

THE CHEATERS

In the past few years we've seen a surge in interest in multiplayer games, with the development of online capabilities for console systems, most notably the success of Microsoft's Xbox Live service. Likewise, there's been tremendous growth in the MMO genre with games like *World of Warcraft* and *Lineage 2* drawing millions of players, and casual games such as *Neopets* and *Yoboho! Puzzle Pirates* demonstrating the reach of digital games beyond the traditional player demographics. So it's natural to think of cheating in relation to such games and consider the consequences for such spaces when contested practices invariably emerge.

As the last chapter showed, there are a variety of reasons that many players cheat when they play games, but the vast majority of that activity is limited to single-player games. Those who decide to gain an unfair advantage in multiplayer games are relatively few and far between, yet their actions have implications that go deeper than their individual preferences. Their conduct has effects on other players, virtual worlds, and the economics of the wider games industry. I'll concentrate here on those individuals and activities, as they are a focal point for understanding both what good and bad gameplay mean, and how we define boundary points or lines between the two. Likewise, I'll bring in how multiplayer cheating relates to gaming capital, and ways to understand such types of cheating in relation to the concepts of performance and play.

The information in this chapter is based on interviews I've conducted with game players, game developers, and specialized game security personnel (working at both development studios and game security firms), material taken from published sources on game security, and lectures and roundtables about cheating in games at the four Game Developer Conferences held from 2003 to 2006.

According to those sources, the majority of players engaging in multiplayer cheating are male, with one important exception. The players I interviewed who fell into this category were also relatively young, ranging in age from nineteen to thirty-two. Similarly, executives from firms such as Even Balance (the maker of PunkBuster) confirm that the majority of online multiplayer cheaters they have encountered are young males.¹ Of the women I interviewed who admitted to cheating, only a couple said they cheated in multiplayer situations, and as Cathy explains, “It was only because everyone was cheating. We all knew.”

Yet while conducting this research, I discovered further activities that challenged the predominant assumption that it’s mainly males who cheat online. As I’ll discuss later in this chapter, in virtual worlds where a majority of players are girls, cheating by girls is just as common as cheating by boys.

The majority of players who use hacks or other cheats that alter the game code do not develop the cheat they use. As Jeff Morris of Epic Games notes, in his experiences going after those who employ such cheats, 90 percent of cheaters in *Unreal Tournament* are individuals who find and download a preexisting cheat online.² Those players generally surf the Web looking for easy places to find cheats, and can thus also be stopped by drying up the distribution sources—Web sites that offer or advertise cheats and hacks.

According to Morris, there are two other types of players who are much more troublesome for game developers, and demand more time and resources, if indeed the developer wishes to go after cheaters at all.³ They include the (approximately) 1 percent of players who write an original cheat, distribute it, and develop a following, and another 9 percent or so who “want to take your game down,” feel rewarded when developers pay attention to them, and actually “don’t think they’re doing anything wrong.” That’s because they position themselves as customers, and the developer as someone who promised them the ability to modify and customize their gaming experience.⁴ The 1 percent who write cheats themselves are the most difficult to catch, according to Morris, yet the most valuable to find, as they are the supply source for the majority of those who wish to cheat.

Individuals who have admitted to cheating in multiplayer games say they enjoyed the activity quite a bit, or at least reflected that they did, if

they cheated in the past. Cheating was a ludic activity, playful in intent, although a component of this effect was gained at the expense of others. For example, Neal (twenty-two) defined the act of cheating itself as “breaking the fundamental rules of the game, *and thereby ruining the enjoyment of others*, or utterly destroying the challenge of the game” (emphasis added). For him, cheating was not merely instrumental but by definition also relational. Neal may be close to the griever in gameplay style, but he still needed two elements for his activity: cheating was gaining advantage as well as playful in some way.

While for the rule-abiding player a cheat might be ludic in that it allows greater freedom or options within a game, that particular cheat is limited to strictly benefiting the player, with no other players involved. It is not a zero-sum game—no one else has to be worse off for that player to gain. Yet for the cheater, the ludic experience is gained in part through someone else’s disadvantage.

The cheater needs to be distinguished from the griever, who plays mainly to cause distress in other players. While the griever is using cheats ludically, that individual is doing so with one central goal in mind: the reactions of others. By contrast, the cheater gains pleasure from using cheats, but does so for another reason: to gain advantage and progress further (or win) in the game. Perhaps for some cheaters there is no ludic sense involved; cheats are solely instrumental to getting ahead and winning. Nevertheless, of the players I talked with who admitted to cheating in such fashion, most felt that pleasure played a part in their activities. And many of these players drew little or no distinction between the activities of the griever and those of the cheater—both activities were wrong, and were conceptualized as cheating. While that might seem to conflict with the overarching definition of cheating as gaining an unfair advantage—the griever gains no real advantage from his activities—it might be that the griever is seen by players as acting unethically, or is cheating other players out of the acquisition of gaming capital or at the least an enjoyable gameplay experience.

