

| Introduction |

TO CHEAT OR NOT TO CHEAT: IS THAT EVEN THE QUESTION?

On Christmas Day, 1980, videogames invaded my home. My younger sister and I received a joint gift from our parents: an Atari 2600. When we unwrapped the gift and saw what it was, my sister was almost ecstatic with glee, clearly excited by the thought of playing with the Atari. On the other hand, I was happy, but definitely not to the same degree. Was I less excited? Not really; I was probably even more demanding in my wishes for the system. Yet I had cheated. So eager to confirm that my parents had indeed acceded to my desires, I had searched their room one day earlier in the month and had found the Atari system unwrapped, under their bed.

That knowledge satisfied my desire to know, yet at the same time it extinguished something maybe even more vital: my capacity for surprise at the future unveiling of the gift. My tempered happiness on Christmas Day was the result of my foreknowledge of the event, and my trading of that knowledge for the later surprise. Although it's not a big deal, certainly nothing to lose sleep over, from that point on I never searched for presents again—I had learned my lesson: that the surprise was worth more to me than early knowledge of what I would receive.

That experience is definitely not the same for all people; some of my friends continued peeking and searching for gifts as long as they continued to receive them. Nevertheless, those experiences have valuable things to say about how different individuals approach the pursuit of information, and the costs they are willing to pay to acquire that knowledge. It also says something about what those costs are, and how they operate.

Like peeking at Christmas gifts, reading a puzzle solution for the adventure game *Dreamfall: The Longest Journey* at GameFAQs.com can help a player find the solution, but it also ends up negating the surprise that may come from working it out on one's own. It can also diminish the

sense of achievement earned by solving the puzzle for oneself, rather than reading to find the answer. Although trivial to some, elements such as surprise and earned achievement in a digital game are important and worthy of study. Similarly, but generally needing less justification, practices such as “real-money trade” or the buying and selling of in-game accounts, items, and money, need further examination. Who buys such things, and why? Why do some players consider it one of the worst forms of cheating, while others see it as of little relevance to their own experiences? How players choose how to play games along with what happens when they can’t always play the way they’d like are the beginning points of exploration for this book. Such activities by players challenge the notion that there is one “correct” way to play a game, or that games can have specifiable “effects” on players.

Game players and the broader game industry have created different ways of playing and enjoying games. Such ways can give players a wider range of experiences, can reward superior players, and can challenge game companies in understandings of who controls the game space. Although I began this project primarily interested in the phenomenon of cheating, how players define that term has opened up a huge range of activities that demanded investigation, from both the player and industry perspective. What that investigation found is a cultural history of gameplay that puts player activity and peripheral industries at the center of analysis. That foregrounding reveals how player agency is central to understanding games as well as the development of the wider game industry. Yet additionally, it is crucial to keep in mind how power moves along those pathways, through individuals as well as industry professionals. Just as players exercise agency, they aren’t doing so in a vacuum. Along the way, various industry elements work to constrain certain readings or activities, promoting certain ways of seeing gameplay and ways of playing that are valued over others.

Such power systems must be carefully delineated, however, lest this account slide into a false celebration of player agency at the expense of understanding the more complex, dynamic push-pull of industry and player currently at work in the gaming universe. The development and circulation of *gaming capital* takes into account such an interplay. That concept is developed in this book to seek out how multiple structures, relations, commodities, and groups of players have been central to its development and deployment.

To get a grasp on such complexities, this book investigates a wide range of player behavior in relation to digital games, including cheating alone and in groups, how cheating is defined, and how the industry has helped create a system of cheating and help that has ultimately worked to stabilize (and occasionally destabilize) itself.

This book utilizes as well as develops several themes and theories to advance its arguments. Most centrally, it defines and develops the concept of gaming capital. It also brings in past literature and theorization about cheating, drawing on past studies from human and animal behavior, philosophy, and ethics. Such theoretical frameworks undergird and help provide various lenses for the arguments advanced. Finally, the concept of “paratext” as developed by Gérard Genette is expanded on as a way to better understand the multiple elements involved in the larger game industry, and how those elements contribute to shaping the industry.¹ Here, I introduce these theoretical concepts, and then preview the structure and content of the book.

Gaming Capital

One way to describe player activities both in games and generally could be to conceptualize players as members of a particular “subculture,” as originally articulated by Dick Hebdige.² In that sense, players could be identified as belonging to a particular group that shared similar practices, beliefs, and a sense of style. Certainly some gamers do seem to belong to a culture distinct from mainstream society. The term *subculture*, however, is too limited to adequately explain the broader world of games and game players that currently exists.

