Forbidden Pleasures – Cheating in Computer Games

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1. 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. The reasons for this oversight are not entirely clear, since it is immediately obvious that cheats are 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.

Building on the work of Torben Grodal, Rune Klevjer has pointed out that "the gaming experience, even though the 'passive' competencies required by film are also involved, characteristically is an aesthetics of control." An aesthetics of digital games must therefore take into account the 'illegal' modes of enhancing or diminishing the player's control. Similar to the way video recorders have changed the experience of watching films, both at home and in the theater, by giving the viewer more control over the viewing process, cheats change the perception of games, by transferring the power over the order, duration, and frequency of their sequences to the player.

Additionally, cheat codes carry cultural significance beyond the games they stem from. In an article entitled "Up, Up, Down, Down" Jon Katz quotes a cheat combination for several games on the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES). He goes on to say that if you "[r]ecite this combination to millions of younger Americans, [...] it's like a secret handshake" (1). Therefore, cheat codes can be regarded as a sort of symbolic currency within gaming communities. In a similar vein, Keri Facer argues that games [...] function as a means by which young men are 'allowed' to speak to each other. The exchange of cheats, games and computer expertise [...] functions as a currency by which friendship is constructed." (Facer 209)

In multi-player games, however, cheats do not only change the experience of the cheater, but the experience of the other players as well. In a game like *Counterstrike*, 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 from the fact that it is in some form transgressive of social norms.

2. What are cheats?

But before we discuss these issues in detail, we should try to clarify what exactly we are talking about when we speak of cheats. To define cheating proves a difficult task, however, since the phenomenon of cheating is inevitably tied to the phenomenon of

games – and games are notorious for defying an all-encompassing definition. Indeed, 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, in Germany, graphic depiction of violence is usually removed from games prior to their publication in order to appease the rating board, but the gore can be restored by changing the game's locale settings.

Employing these so-called 'blood-cheats' 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? I don't believe so. First of all, it is not always possible to determine the 'intended use' of a game. A mod like *Counterstrike* can be seen as a way of playing *Half-Life* that was not intended by its designers, but it is not a cheat.

But in order to cheat players do not have to use the game in such a fashion. Walkthroughs, i.e. detailed instructions on how to get through a game, are a common cheating strategy 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 (by accessing a game's physics engine, players can often tweak factors like gravity or friction, thereby changing the experience of the game dramatically), 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. Such a definition serves not only as a safeguard for a value-neutral assessment of the subject at hand, but also enables us to distinguish different types of cheats by the ways in which they change the players' experience of the game. In the analysis of the role cheats play in the context of games and gaming culture a precise classification of cheats should prove an indispensable tool.

3. Towards a typology of cheats

Cheats can be classified into a whole range of categories, the broadest of which are platform, game mode, and game genre. By the category *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, which can be altered using a hexidecimal editor[1],

[1] A hexadecimal editor (also called a hex editor) is a software tool that enables the user to view and

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, since players can use the bin hex editor to search for individual values (such as number of lives, hit points, or amount of game currency), and change them directly.

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 (and is essentially of no consequence to others), 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 much of a problem, and if it becomes a problem, it can usually be resolved face to face. In open multi-player games, however, cheating can destabilize whole game-worlds, and therefore, the industry spends much time on anti-cheating measures. Quoting game designer Ralph Koster, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman estimate that "tracking down cheaters and hackers can occupy approximately half of all the resources spent on maintaining and improving an online game." (Salen and Zimmerman 280)

Game genre is another useful category in classifying different kinds of cheats. As I have pointed out elsewhere (Kücklich 53), 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. This model can serve here as an auxiliary theoretical construction which enables us to discuss game genres in rather simple terms.

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 (in 'translating' the textual interface of early adventure games into the point-and-click interface of their graphical successors, the limitations of the parsers' vocabularies become painfully apparent). 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. Interestingly, 'novelizations' of adventure games such as Chris Ratcliff's *Sam and Max Hit the Road* can serve as cheating devices, but have aesthetic value independent of the games themselves.