Where They Are: The Worlds of the Cheater

Cheaters can be found almost anywhere there’s a game being played. While some players I interviewed mentioned cheating in off-line multi-

player games, the greatest popular attention has been paid to online games, where opportunities to cheat multiply, and the risks of being caught and damaging a reputation decrease. Yet cheating in off-line games is also significant and worthy of investigation, especially as it prefigures many actions found online. To gain a better picture of the many places in which cheating occurs, I want to explore the constraints and affordances offered by different gaming locations, and how each can encourage as well as discourage particular types of cheating behaviors.

Off-line Play, Many Players

Individuals have cheated at games long before the existence of videogames. The cardsharp or card counter, the shell game, the gambler with weighted dice, and the self-serving *Monopoly* banker have all contributed to what we know about cheating. Some cheats are perpetrated without conferring advantage, such as the parent who cheats to end the (endless) game of *Candyland* and allow his child to win the round. What I want to focus on here, however, are cheats that do confer advantage in some particular way. In off-line games, played face-to-face, there are still opportunities to cheat in videogames as well as players who take advantage of that opening. What can vary are the nature of the cheat along with its seriousness in infringing on gameplay and others' reactions to it.

Individuals are aware of many opportunities to cheat in videogames and often will take steps to eliminate situations where the temptation to cheat might be too great for (almost) any player to ignore. To do so, players frequently negotiate rules before play starts (and many times as play progresses), much like players of nonelectronic games, in order to limit accusations of as well as temptations for cheating. While players cannot cover every contingency nor know of every possible action other players might take that might be considered cheating, individuals often negotiate in good faith before gameplay begins. Such actions are a reminder of the many ways that gameplay is alterable outside the actual code of games.

In off-line gameplay, players frequently know one another, and the game space is bounded to one physical locale, which gives players greater control over how that space and game are utilized. So, for example, players can negotiate beforehand if one player (or more) is allowed a handicap in a golf game. While the self-conferral of advantage might result in cries of cheating, working out and modifying the rules in advance limits such

problems. Likewise, in games such as the FPS *Goldeneye*, which uses a split-screen view for each player, some competitors have chosen to prevent the temptation to cheat by taping a barrier down the middle of the television screen to keep each other from ascertaining a rival's location in game.⁵

Activities like these suggest the dynamic nature of cheating—it is not always the easily definable activity we would like it to be, such as the file-hacking player who uses code to see through walls or perfectly aim his weapons. Instead, it can also include players who “peek” while their counterparts are lining up plays in the latest *Madden* or are checking another player's location in one of the iterations of *Army Men*. Player-improvised negotiations and modifications can help prevent the tempting cheat from being plucked as well as limit the activities of known overzealous players. Yet even in the same game, if there are different players involved, checking out a rival's position might be considered shrewd game strategy and allowable. The key is in the negotiations that take place either before play begins or as it proceeds, as players work out what they consider unfair advantage as well as skillful gameplay. Once such negotiations have been made, though, the opportunities to cheat have been named and those who cheat can be punished accordingly.

In physical spaces, the opportunities to cheat are not only limited technologically but socially as well. As J. Barton Bowyer has written, it's easier to cheat in anonymous situations, as a player's reputation does not precede him in that case. In face-to-face gameplay, the cheater may occasionally succeed, but if her cheating is uncovered, the subsequent damage to the cheater's reputation often prevents her from participating in future opportunities to gain advantage.⁶ When identity and behavior can be physically associated and gameplay is also a physically bounded activity, cheating cannot be easily dismissed nor confused. The cheater, once uncovered, can be more easily removed from future gameplay situations or have his gameplay discounted. Yet when the cheater goes online, a new world opens up, and cheating becomes magnified in terms of both lowered risk and the types of cheats attempted.

Online: Play the World

Early researchers of cyberspace remarked on the anonymity and freedom from bodily constraints to be found online.⁷ Users could experiment with

different aspects of their identities, creating (or expressing) entirely different selves online.⁸ Participants in text-based multiuser dungeon (MUD) games were especially interesting to study, as players might explore the expression of different genders, or create new virtual societies with elaborate rules and punishments. Richard Bartle, who created the first MUD in Britain in the late 1970s, has written some of the earliest work examining player types, but textual spaces never gained widespread popularity or attention.⁹ One of the earliest graphical online games was *Habitat*, released in 1987 on an Internet service to become America Online, which further revealed the varied nature of player approaches to online games, with challenges like duping and PK appearing early in the game's run.¹⁰ Similar actions in the larger world of *Ultima Online* demonstrated that cheating could exist quite easily in online as well as off-line game spaces.

That isn't to say that cheating in online spaces is the same thing as cheating off-line, however. Although later researchers have revised ideas about anonymity online, there can still remain a certain degree of it, especially as game worlds or servers become bigger and reach global populations. And with large spaces unmoored from more traditional identity markers (a physical body or a legal name), repercussions for poor behavior, including cheating, become more difficult to make stick. As Bowyer argues, not only does anonymity make punishment more difficult to apply to the violator it can also increase an individual's propensity to cheat.¹¹ So as it becomes easier to get away with, it becomes even more alluring to try. Individuals who would never cheat in a face-to-face game might readily do so in online situations. Without the tieback to a more physical sense of identity and its constraints, some players happily push the boundaries of acceptable behavior.

