 'Being stuck' is perceived as a 'constriction' of narrative space, which can only be overcome by referring to a 'hint book' or a similar document.

In adventure games, the players' pleasure derives from a careful balance between the puzzles they are confronted with and the resources the game supplies them with in order to solve these puzzles. The players' pleasure therefore depends on their having the sense that there is a solution. If it can be found at first try, this is usually experienced as anticlimactic, but if it cannot be found at all, this quickly becomes a source of frustration. Therefore, the 'pleasure of the game' which is lost through a puzzle which is too hard can only be regained by taking recourse to resources outside of the game.

In reference to hypertext, Espen Aarseth speaks of "topological constraints laid down by the author" (Aarseth, 1997:78) that limit the reader's freedom to read in a 'tmesic' (i.e. skipping) manner. By analogy, we can consider cheats in terms of means that can be used to overcome the topological constraints of the game. After all, the pleasure of any game depends on a balance between its rules and the freedom these rules leave the player for unconstrained interaction. Cheats can solve this dilemma by decreasing the perceived level of constraint in the game, thus setting the playing process in motion again.

Multi-player games

As Jacques Ehrmann has pointed out, "any theory of communication (or of information) implies a theory of play ... and a game theory. And vice versa." (Ehrmann, 1968:56) We can regard games as media that enable the players to communicate in a certain manner. The kind of communication that takes place within the medium of the game is therefore a form of meta-communication about the process of playing. This is also the conclusion Gregory Bateson draws from his observation of playing monkeys: "[P]lay [...] could only occur if the participant organisms were capable of some degree of meta-communication, i.e., of exchanging signals which would carry the message 'this is play.'"(Bateson, 1983:315)

Humans are capable of an even greater degree of meta-communication than monkeys. While the monkey's game still depends on the rules of combat, games between humans can be defined entirely by abstract rules, or the rules themselves can become the subject of play. This practice of playing with the rules, rather than by the rules is as widespread and multifaceted as the practice of playing itself, and ranges from changing individual rules of a game to changing the whole rule-set, or

changing the rules that apply to each individual player. (See Wright et al., 2003) The common denominator of these practices is their social nature: a change in the rules needs to be agreed to by all the players involved. In contrast, cheating can be regarded as an attempt to make one player exempt from the rules agreed upon by the other players, thus creating an individual rule-set for the cheater.

To differentiate the various forms of cheats found in 'open' and 'closed' multi-player games, I introduce the distinction between cheats and so-called 'exploits', which is often found in the popular discourse about games. Exploits are usually defined as bugs or loopholes in the game design that players can use to their advantage. Wright et al. describe one such exploit in the game *Counter-Strike* that allows 'dead' team-members to communicate with the living: "[A] fellow CT [counter-terrorist] member who is 'dead' [...] uses the vote command to place the following vote, 'vote Tom Tunnel.' The server issues an automatic response, 'Sorry, DeadEar, Tom Tunnel was not found on this server.'" (ibid.)

This practice is within the bounds of the game's rules, but it might well be construed as cheating, especially by the players against which this tactic is used. Nevertheless, Wright et al. subsume this behavior under the heading of 'creative player actions.' In this respect, exploits can be compared to 'emergent gameplay,' i.e. a way to interact with the game-world unforeseen by the designers. While this comparison is clearly justified in respect to the comparatively harmless example given above, the distinction between creative and abusive is blurred as soon as one takes into account more severe exploits such as those that make use of time lag in the player's connection to the server. In his article "How to Hurt the

Hackers", Matt Pritchard describes the effect of extreme lag in games such as *Age of Empires*:

When this happened, the game engines stopped advancing to the next game turn while they waited for communications to resume. [...] While the game was in this state, a player could issue a command to cancel construction of a building, returning its resources to the player's inventory – only the player would issue the command over and over as many times as possible. [...] The result was the command executed multiple times during one game update. (Pritchard, 2000)

The difference between the example given by Wright et al.'s and Pritchard's example cannot be determined in reference to the rules of the respective games, since both are actions that require no active manipulation of the game's rules on the part of the player. It is to be found rather in the social dimension of these games, i.e. in the way in which these exploits change the interaction between the players. If single-player adventure games can be said to create a narrative space for the player to explore, multi-player games create an ad-hoc social space which is constituted as much by the player's consensus as by the game architecture.