Fast-paced action games, including arcade games, first-person shooters, beat-'em-ups and sports simulation games typically have a high level of interactivity, but score rather low on narrativity and openness. 'Action adventures' such as the games of the *Tomb Raider* series usually oscillate between fast-paced action sequences, exploration, and non-interactive cut-scenes responsible for narrative progression. Typical cheats for action games increase the games' interactivity by making the players' avatars invulnerable, supplying them with an infinite amount of ammunition, or giving them access to all the weapons available. Since action games typically

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alter game files in hexadecimal format. An example is the following cheat for *Command and Conquer: Generals*: "Open 'INI.big' in the generals program folder. Using a Hex editor, find "InitialStartingCash". Normally you start with 10000 but you can change that to anything up to 99999." (codetycoon.com)

require the players to perform rather repetitive interaction patterns, much effort is spent on designing attractive settings (arenas, dungeons, racing courses, etc.) for the actual gameplay. Often, these settings must be 'unlocked' by winning a predetermined number of matches or performing a similar feat. Cheats offer a convenient way to circumvent these arbitrary restrictions.

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 depends on the player, the level of interactivity is also low. Lack of funds and arbitrary restrictions (such as the types of buildings that can be built at a certain developmental level) limit the level of openness, and therefore it should come as no surprise that 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. In *Civilization II*, the internal rules of the game governing the behavior of the computer-controlled players are stored in an ASCII-file that can be opened and manipulated using a text editor*. Civilization: Call to Power* features cheats as a regular option in the game's menu. This is consistent with the prevalent philosophy in simulation gaming which emphasizes explorative play as the feature that sets simulation games apart from other types of games. Therefore, cheats are an often integral part of simulations, rather than an added feature.

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. Role-playing game cheats, for example, often give the players access to magical items, or allow them to increase their characters' stats, which is equivalent to generic simulation game cheats. But since role-playing games also contain narrative elements in the form of 'missions' or 'quests', walkthroughs and maps are also in high demand.

Strategy games, especially real-time strategy games such as *Command & Conquer*, or *Age of Empires*, challenge players to make quick tactical decisions, without letting the momentary action lure them into forgetting the strategic context within which the action takes place. Strategy game cheats address this dilemma by either giving players access to superior weaponry (tactical cheats), or by allowing them to change the rules of the game. Several titles of the *Command & Conquer* series come with a rule set file that can be altered at will by changing numerical values such as the price of certain buildings, etc.

While this general overview of genre-specific cheats is necessarily an oversimplification, and 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. This holds especially true for highly formalized genres such as the first-person shooter, in which a game can be regarded incomplete if it does not feature a certain set of

generic cheats such as those for invulnerability or teleportation. 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).

But how does this classification of cheats pertain to the way in which they change the player's perception of the game? And how can we make this classification independent of the rather crude genre distinction it is based on? In order to answer these questions we should review the kind of cheats that are characteristic of individual game genres. There are, according to my brief overview, basically three kinds of cheats:

1) cheats that speed up narrative progression,
2) cheats that increase the player's frequency of interaction, and
3) cheats that enhance the range of the player's options.

As Fuller and Jenkins, as well as Lev Manovich point out, narration becomes 'spatialized' in adventure games, i.e. narrative progression is mapped onto the three-dimensional space of the game-world. From this point of view, speeding up narrative progression can be regarded as an implosion, compression, or condensation of space. Therefore, the first type of cheats can be understood as effecting a change in the way players perceive game-space, while the second type of cheats changes the players' perception of game-time. Indeed, the continuous interaction (without the avatar's intermittent death and rebirth) made possible by the 'god mode' of many first-person shooters is bound to change the perception of time radically – from striated time to smooth time, to borrow a spatial metaphor.

Since time is such a crucial factor in most action games, the cheats found in this genre are essentially time-savers: inventory cheats in first-person shooters can be regarded as shortcuts from the player's current position to the desired object (weapons, ammunition, power-ups, etc.) which effectively limit the time spent gathering these objects to an absolute minimum. Cheats that unlock the different areas in which the game's action takes place have a similar effect of reducing the time that would otherwise be spent playing towards this goal.