Yet while online spaces may make it easier to contemplate cheating or escape its aftermath, it can also be more difficult to accomplish. The off-line cheater may only need a quick glance at another player's location onscreen to gain advantage, while the online cheater has greater technical constraints to manage. Depending on the level of the cheater (that is, someone who creates hacks versus someone else who downloads them from a popular site), greater or lesser amounts of technical skill are involved. As mentioned before, gaming capital can be involved in the realm of online cheating, as cheaters strive to impress other cheaters with their hacks, bots, and "social engineering" misdeeds. So social ostracism

can result for the online cheater, in different ways. Both the elite hacker can be embarrassed as well as the more “pedestrian” bot user who is black-listed by more ordinary players.

Not all online cheaters need technological skill to succeed, though; one of the easiest ways to cheat is to simply pull the Internet plug when one is losing an online game and disconnect before the loss is official. Likewise, other cheaters prefer more sociological methods to gain advantage, such as Evangeline in *The Sims Online*, who simply through talking conned new players out of their money.¹² Whatever the cheater’s preference—technological or social—either method can be turned into a cheat online.

There are many different ways to cheat in a videogame, and methods can differ depending on where the game is played—online or off-line. While both are digital spaces, each resulting location brings with it different types of player relations as well as opportunities and constraints on cheating behavior. Some players cannot cheat others when physically next to them, needing the cover of anonymity to press the advantage. Others might only utilize the “easier” cheats of off-line play, rather than engage in more sophisticated technological or psychological engineering to get ahead in a game. Anonymity might be a spur to cheat for some players, while for others it is only those nearby that would do. Cheating can come in various forms, which I explore next, but those forms are delimited (or allowed) by the space in which the cheater chooses to operate.

What They Do, from Aimbots to Zeny Buying

What do players do when they cheat in multiplayer games? The answers are varied and imaginative. In this section, I want to discuss the different types of cheats that players engage in during multiplayer games, and how those do or do not relate back to the typology of cheating developed in the last chapter. I can’t hope to list and explain all of the types of cheats that players can employ (new ones are certainly being developed as I write this, and as the reader later reads this), but I will cover major types of cheats, suggesting the ways that such cheats operate as well as how and why cheaters might choose those particular methods. The cheats are divided into the following four categories: taking advantage of glitches, taking advantage of people, taking advantage of code, and taking advantage of third-party systems.

Taking Advantage of a Glitch: Exploits and Duping

Depending on your point of view, an exploit might or might not be a cheat, yet its very contestedness places it on this list. Exploits don't involve a player actively changing code in a game or deceiving other players; instead, they are "found" actions or items that accelerate or improve a player's skills, actions, or abilities in some way that the designer did not originally intend, yet in a manner that does not actively change code or involve deceiving others. One of the earliest examples of such an exploit was found in *Habitat*. In that game, the designers relate, players discovered at one point a vending machine that sold items for a certain price, and a pawnshop that bought that same item back for an even higher price. As Chip Morningstar and Randall Farmer explain,

Naturally, a couple of people discovered this. One night they took all their money, walked to the Doll Vendroid, bought as many Dolls as they could, then took them across town and pawned them. . . . The final result was at least three Avatars with hundreds of thousands of Tokens each. We only discovered this the next morning when our daily database status report said that the money supply had quintupled overnight. . . . We were puzzled that no bug report had been submitted. By poking around a bit we discovered that a few people had suddenly acquired enormous bank balances. We sent *Habitat* mail to the two richest, inquiring as to where they had gotten all that money overnight. Their reply was, "We got it fair and square! And we're not going to tell you how!" After much abject pleading on our part they eventually did tell us, and we fixed the erroneous pricing.¹³

A more recent example wasn't even an actual exploit but the rumor of a duping (or item duplication) exploit found after an update to *World of Warcraft* in July 2005. Players debated its existence on forums, and Blizzard responded to allegations regarding the exploit by saying it took such problems seriously, as "the potential damage a duping exploit can bring to a game can be devastating." Author Miguel Lopez of *Gamespy* reported on the alleged problem, explaining the temptation behind using such exploits and the challenges that MMO developers face:

Just like people do in real life MMO players covet expensive things. And likewise, anyone who can make a quick buck, even if the methods involved are just a little bit illegal, will attempt to do so. Like many of the elements that

make up these games, it's all about risk-versus-reward; i.e., is it worth risking your account to make tons of gold? You can be damn sure that 99 percent of players would perform some kind of exploit if they had zero chance of getting caught.¹⁴

Neither the *Habitat* nor *World of Warcraft* exploits (real or imagined) involved hacking code or the deception of others, yet both resulted in gameplay not intended by the designer. Cheaters can also use exploits to escape death as well as increase their chances of killing opponents. For example, in the PC version of *Halo* there is an exploit known as “lag jumping”: “With this exploit, when the cheater is threatened (that is, fired on or about to be run over by a vehicle) they deliberately cause themselves to lag. As a result, their on-screen avatar will blink in-and-out of the game world and appear to teleport several feet, making them difficult to hit.”¹⁵