This is necessarily a process of inclusion and exclusion, and one of the means to achieve this delimitation of a social space is to use specialized rule-sets. As in every form of symbolic interaction, these rules often stem from an aberration which has been taken over by other interactors over time, and which is thus conventionalized. It might seem a sign of deterioration if *Diablo* players have to take recourse to cheating in order to survive in the game-world, (See Kuo, 2001) but from a cultural point of view it can be considered an

indicator of evolution, albeit not the sort of evolution intended by the manufacturers of the game.

Within gaming cultures, wallhacks, aimbots and other 'illegal' manipulations are defining cultural activities that are as much part of the culture of a particular game as clans or mods. While some of these activities are welcomed by publishers for their potential economic value (one of the most prominent examples being the phenomenal success of the *Half-Life* mod *Counter-Strike*), others are frowned upon by the industry due to the disruption they create for mainstream players. This schizophrenic attitude towards the uncontrollable creativity of the player community indicates that the social space created by games is far from uncontested territory. In fact, the vehemence of the industry's anti-cheating measures is a very real manifestation of a less author-centric cultural paradigm that has begun to replace the traditional model of media production, distribution and reception.

From an aesthetic point of view, this is an interesting development, since it seems to constitute an excess of games' inherent possibilities, a playfulness on the part of the players that goes beyond the game itself and transforms an object of consumption into a creative medium. This is not to say that all cheaters are artists, but the sum total of the creative energy that they invest into a game is bound to change its public perception, thus endowing the game with a 'social aesthetic,' that is to say, an aesthetic that depends on the participation of a large number of recipients to achieve its effect. While this effect is not necessarily the effect intended by the 'authors' of the game, it is an effect to be reckoned with if one takes into account gaming cultures' history of using games against their original

purpose, from cross-dressing in *Quake* to Jodi.org's 'deconstructivist' mod of *Castle Wolfenstein, S.O.D.*

Massively multi-player online games

This social aesthetic is probably most pronounced in massively multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs), such as *Ultima Online*. It is also here that the problem of cheating is felt most acutely, by players and providers alike. While cheating in single-player games might create an internal conflict for the individual player, and cheating in multi-player games is likely to create tensions within the players' social dynamic, the extent of damage wrought by cheaters in MMORPGs is far greater. The reason for this large potential for disruption lies in the fact that online role-playing games strive to create a persistent world that is influenced and shaped by all its inhabitants.

The showcase example of the damage cheaters can do to an online role-playing game is Blizzard's *Diablo*. Released in 1997, it predates persistent-world games such as *EverQuest* and *Ashteron's Call*, and for this reason its developers were unprepared for the invasion of cheaters that followed its release. In a Games Domain interview with a Blizzard spokesman the company admits to having been surprised at the level of cheating in *Diablo* and to being "outnumbered" by cheaters (See Greenhill, 1997). What happened then is described by Andy Kuo in his article "A (very) brief history of cheating":

Then the cheaters came. As a social construct, despite being virtual, the online world of *Diablo* was just as susceptible to cheaters as the real world. Imagine yourself as a player, having spent countless hours laboriously developing your character to a very high

level, possessing powerful equipment. Then one day, you encounter a ridiculously high level character, possessing unimaginably powerful equipment, asking questions like 'How do I attack a monster?' Such obviously new players had found ways of illegitimately altering their characters. Using a technique called 'duping', they could duplicate any item they owned, or even fabricate them out of thin air (Kuo, 2001)

In *Diablo*, the nightmare of any capitalist society came true: the means of production (in the form of "compilers, disassemblers, debuggers and utilities"(Pritchard, 2000)) were handed over to the masses, and the masses used them recklessly, thus destabilizing the carefully balanced economy of the game-world. In economic terms, there is hardly a difference between a character's possessions and his or her stats, so the cheaters' ability to raise their character's statistics to impossibly high numbers has the same result: a good whose value is dependent on its scarcity is thrown on the 'market' in vast amounts, which results in a sort of deflation of the game's economy: "[W]hatever the reason, it's indisputable that every item or weapon created from thin air, will lend a hand to completely depreciating the value of it."(Greenhill, 1997)