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' perceptions of the relation between subject and object, or, in less dramatic terms, their feeling of agency. As Donald Winnicott has pointed out, children learn to differentiate between their selves and the outside world through transitional objects such as toys. In digital games, players have the unique opportunity to reset the parameters of that rather stable sense of agency that has been developed by the end of childhood, and cheats that allow them to change the level of openness enhance these possibilities of experimentation even further. It should not come as a surprise, then, that it is the genre of 'god games' in which these kinds of cheats are most commonly found.

In theory, it should be possible to further differentiate the cheats in each category by creating sub-categories such as depth, perspective and resolution in the category of space; frequency, order and duration in the category of time; and levels of agency ranging from the fulfillment of everyday tasks to the working of miracles. But this is a task for future inquiries into this matter, and the descriptive typology developed so far

should supply a solid basis for the following theoretical approaches to the subject of cheats.

4. Theoretical approaches to cheats

So far, computer game theorists have by and large shunned the subject of cheats, possibly because of its rather elusive nature. 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 typical example:

> 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. (67)

Although the authors' focus is different than mine, the economic aspect seems tantamount to the fact that cheats warp the space of games, considering the fact that Fuller and Jenkins describe games as a form of spatial narrative, or travelogue.

But Fuller and Jenkins must be given credit for broaching subject of cheats at all. The wide-spread negligence of this phenomenon seems to indicate a wariness of the subversive potential of cheats, which might, after all, destabilize carefully balanced theories. If, for example, one regards digital games as ergodic texts, as many theorists do, it becomes immediately obvious that cheats offer a convenient way of decreasing the effort it takes to traverse the text, thus diminishing their ergodicity.

Clearly, the problem of cheats cannot be addressed by using theoretical models that emphasize the aesthetic autonomy of games; instead, 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. In the following sections on single-player games, multi-player games and MMORPGs I employ, respectively, concepts from literary studies, media studies and systems theory, which should allow for new insights into this largely neglected part of gaming culture.

4.1. Single-player games

The first context I want to focus on is the single-player adventure game. This setting can be regarded as a 'controlled environment', as it were, in which cheats can be observed without addressing the problem of destructive potential. Furthermore, adventure games are in many ways similar to literary texts, and can be studied with the tools of textual analysis. While literary studies' claim to the field of computer games is debatable in many cases, this is one area in which the advantages of such an approach clearly outweigh the danger of 'theoretical imperialism'. Thus, the way in which cheats distort the narrative space of a game can be likened to similar strategies in literature. The section following this one will focus on fathoming the extent to which these findings can be integrated into the larger context of multi-player games.

While the generic adventure game seems to have expired at some point in the early 1990s, games such as *Ico* still bear a structural resemblance to this genre. In *Ico*, players still engage in the same activities as they did in *Zork* – gathering items,

fighting against adversaries, and exploring a maze-like environment. As *Ico* is a highly linear game with some minor action elements, the number of cheats from the second and third category is rather small. Most of the 'cheats' published fall in the category of 'easter eggs' rather than being actual cheats. But if players get stuck in the game, and cannot figure how to solve a puzzle, they can seek advice from one of the many 'walkthroughs' available on websites such as gamefaqs.com.

In many cases, these documents will supply players with detailed instructions on how to solve the puzzle in question. Therefore, consulting a 'strategy guide' is usually the last resort for players. In an article on adventurecollective.com, Jeremiah Kauffman 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, which is, of course, a ludicrous thought, but when you have spent hours wandering around and trying items on items randomly it begins to seem reasonable" (Kauffman). This description of 'being stuck' – another spatial metaphor – draws attention to the fact that it 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. In some cases, there are one or several alternative solutions to that which looks, from the players' perspective, like the most obvious way to overcome the narrative obstacle, and this might make it easier for them to find a solution. In any case, the players' pleasure 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.