Not all players see exploits as cheats, for a couple of reasons. First, they are available to all players shortly after they are figured out, and can sometimes become an acceptable part of gameplay, at least in particular games. They thus function as another aid for gameplay, much like strategy tips or maps made available to any player dedicated enough to search for them and then practice their use. Likewise, most of these exploits require no alteration of the game code—another practice that signals cheating to players. Many players reason that because it is not specifically prohibited by the developer's code, it might not be a cheat.¹⁶ Some exploits are more readily agreed on as cheats by players, however, such as the “lag kill cheat” in *Halo 2*:

This is an XBox Live modem exploit that allows a cheater to cause all other players to go into standby mode while the cheater remains active within the game. As a result, everyone else in the game world is frozen in place (with their televisions displaying a loading screen), while the cheater is free to run around killing players or stealing their flags. Bungie has addressed this exploit and threatened to terminate the accounts of any players who utilize it. Fortunately, it is extremely obvious when it is used.¹⁷

Such exploits stretch the notion of “allowable” so far that most players deem them cheats and disallow their use in gameplay. Such cheats also go beyond increasing the abilities or advantages of one player to actively

hurting other players, thereby making it more likely that most players would see such activities as cheating.

The discovery of bugs that allow players to dupe items or currency in games is also usually defined as cheating by both players and developers.¹⁸ Duping problems were particularly troublesome in *Diablo* and *Diablo II*, with some players making multiple copies of high-value items, which then entered into general circulation. In attempts to curb the duping, Blizzard worsened the situation for players who had unknowingly purchased a duped item, which subsequently disappeared when the game was “fixed.”¹⁹ Those duping cheats were also widely known about, and the player response was often strong opposition to those practices.

Some players went so far as to create elaborate warnings for other players, such as those found on the *Diabloii.net* site, which has extensive information about duping, hacks, cheats, PK, and other cheating and antisocial behaviors that can be found in *Diablo II*, in addition to general game information and strategy. The site also takes the developer, Blizzard, to task for not cracking down on cheats seriously enough:

Instead of having and enforcing clear rules about hacking, Blizzard does nothing but issue never-enforced warnings, and has their support team fix hacks/cheats once they are discovered. Since there isn't any punishment for hacking, hackers of course try to find new methods constantly, and as soon as Blizzard fixes one, others appear. This means that Blizzard's tech support is forever chasing around, trying to figure how new exploits are being done, and then figuring ways to stop them, and the hackers are always at least one step ahead.²⁰

Depending on who is asked, developers take actions against cheating that are either too aggressive or not nearly good enough. Keeping cheaters at bay has become a full-time job for developers, and online games now have a variety of staff dedicated to eradicating as well as preventing various forms of cheating, as I'll talk about in the following chapter. But Blizzard was an early entrant in this category and learned things the hard way. After working on various methods to disable and prevent duping and cheats, Blizzard eventually turned to a more direct approach to rid the game of the worst offenders. In 2002, it banned 8,500 players from the game, and in 2003, closed more than 131,000 accounts and banned thousands of CD keys.²¹

To sum up, the cheats in this first category are variable to a degree, with players viewing activities like exploits and duping as contested. Most often the definition depends on the extremity of the action, and the amount of advantage or disadvantage gained as well as its impact on other players. Yet here, game laws have not been broken, just carefully bent.

Taking Advantage of People: Social Engineering

Rather than seek out glitches in game code, certain players use the social nature of multiplayer games to their advantage. Social engineering can take many forms, but mainly involves players who “game the player” rather than the system, searching for ways to trick other players into giving them what they want. That might include asking to “borrow” items from others to use temporarily and then keeping them, taking advantage of a friendship to borrow access to an account and then selling off valuable equipment, or tricking players into traveling to dangerous areas in order to kill them and steal their loot. The central element that’s involved is the exploitation of player trust.

In such scenarios, cheaters know (or learn) how to exploit the relative anonymity of game spaces as well as player expectations for other players’ and game administrators’ behavior. The cheater might create multiple personas that can’t be tracked down easily, in order to trick other players into giving them what they want. For example, an experienced player might pose as a new player, and ask others for money and items to get started in the game. Players of *Final Fantasy XI*, for instance, regularly complain on game boards about players who engage in such deceptive (and annoying) activities. Such actions are designed to take advantage of other players’ generosity and willingness to help those just beginning. While players do alert each other if such begging by a character becomes widespread, cheaters often simply start a new character and begin again, with an untarnished reputation.²²

In other situations, players may collude to artificially raise the price or value of certain items in order to gain a profit. For example, in *Whyville* two players can enter a public Trading Post and make a big deal about trading a certain item for a large amount of clams, the in-game currency. Other players watching will get excited, thinking the item is worth a high value. “But it’s either one kid with two accounts or a kid with a friend” who

have just raised the price on a particular item in order to sell more of them later for inflated sums.²³