For example, the argument could be made that *EverQuest* players constitute a subculture, as they create fan fiction about the game, have conventions to meet each other, and often play the game together for many hours a week. But where would the avid *Counter-Strike* player fit in that scenario? A subculture, to be identified as such, must share common symbols, through such things as fashion, music, or aesthetics. Although individual games or genres may spawn such subcultures, games as a whole are too varied to paint their players with such a broad brush. And to trace an adequate history of gameplay, we must confront differences between players—in genre preferences, play styles, and many other areas. For those

reasons, the concept of the subculture cannot work satisfactorily to explain gamers and gameplay. I believe instead that gaming capital captures the dynamism of gameplay as well as the evolving game and paratextual industry.

Thus, one of the themes running through this book is the development of gaming capital as a central element to serious gameplay. That term is a reworking of Pierre Bourdieu's "cultural capital," which described a system of preferences and dispositions that ultimately served to classify groups by class.³ Of course such a system was not apolitical, but Bourdieu's intention was to investigate how certain interests, pastimes, or preferences were conveyed (and kept) among groups, while kept carefully distinguishable from other interests or pastimes.

I believe that the concept of gaming capital provides a key way to understand how individuals interact with games, information about games and the game industry, and other game players. The term is useful because it suggests a currency that is by necessity dynamic—changing over time, and across types of players or games.

Games aren't designed, marketed, or played in a cultural vacuum. I would argue that it is somewhat futile to talk about the player or a game in the abstract, as what we know about players can change over time, and be dependent on such elements as player skill or age. Likewise, even the most linear game can be experienced in multiple ways, depending on a player's knowledge of past games in that genre or series, including previewed information from magazines or Web sites, and marketing's attempt at drawing attention to certain elements of the game. All of that knowledge, experience, and positioning helps shape gaming capital for a particular player, and in turn that player helps shape the future of the industry.

Specific segments of the game support industry have shaped important elements of gaming capital over the past several decades. The contents of game magazines and strategy guides as well as the development of Game Genies and mod (short for "modification") chips have had critical impacts on how all gamers evaluate, play, and talk about games.

And players themselves further shape gaming capital, especially as new media forms offer individuals more opportunities to share and the game world grows even larger. This book explores that coevolution of gaming capital, and its impact on the world of games as well as digital culture in general. It does that by examining the role of such things as magazines and

mod chips along with players' own contributions to and articulations of gaming capital.

What Is Cheating?

This book takes cheating as a central point of departure for its look into how players understand and enact gameplay practices. How they define cheating in their own terms is my main intent. It is useful, however, to consider how the concept has been defined and debated over time to better contextualize player definitions. But context *is* all we should draw from such a discussion. I believe it's important to keep our understandings of what cheating is or might be open to interpretation as well as debate.

Although not written about extensively, a few individuals have considered the concept and act of cheating in history as well as contemporary culture.⁴ J. Barton Bowyer writes that cheating “is the advantageous distortion of perceived reality. The advantage falls to the cheater because the cheated person misperceives what is assumed to be the real world.”⁵ The cheater is taking advantage of a person, a situation, or both. Cheating also involves the “distortion of perceived reality” or what others call “deception.” Deception can involve hiding the “true” reality or “showing” reality in a way intended to deceive others.

Bowyer also argues that cheating has been around since ancient times; in his *Cheating*, there are pictures of hieroglyphs found in Egypt that suggest ancient Egyptians played the “shell game” that can still be found on the streets of any major city. He also states that although U.S. society (and many others) pays lip service to the idea that “the honest person never cheats or lies,” in actuality cheating is pervasive and often expected in areas such as war, politics, and espionage. As an example, he describes the Trojan horse and how deception was an integral part of strategy by the Greeks. Bowyer also maintains that the need to cheat “arises out of the nature of power,” meaning that when one is faced with a more powerful opponent and desires to win, cheating can become a viable option to help “even the score.”⁶ Certain such ideas about cheating can extend to beliefs about gameplay. On a discussion board for *Final Fantasy XI* on Allakhazam.com, many players debate the topic of cheating in the game and what activities deserve (or don't) that label. I will explore some of those discussions in chapter 7, but here it is essential to mention that although most posters

claim to be against whatever activities they have decided are cheating, they are also fairly sure that such activities are widespread in the game. The many discussion threads about such issues, including gil selling and power leveling, seem to lend further weight to these beliefs.