How can we analyze this mode of reading that simply skips over some of the narrative obstacles in the reader's way? In reference to hypertext, Espen Aarseth speaks of "topological constraints laid down by the author" (Aarseth 78) that limit the reader's freedom to read in a 'tmesic' manner. In other words, hypertexts guide the reading process by allowing the reader access to some of its parts, while others remain inaccessible until certain criteria have been met. Aarseth's allusion to Roland Barthes' concept of *tmesis*, "the reader's unconstrained skipping and skimming of passages" (ibid.), seems to offer a convenient model to approach the phenomenon of cheating theoretically, were it not for the fact that *tmesis* in literary texts does not require the reader to leave the fictional world of the text. Therefore, the use of the term should remain limited to the area of literature.

Nevertheless, it makes sense to 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. From the player's perspective, playing can be regarded as a dynamic process that oscillates between a maximum and a minimum level of constraint. Once the game process goes beyond either one of these thresholds, it deteriorates into a state of over-codification or a state of contingency, both of which leave the player at a loss for what to do. 'Being stuck' in an adventure

game can be regarded as an instance of over-codification, since there are more conditions for narrative progression than the player is able to meet. Cheats can solve this dilemma by decreasing the perceived level of constraint in the game, thus setting the playing process in motion again.

4.2. Multi-player games

Textual analysis might seem well suited for single-player adventure games, but it cannot be applied in the analysis of multi-player games. As I indicated above, multi-player games must be regarded as media that that foster new forms of interaction between players. As Jacques Ehrmann points out, "any theory of communication (or of information) implies a theory of play ... and a game theory. And vice versa" (56). This statement involves several relevant points in reference to our subject. First of all, this means that we can regard games, especially multi-player games, as media that enable the players to communicate in a certain manner. Furthermore, Ehrmann seems to imply that communication is an inherently playful activity, i.e., a process whose rules themselves are subject to playful interaction.

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 recognized as a fundamental quality of play in Gregory Bateson's article "A Theory of Play and Fantasy", in which he relates his observations of playing monkeys in a zoo: "I saw two monkeys *playing*, i.e., engaged in an interactive sequence of which the unit actions or signals were similar to but not the same as those of combat. It was evident, even to the human observer, that the sequence as a whole was not combat, and evident to the human observer that to the participant monkeys this was 'not combat'" (315). From this, Bateson concludes that "play [...] 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'" (ibid.).

Quite obviously, humans are capable of a 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: "Breaking the rules seems to be part of playing games" (Salen and Zimmerman 268). 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.

This seems to apply to computer games as well. "In playing a computer or video game players must decide what constitutes proper game behavior, navigating the space of possible rule violations." (Salen and Zimmerman 281). While computer gaming is every bit as much a social phenomenon as board or card games are, the conditions under which these activities take place can differ widely. Multi-player games played on a console or over a LAN can be compared rather well to traditional games, because attempts at cheating can be easily detected and appropriate steps taken. On the internet, however, players often don't know each other personally, and cheaters are protected by the anonymity of the game space. Salen and Zimmerman point out that face-to-face interaction is important because "[a] game is a sort of

social contract. The presence of the other players is important to maintaining the authority of the magic circle, because if a group of players are all obeying the rules, they implicitly police and enforce proper play." (269)

To differentiate the various forms of cheats found in multiplayer games, it makes sense to introduce the distinction between cheats and so-called 'exploits' 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 *Counterstrike* 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'" (Wright 9). In this example, 'Tom Tunnel' is a coded message by which a remaining team-member is advised about the way to approach the adversary team.

It is often difficult to distinguish between cheating and playing very well, as players who have undeservedly been accused of cheating can testify. In her discussion of 'power gamers', TL Taylor writes:

> Power gamers often push systems to their limit by trying to 'break' them or find points at which the game architecture is internally contradictory or malleable. In many ways it is these kinds of behaviors that get seen by the broader game community (and quite often by the administrators) as looking far too similar to cheating. But power gamers generally see these kinds of explorations into the dynamics of the game as simply smart moves – that only by understanding the constraints of the system will you be able to most effectively play. How do mobs [monsters] path through a zone and what is the most efficient route to take when fighting them? […] As power gamers work and rework these questions their knowledge of the game can almost at times appear *too* good. They seem to understand how things work at a level the average player does not quite grasp. Given the gap in understanding how power gamers actually play this kind of knowledge sometimes gets labeled negatively, as cheating or trying to exploit the system. (304)