One of the best-known examples of such a scam was the one (allegedly) perpetrated by “Nightfreeze” on the MMO *Eve Online*. After encountering players who Nightfreeze felt did not play fair, Nightfreeze decided to get even with them as well as the game itself. He worked out systems to amass great amounts of wealth, and then engineered an elaborate scam that bilked several players out of all their (considerable amounts of) money. This scam included help from an in-game friend, the creation of multiple fake accounts to promote the scam, and the use of a library telephone number so that a suspicious player could be appeased. What is noteworthy about the scam, in addition to Nightfreeze’s highly entertaining narration of it, is its reliance on fooling others as its central strategy. As Nightfreeze narrates,

This is a story of deception, intrigue, and double crossing. It is a story of liars, bandits, and greed. It is a story of the worst of the human condition, and how the motive for profit will drive a normally nice guy to the deepest depths of evil and betrayal. This is the story of my life in *Eve Online*. *Eve Online* is a space-based MMORPG with a level of depth and breadth that blows games like *Shadowbane* and *City of Heroes* out of the water. It is also a beautiful game, with glaring suns, shining stars, and exorbitant ship detail. Beneath its gilded beauty, though, there lies a poorly designed game which rewards the greedy and violent, and punishes the hardworking and honest; and if you think about it, that’s a good representation of capitalism.²⁴

Nightfreeze goes on to relate personal experiences in the game, how other players were equally unsavory, and his ultimate actions. While definitely extreme, the story does point to how cheaters can gain advantage over others without having to know anything about code or hacks. Rather, they need to be experts in human behavior and self-interest.

In addition to deceiving other players through actions purported to come from other players, cheaters can also attempt to impersonate game administrators and obtain passwords from other players in order to gain access to their accounts. Such activities are not exclusive to games, of course, and occur in just about any online activity involving a password. Cheaters can also play off real or imagined friendships with others, gain access to their accounts, and sell or give away valuable items. In those

cases, it is the alleged “reality” of the relationship that works for the cheater, who would rather have game benefits than player trust.

In sum, players can cheat without having any technological expertise at all. Rather, some cheaters play off the varied assumptions, goodwill, and shortcomings of other players to gain what they want.

Taking Advantage of Code: Hacks, Bots, and Packet Sniffers

One of the best-known forms of multiplayer cheating involves altering the code of the game. It can be accomplished in a variety of ways, and is constantly evolving due to increasing security efforts by game developers as well as the creativity of the cheaters. Cheats based on code can include aimbots, which allow a player to aim automatically at opposing players with unnatural speed and accuracy, and wall hacks, which let players see through walls and therefore find opponents who are hiding nearby. Code-based cheats also include the alteration of the messages sent to the game’s central server in order to send more favorable information as well as cheats that give players increased speed, better ways of spotting opponents in a game (such as by painting them with fluorescent skins), and ways to lag the system for other players. The focus in all of these cases is on cracking or hacking the code of the game in some way favorable to the cheater. Even among those who employ these tactics, however, there are some who do not see their actions as cheating but instead as modifying or customizing their gaming experience.

Because the majority of players who use hacks or other cheats that alter game code do not develop the cheats they use, they generally surf the Web looking for cheats, and such players will look almost anywhere. For example, several of my personal blog posts have dealt with cheating in *Final Fantasy XI*, and at least one of my threads (which discussed the use of fish bots and their banning by Square Enix) unexpectedly turned into a debate among players about bot use, where to find bot macros, and whether this type of cheat is wrong.²⁵ Without my prompting (or even initial awareness), various players began posting to my blog, to ask the question directly:

How do u get a fishing bot. (Sagi)

How do u bot? (nightskater)

I wanya free bot. (Orane)

I was wondering if anyone could tell me on where/how to get a fishing bot. (Lupin)

In addition to the direct demands for bots, or information on where and how to find them, some individuals also asked, but with some sort of justification first:

This game is nearly impossible to make gil in, I've lost over 160k in goldsmithing and I'm a crippled level black mage [i.e., poorly equipped or leveled black mage], how am I suppose to keep playing this game? I'd really appreciate it if you could tell me how to bot fish in this game. I really need the gil and equipment. (Kanstar)

Another player, who seemed to make some distinctions between types of bots used, remarked on the various uses for bots, and what was the "correct" and "incorrect" use:

Fish bot. Ok this is a little different. It's not an aimbot like in a first person shooter so it doesn't directly affect other people. I think the fish bot is fine as long as the person sits at their computer. It's not fair if they fire the bot up and then go to their job and come home and have a stringer of black eel. They're 7000 gil a stack by the way. That's not fair. (gilMakah)

Despite their approaches, all of those seeking a fish bot could be included in Morris's 90 percent of cheaters—not willing or able to create their own cheat but amenable to using one found online, for reasons that were articulated to various degrees.