If cheating is a deception, what is the purpose of the deception, and what are the ramifications of it? Moral philosophers can help us in figuring out how truth and deception function to keep societies, whether real or virtual, stable or in chaos. Sissela Bok observes that when we deceive others, we communicate messages that we ourselves don't believe.⁷ Eventually, those who are deceived learn that they have been deceived, and there is a gradual erosion of trust, leading to a collapse of society, with all individuals relying only on their own information for survival. Lies or deceptions "can affect the objectives seen, the alternatives believed possible, the estimates made of risks and benefits. Such a manipulation of the dimension of certainty is one of the main ways to gain power over the choices of those deceived," notes Bok.⁸

And what if you live in such a society but aren't actually lied to yourself? Bok believes that doesn't really matter, as the ramifications of the deception are felt "by all those who feel the consequences of the lie, whether or not they are themselves lied to."⁹ Even if you aren't lied to personally, if you live in a society where lying is routine, you will come to regard most or all speakers as suspicious, thus affecting how you judge objectives, alternatives, risks, and benefits. So deception can have far-reaching effects beyond one cheater and the person who is cheated. For example, in my own gameplay in *Final Fantasy XI*, I have not encountered any individuals that have tried to scam me out of in-game items of value, yet the subject comes up frequently on Allakhazam.com's game boards. The repetition of the message that scammers exist works to increase suspicion in the game, regardless of whether players have individually experienced such events for themselves. Additionally, popular media attention to cheating in online games strengthens such feelings and suspicions.

Rules of the Magic Circle

Johan Huizinga argued that play occupies a time apart from normal life (when one is playing a game, the rules of normal life aren't supposed to intrude), and when a game is played it creates a space apart from regular

space—the playground or “magic circle” where a special sort of order is created. That order is also dependent on rules. As Huizinga writes, “Rules in their turn are a very important factor in the play-concept. All play has its rules. . . . [T]he rules of a game are absolutely binding and allow no doubt. . . . [A]s soon as the rules are transgressed the whole play-world collapses. The game is over.”¹⁰ So just as play involves a special time and place, it also requires specific rules for its continuation and practice. Still, with the development of entire genres of games such as Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) that are played across time and space, and player interest in games that extend beyond the simple playing of a game to activities such as creating walkthroughs of games, writing fan fiction, or developing character skins for particular games, can we always say that play involves a special time and place?

While it may be helpful to consider that there is an invisible boundary marking game space from normal space, that line has already been breached, if it was ever there to start with. My point is not to contend that such boundaries are necessary (or unnecessary) but instead to point to the most important boundary marker for games: their rules. Rules keep a game distinct from other games as well as other parts of life. Paradoxically perhaps, it is the rules that make a game fun and entice an individual to play. Rules, then, are a central component of games, and their significance for cheating (or its various expressions) cannot be understated.

Players then have the options of following the rules, refusing to abide by the rules overtly, or secretly not abiding by the rules (although appearing to do so) and thus cheating. Different outcomes occur in each situation, and Huizinga claims that we attach different meanings and penalties to each of the latter. He states:

The player who trespasses against the rules or ignores them is a “spoil-sport.” The spoil-sport is not the same as the false player, the cheat; for the latter pretends to be playing the game and, on the face of it, still acknowledges the magic circle. It is curious to note how much more lenient society is to the cheat than to the spoil-sport. This is because the spoil-sport shatters the play itself. . . . [H]e robs the play of its illusion.¹¹

The belief that the spoilsport is worse than the cheater is supported by Bowyer, as he argues that cheating is a “normal” part of society or culture, present in most aspects of life. It begins early: “all the way from

Peek-a-boo to their card game of Cheat, children learn the principles of cheating.”¹² And it pervades our world: “to be is to be cheated.”¹³ Bowyer also agrees that cheating is transgressive and alters the game being played to give power to the cheater; “to cheat, not to play the game that reflected the norm, indicated that there was another world, the world of deception, in which people did not play *the* game, *your* game, but their own.”¹⁴

How does that relate to videogames? As long as there have been videogames, people have cheated while playing them. But now we arrive at the point where we must turn to players themselves, because only they can tell us what it means to cheat in a videogame.

Paratext

Before a videogame is ever released, communication and artifacts relating to it spring up like mushrooms, much of it (the noncommercial side at least) with little planning or overall design from the game’s developers. Fans of a game series post updates to a blog, mailing list, or chat site. Previews of the game, including screen shots, trailers, and interviews with the developers, appear on television and in magazines. Slots for the game, to allow potential players to preorder it, are created on Amazon’s and GameStop’s Web sites. Rumors may fly. A strategy guide may go into production. Shelf space and advertising are secured.

Before a player loads a game on to a console or computer, the opportunities to learn about that game have become vast. And once a game is released, that steady stream of information becomes a flood. Reviews (both commercial and noncommercial), ads, cheat code releases, G4 TV specials, walkthroughs, discussion board topics on GameFAQs.com, and perhaps the opportunity to pay more real money to upgrade your game experience all appear.