These practices are 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 the behavior described above under the heading of 'creative player actions' along with game features such as game talk, map creation and 'sprays'. In this respect, exploits can be compared to 'emergent gameplay', i.e. a way to interact with the game-world unforeseen by the designers. Quoting Harvey Smith, Salen and Zimmerman describe the famous example of proximity-mine climbing in *Deus Ex*:

> [T]he proximity mine is an explosive device that can be "stuck" onto walls in the game space. After the game's release, players realized something that the game's developers did not anticipate. Exploiting the game's physics and interactivity, players learned to climb up on proximity mines, and using (or misusing) a series of these objects like a ladder, they could ascend the game's vertical surfaces, ruining many of the carefully designed levels. (280)

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.

The difference between these examples cannot be determined in reference to the rules of the respective games, since they are all 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. Whether a player is perceived as a 'power gamer' or a cheater is therefore more often decided by the context than by objective criteria.

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 (cf. Kuo), 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 *Counterstrike*), 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.

Sue Morris foregrounds this aspect of cheating in her article on multi-player games as co-creative media:

> "Issues of cheating are mostly played out at the community level. While developers try to make games as cheat-proof as possible, the innovative and creative ethos of the community means that game hackers are always looking for new challenges, and players have developed cheat programs that, for example, automate aiming and firing of weapons, make walls invisible, or extend player models, so they can be seen from any location in the game. The development of cheats is done much in the same spirit of other hacking and cracking activities – for the challenge and the kudos. Anti-cheating programs are developed in the same way, leading to an ongoing battle of wits at a code-writing level. Major anti-cheating inventions such as PunkBuster have been developed by amateur programmers in the game community, and later incorporated into official game updates (eg in Quake III: Arena 1.32).

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*.

4.3. Massively multi-player online role-playing 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 implications of cheating in MMORPGs are far more widely felt. 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 *Asheron'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 (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.

In *Diablo*, the nightmare of any capitalist society came true: the means of production (in the form of "compilers, dissemblers, debuggers and utilities" [Pritchard]) 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).

It should be noted at this point that the 'damage' done by cheaters is mainly in the domain of the illusions other players might harbor about the game world. While it is certainly painful to see a character that has been developed over the course of several months destroyed by a "ridiculously high level character" created, as it were, out of thin air, there is no actual physical or emotional damage. After all, the possibility of the character's 'death' is always a distinct possibility in games – whether it is Parcheesi or *Diablo*. It could even be argued that such a form of cheating

engenders a critique of other modes of playing (e.g. power gaming) that try to transfer the work ethic of the real world into the game.

Other cheats, most notably the infamous 'townkill' and 'autokill' commands, damaged the social fabric of *Diablo* rather than its economic model. In the original game, it was not possible to kill another player within an urban space, 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).

Player-killing should not be condemned outright. As Elizabeth Reid points out in regard to multi-user dungeons (MUDs):

> "On some adventure MUDs users' characters are able to kill one another. [...] For some users, the possibility of playerkilling adds depth and spice to the virtual world. The addition of greater threat and greater danger to the virtual universe enables users to identify more strongly with their virtual persona. The thrill which users describe as a part of such battles, the sheer excitement of adding an unprogrammed human element to the game universe, makes that universe all the more real. Death and danger make the imagined life all the more worth living, and lift the game beyond the confines of the predictable. It is a fear of losing control inherent in a game style that stresses a fight for greater control that makes the game emotionally compelling." (123)

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: "[T]here is a special kind of lucidity and intelligibility about games. 'Real life' is full of ambiguities and partially known information […] In ordinary life it is rare to inhabit a context with such a high degree of artificial clarity." (Salen and Zimmerman 123)

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.

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.

5. 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 necessarily make cheating a noble activity, 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. Cheating has its own pleasures and gratifications and will remain an integral part of gaming culture. Therefore, 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.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank René Meyer (mogelpower.de) for supplying me with material about cheating techniques and Ren Reynolds for his valuable comments and setting up the cheaters mailing list.

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