It's the 1 percent that Morris refers to who write cheats who are the most valuable to find, and include such individuals as "Joolz," who wrote cheats for *Counter Strike* in his free time (during the day, Joolz worked as a corporate software engineer). Cheats such as his "Lookaim" have been downloaded by more than fifty thousand people, which allows a player to spin around and shoot an opponent behind him if the opponent looks at the player. An article about Joolz and cheating reinforces the idea that cheaters like Joolz form the top of a pyramid of cheaters, who are revered for their skill: "He gets fanmail. It's given him a name and a Wild West

notoriety. When Joolz walks into certain online chatrooms, a reverent quiet falls.”²⁶

Yet even the elite cheaters disdain the more run-of-the-mill individuals who download the cheats they themselves have created. As Joolz states, “I’ve sat there for hours on end, writing the thing. They’ve just downloaded it from a website.” Joolz also built a “backdoor” into the cheat, which lets him spot when others are using his cheat, and allows him to disable it. “I don’t like being beaten by people using my cheat,” explains Joolz.²⁷ Cheats can be multilayered, designed to not only work to the advantage of the cheater but also be responsive to the original designer’s intentions. It may allow a player to bypass or alter certain game code, but can also be a marker revealing the cheat-in-use, allowing the creator to “see through the walls” of the cheat, in addition to letting the user see through the game walls.

Taking Advantage of Third-Party Programs: Mods and Ends

Finally, some players cheat by relying on specialized programs or tools that they (or usually others) create. These tools are more than a bot, a macro, or a hack, in that they have an executable code that can run either separately from or in tandem with game code. Some of the earliest examples of such programs were UO Macros and its successor for *EverQuest*, ShowEQ, which “passively monitors network traffic for *EverQuest* data and displays it on screen in an easily readable format,” giving the player access to “EVERY mob position in the zone, its level/class/race, items it is HOLDING which affects the way it looks” and more.²⁸ The creators of the program made it an open source project, and encouraged users (who had to run it on a separate computer, in Linux) to use it in “good” rather than “evil” ways. By that, they meant that “ShowEQ makes it fairly easy to farm rare spawns. It also makes it easy to find and kill rare spawns that others might have already been after for hours. This is NOT what ShowEQ was intended to do. Farming for EBAY is another of the bad uses. While the developers can’t stop anyone from doing this, they ask that you don’t.”²⁹

Whichever way the developers intended the tool to be used, Sony obviously felt the program was a cheat, and those found using it could have

their accounts suspended or banned. The requirement of a second computer and the ability to run (and understand) Linux, however, likely limited the widespread use of ShowEQ.

More recent third-party programs for online games have proliferated and include programs that enable players to play a game in Windowed mode (if the game does not usually allow it), and more easily level and farm individual characters. One such program is the WoW Glider, designed for players of *World of Warcraft* who wish to automate certain aspects of gameplay. As its creators explain, “WoW Glider is a tool that plays your *World of Warcraft* character for you, the way you want it. It grinds, it loots, it skins, it heals, it even farms soul shards . . . **without you.**”³⁰

The program, once installed, will run a player’s character and keep it traveling on a preset path through a certain area, killing all the enemies it encounters as well as gathering items and experience points. Yet here as well, the makers of the program admit that it violates the game’s terms of service, but insist that Glider isn’t a cheat. Instead, “Glider is intended for people who want to quickly level up an alternate character or glide through the last few levels to 60.”³¹ They believe that players who want to quickly get a new character to level 60 should not rely on Glider or other third-party programs, as the players would be missing out on the fun of the game. Their program, it seems, is a way to fast-forward through the undesirable elements of gameplay. While they can try to encourage its use in particular ways, like the creators of *Habitat*, they can never fully control that.

Why They Do It: Expertise, Power, and Play

Players cheat in multiplayer games for a variety of reasons, many of which are similar to why players cheat in single-player games. Players may find a game too difficult or time-consuming, and so wish to find a bot or a hack that makes gameplay easier or lets them acquire in-game resources in less time than the developers likely planned. They can thus fast-forward through tedious content, areas, or gameplay. Players may also wish to acquire status or prestige in a particular game or game world, and use specific techniques or programs to gain that wealth and power more quickly than they would if they didn’t cheat.

But in addition to looking at cheating in multiplayer games as instrumental (time-saving or problem solving) and ludic, how else can the

activity be conceptualized or theorized in order to better understand it? While I've used the concept of gaming capital to explain the rise of paratextual game industries, it can also be tied to cheating behaviors. Players who are considered elite by other players are thought to possess large amounts (as well as particular types) of gaming capital. Such players may excel at playing particular types of games, or be quite knowledgeable about gaming hardware or the latest releases. They are aware of multiple options available in games, and can probably provide help or advice to other players. Such is the ideal gamer. Having such gaming capital confers a certain degree of power within gaming circles, whether that is a group of high school or college friends, an MMO guild, or a chat site devoted to a particular game.