Other cheats, most notably the infamous 'townkill' and 'autokill' commands, damaged the social fabric of the game rather than its economic model. In the original game, it was not possible to kill another player within a town, so new and inexperienced players could take refuge there. Once the 'townkill' cheat was introduced to the game, new players were slain with such frequency, that their only choice was to resort to cheating as well. This rationale is used even in the 'advertising' of

Diablo cheats: "Tired of getting town-killed? Punish the curs before they get you. Tired of players you can't kill? Become godly yourself (hey Jesus did it) ... Bottom line, if cheating on Battle.net has ruined the game for you, then ruin it for some other poor non-llama!!!" (Quoted in Kuo, 2001)

MMORPGs are perhaps best regarded as complex cybernetic systems, in which a change in one of its constituent parts affects all other parts to some degree. The economical model of the game-world and different social systems (such as classes, guilds, etc.) can be seen as sub-systems of the game-system, which is, of course, a sub-system of the real-world social system that encompasses us all. Borrowing a term from systems theory, cheating is a form of 're-entry,' a figure that re-introduces into the system the basic distinction by which the system is differentiated from its environment. In the case of games, this distinction is marked by the difference between playing by the rules and playing with the rules.

In real life, we are constantly required to adjust the rules of social interaction with others, depending on various contexts, which causes a rather high level of contingency in non-standard interactions. In contrast, games set up a frame for rule-based interaction that leaves not much room for contingency, thus constituting a 'safe' social space. By re-introducing the possibility to play with the rules into the game, cheaters simultaneously re-introduce the contingency of real life, which explains the non-cheating player's outrage at the cheaters. In the light of this conceptualization it seems rather ironic that in the above quote cheats are advertised as endowing players with 'godly' powers. After all, a world ruled by willful gods is a very fitting metaphor for a contingent universe, a

universe in which anything can happen at any time.

Quite obviously, cheats in MMORPGs fall into the category of cheats that influence the players' perception of their agency. While this type of cheats is associated with simulation games in the classification I have developed above, it can be employed in the analysis of online role-playing games as well, since they simulate a persistent world. Cheats shed a dubious light on the persistency of the game-worlds, however. The hacking of the *Diablo Realms* servers in December 2000 is a case in point: although Blizzard was quick to assure players that the killed characters would be restored and the stolen items returned, the players' confidence in the persistence of online game-worlds was shaken. Thus, one player's increase in agency is another player's loss of immersion. Cheats introduce a nagging doubt about the consistency of the game-world the players inhabit, subjecting them, in effect, to the same doubts and fears they might experience offline.

CONCLUSION

In the real world, activities that prompt us to question the validity of our assumptions about the world we inhabit are often regarded as works of art. In game-worlds, such activities are mostly regarded as vandalism, unless they are non-disruptive, such as Eddo Stern's *Summons to Surrender*, a collection of MMORPG characters programmed to perform the same action over and over. From an aesthetic point of view, it is hard to differentiate these 'subversive' activities, since they differ only in the magnitude of their effect. While artistic projects in the real world are unlikely to unhinge economic systems or result in the loss of lives or possessions, these dangers are very 'real' in virtual worlds.

While the loss of virtual items or characters might mean a real financial loss for the person owning them, now that these items sell for real money, the actual danger lies in the disillusionment of the players. Cheating in game worlds is a signal to the players that these worlds are not exempt from the rules of the real world. Rather, games are subject to the same power relations as the social systems we inhabit in everyday life. This does not make cheating a noble activity, deserving of praise rather than criticism. But it serves as a reminder that the playing field extends far beyond the boundaries of these game worlds, and what is at stake is our perception of games as cultural objects.

In summary, we can say that cheats are deserving of more critical attention than they have received so far, as they contribute to our understanding of the perception of digital games. 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. The phenomenon of cheats is of special interest in multi-player role-playing games, as these are novel participatory media forms that are infused with cultural codes from the real world such as the flow of currency and commodities. Insofar as the characters themselves become a commodity in MMORPGs, cheats that address this commodification can be said to possess critical potential. Whether or not this critique is intentional is beside the point. As in the case of games themselves, authorial intention plays second fiddle to creative use of the objects created. If for nothing else, cheats deserve credit for making us aware of this 'social aesthetic' of the games we play.

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