Game players possessed of the proper kinds of gaming capital—for their own gaming circle—are powerful in the sense that they can often dispense advice with confidence, are looked to as experts in some way, and can, through their behavior in game, enhance or reduce opportunities for others. For example, a high-level player in an MMO might be asked for advice on the best equipment for particular levels or strategies to use on certain monsters. Likewise, a dedicated player on that same MMO might not have a high-level character but instead have much more experience in crafting. That player might be asked to craft specific items or be looked to as the expert in that area for their guild. Each of those players has a certain kind of power or expertise, which they can use productively or destructively.

Relating back to the topic at hand, cheating can also confer certain kinds of power and gaming capital, depending on the audience sought as well as the particular situation. In addition to having fun, saving time, or solving problems that are too difficult, players also can cheat as a way of gaining gaming capital. While for most players multiplayer cheating would destroy gaming capital for them, in the world of multiplayer cheaters, a subculture of cheaters can subscribe to its own beliefs about skilled gameplay and the clever exploitation of game resources. Thus, players such as Nightfreeze and Joolz can gain a following, and be revered for actions that most other players despise. So even as game companies look to stop cheaters and their hacks from working, companies like Even Balance are also interested in destroying the reputations of famous hackers in order to wipe out their gaming capital, which is potentially even more damaging than eliminating one piece of code.

Cheating and Gender: Rethinking Assumptions

Initially I had conceived of multiplayer cheating as a predominantly masculine activity, yet after learning of the many scams perpetrated by young girls in *Whyville*, I began to reconsider that assumption. While statistically the majority of players who cheat in online multiplayer games are still male, I believe it would be overly simplistic to ascribe this behavior or practice to a particular gender or gendered construction of gameplay. As T. L. Taylor and Nick Yee have written, many of the practices, behaviors, and interests that we initially ascribed to women or girl gamers have changed as they gained more experience playing games, or changed as researchers moved from studying girls to adult women. Sometimes, it seems, scholars conflate what girls and women want and do with what are actually newbie player practices and interests.³²

Given that, it seems logical to suggest that certain player activities may be reflective not just of individual player interests but also of the larger context in which those activities occur. In spaces that are either actually or assumedly disproportionately weighted toward a particular gender (or race, or class, and so on), we cannot ignore the effect that unbalancing will probably have. For instance, research has shown that women who major in math and science fields in small liberal arts colleges as well as women-only colleges are more likely to finish their programs and go on to graduate study in those areas.³³ Likewise, online researchers have found that in online spaces where rules are not explicitly set or women are not the primary users, women tend to participate less frequently and let men dominate conversations, tend to drop out of or ignore arguments, and are supportive rather than assertive in their communicative styles.³⁴

That's not to say that such differences are negative but that they do exist. And in game spaces that are predominantly male or masculine, it is likely that some girls and women will adjust their behaviors to either not draw attention to themselves or fit in with particular norms. But when in game spaces where gender imbalances disappear, interesting things start to happen. Such evolving practices can be found in the online game *Whyville*, an educational game that has received almost no popular attention from the media. The game has over a million registered users, mainly preteens, with a majority of the players being girls.

The game space consists of a series of minigames based on math and science problems, which allow players to earn salaries (clams) that they use to buy “face parts” to decorate their avatars. Players can amass wealth from salaries, but more likely from successfully designing and selling face parts to other players. A small minority of players owns most of the wealth in the game, with the richest player currently holding about twelve million clams.³⁵ As with any game, some players wish to take shortcuts to acquire as many clams as possible, either for the prestige of having wealth and great face parts, the power of having money, or perhaps the enjoyment of scamming the system and other players. The difference here is that many of those cheaters are girls.

Jennifer Sun, president of the company that runs *Whyville*, estimates that of the approximately twenty thousand players per day who log on to the game, there are “tens of such incidents” of cheating scams that occur. Those scams can range from the “relatively stupid” where a player will send another player an internal game e-mail stating it is from a game administrator asking for an account password, to more clever attempts such as when players send e-mails saying “you’ve won the Why lottery. Send us your password to verify who you are.” Such practices use greed to hook someone and potentially cheat a player out of her clams.

Players also engage in other social engineering practices, which can get quite elaborate, as well as putting up external Web sites explaining either how to cheat at the *Whyville* minigames, easy ways to solve the problems, or outside sites that pretend to be clubs for *Whyville* and need a player’s password to send them valuable gifts or information. While the administrators of *Whyville* do stop cheating as they find it occurring, and will take away improperly acquired items or clams from scammers, they take a relatively permissive stance, maintaining that “we rarely banish people because they are still playing the game. We only ban for seriously inappropriate behavior on the site.”³⁶

So if girls are just as likely to cheat in situations where they are equally represented in games, what can be said about cheating in addition to arguments about power and prestige? Sun believes that the girls who cheat are equally, if not more, represented in the social engineering cheats, but the company doesn’t keep track of infraction by gender, so it is difficult to make conclusions about particular types of cheating that may appeal to different genders. Yet one can conclude that girls and women, just like boys

and men, are interested in gaining power and prestige in games, occasionally through improper or illegal means. One of the first scams in *Whyville* involved a girl named “Flower” going around tricking other players into giving her their account password, whereupon she’d clean out their accounts. So girls too are willing and able to cheat others, simply to be able to do so.

Such stories suggest that as more gender-balanced game worlds appear, there will also be a range of play styles that are both positive and negative emerging from both male and female players. Advancement, power, and prestige matter to all players (although in varying combinations, to be sure), and all players have various challenges to confront when in game spaces, including gameplay difficulties, boredom, and dissatisfaction with developer-presented options. What this preliminary exploration of girls cheating online suggests is that one needs to be careful to consider how virtual spaces shape expectations, consciously or not, and how players may react to those spaces in unexpected ways. Just as paratextual industries like game magazines have helped to shape what gamers see as a good videogame, so too virtual spaces can shape behaviors, and the makeup of those spaces is critical to keep in mind when analysis begins.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I’ve explored some of the contested practices that individuals and groups engage in while playing multiplayer games. Although I’ve called many of the activities cheating, it’s important to remember that at least some of them are still debated over and argued about, whether they should be conceptually defined as belonging to either the cheating or skillful gameplay category. Exploits can easily reside in either location, depending on the particular trick and the player community. Social engineering varies and can also be thought of as a skilled variant of playing the game (or the gamer), rather than doing something unethical. Yet the use of technological code—hacks, bots, or third-party programs—seems to raise more of a red flag for those wishing to demarcate lines between cheating and fair play. Such tools confer advantage in ways that other players might find difficult to replicate. Additionally, the tools are generally explicitly against a game’s terms of service, and so their construction as a cheat is all but assured.

Players who use such advantages often (but not always) do so for the same reasons that players cheat in single-player games—except by using them against other players, rather than simply matching wits with a computer program. But because the stakes are higher, this form of gameplay needs more careful consideration. It's where the boundary lies for acceptable and unacceptable play, and it's here where the debates rage as new territory is contested, staked out, and then perhaps fought over once again.

Cheating: Activity or Identity?

One of the questions that this chapter (and book) raises concerns how to think about cheating by individuals in a broader sense. Succinctly put, is a person who cheats someone engaged in an activity or have they taken on a particular identity? Or does that distinction make a difference? As with gender and cheating, it might be premature or incorrect to ascribe too much intentionality to identity or at least the core identity of individuals. I believe it is more helpful to instead examine cheating as a practice, particularly one that is ludic, situated, and iterative in its expression.

As players themselves explain, cheating can be enjoyable and playful, both in the act of getting ahead as well as perhaps in the knowledge of besting other players in some way. Many such players see digital games as a space apart from “real-life” consequences, and so cheating is divorced from the fallout of what would happen if the person cheated in some way in daily life. Even players who may not draw such distinctions see cheating as enjoyable in some way or as part of the game they wished to play.

If cheating is situated, it can only come into being through active engagement with a game and other players, which suggests players are constantly being confronted with more and less meaningful choices regarding how to play a game. Exploits, for example, demonstrate how players must either decide as a group or individuals how to see such abilities in games—as cheats or clever advantages. Generally the group norm is the default for gameplay, with those not wishing to abide by general definitions then accepting the consequences for their actions, if caught.

And finally, cheating is iterative in nature—with each decision made in a game, a player “plays” at a game and a particular play style. Sometimes we play earnestly, sometimes we play carelessly, and at other times we may

stay up all night, ignoring the phone, our families, sleep, and food in order to play a game. We might ask others for help or sit there alone, desperately trying to figure out what to do next. In all of those situations, we are faced with questions about how to play.

As an example, players in *World of Warcraft* may sometimes, often, or never ask questions of themselves such as “Should I try again to camp that rare and difficult monster that someone else always seems to claim? Should I instead go to the International Game Exchange and buy some game gold? Will I only do it this one time?” With each question and each answer (as well as even the refusal to entertain such questions), the player is making choices about his or her preferred form of gameplay. Each act, each play session, “performs” the resulting avatar identity as well as shapes a player’s attitude toward a game and his or her own understanding of what it means to play. Each decision may not logically “fit” with the others—we are not consistent creatures—but each decision does have meaningful implications. Are we iterating a playful performance, a cheating performance, something else, or some mixture of actions?

Such questions have no easy answers, and only reside in the actions of players. So we can certainly ask how and why individuals cheat as well as look at what happens when people do cheat, but to ascribe such actions to core identities or individuals seems misguided. Practices are situated, and game spaces have contexts, histories, and practical limitations. We need to see cheating as an important part of those practices and spaces, but not as a static “thing” or core trait. Besides, that would be impossible, for just as games and gameplay practices change, what we consider cheating and how we respond to it have changed over time as well.

The next chapter examines some responses to cheating, both by game companies and the newly forming “anticheating industry” that take a variety of approaches to how cheating is defined, and most importantly punished, in online multiplayer games. Companies like Even Balance and NCsoft have a range of techniques they employ, each of which helps to codify what we see as cheating in contemporary games. Their particular, practical implementations are crucial to examine and discuss, as they are codifying and delimiting what we know of as cheating, and acceptable responses to it from game developers, publishers, and occasionally even game players.