In two decades, we have moved from a trickle to a torrent of information, and it all plays a role in shaping our experiences of gameplay—regardless of the actual game itself. Yet how can we make sense of such a system? This system isn’t the game industry but is closely related to it. To call it peripheral dismisses or ignores its centrality to the gaming experience. Whether we admit it or not, we have learned how to play games, how to judge games, and how to think about games and ourselves as gamers in part through the shaping of these industries. How best to capture that system?

Writing originally about printed works and the surrounding materials that frame their consumption, Genette introduced the concept of the paratext.¹⁵ He argued that the paratext, which could include a table of contents, a title, and a review (among many other things), all helped shape the reader's experience of a text. And centrally, the paratext helped give meaning to the act of reading.

Peter Lunenfeld later took that concept and applied it to digital media, writing that the boundaries now are even more fluid, and the paratexts are often more interesting than the “originary” texts.¹⁶ I believe that the peripheral industries surrounding games function as just such a paratext. Gaming magazines, strategy guides, mod chip makers, the International Game Exchange, Even Balance and other companies, and industry segments work to shape the gameplay experience in particular ways. Those ways have played a significant role in how gameplay is now understood. Yet not all such shaping—or attempts to shape—went unchallenged, either by the game industry or the players themselves. I will explore that history throughout this book. The central tendency remains, though: the creation of a flourishing paratext has significantly shaped games and gamers in the process of creating new markets.

Book Structure and Chapter Preview

Part I: A Cultural History of Cheating in Games

Part I looks at the cultural history of cheating in videogames. It examines how the act began, from the desire of game designers to put in “Easter eggs” for players to find, to the implementation of cheat codes to help designers in constructing the game. The chapters in this part chronicle how those items migrated to several paratextual industries, such as game magazines, tip lines, and cheat books, to GameSharks and mod chips. The focus concerns how the packaging and selling of cheats was developed into a market, and how that market helped define particular modes of playing games that go beyond simple cheating. That growth also spurred the development of subindustries not working together with designers and publishers that actively pushed for player activity outside the bounds of what is deemed fair play. The part ends by asking how contemporary videogame players conceive of cheating: how do they define it in their own terms, and how do or don't they engage in those practices?

Chapter 1: Creating the Market: Easter Eggs and Secret Agents

This chapter chronicles the history of cheats, including how and why they appeared, and the types of things that they did. It explores how at first cheats were largely unmoored from the business of the game industry, even if they were a part of games. Cheats existed, but as insider knowledge among game creators and a few committed players. Initially, cheats were seen as having no place in a game. The chapter examines how and why that changed, and the beginning of a market for those cheats in early magazines such as *Nintendo Power*. It then argues that this magazine in particular helped institutionalize cheats and the act of cheating, normalizing it for the player, and turning it into an expected and profitable part of gaming for the player and the industry.

Chapter 2: Guidance Goes Independent: The Rise of the Strategy Guide Publishers

Chapter 2 goes beyond the early days of *Nintendo Power* to study how cheats and other game help moved outside Nintendo (and just game creators themselves) to create another fledgling industry. The analysis considers the development of print and electronic strategy guides, and explores the process of creating guides as well as the strength of publishers Brady and Prima. Additionally, the chapter discusses how such guides continued the function of teaching players how to play games, but also further developed stylistic approaches to offering guidance as well as conventions concerning what game-related items should and should not appear in guides. The contribution of these guides to the culture, and how their presence raised expectations for what is found in games, is detailed.

Chapter 3: Genies, Sharks, and Chips: The Technological Side to Cheating

Chapter 3 concludes with the backlash of the growing paratextual industry as against the core game industry itself. As gamers' appetite for more knowledge and help with games grew, so too the industry responded with products that the core industry objected to—items such as the GameShark (and earlier Game Genie) and mod chips to install (illegally by players) in PlayStations. The chapter explores how those items were received by gamers and the game industry, and how peripheral makers walk a fine line between legal and illegal, acceptable and unacceptable help for use in games. The chapter ends by asking how players themselves see those items in relation to their gaming activities.

Part II: Game Players

The second part of the book discusses the actual game players, and their views and behaviors relating to gameplay generally as well as cheating in particular. The chapters in this part focus on how players define cheating, what activities they engage in related to their stated definitions, and how those choices can be understood. Cheaters in online games are given special attention, from their evolving activities to their justifications for such actions. A study of the Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) game *Final Fantasy XI* is undertaken to understand online cheating in context, and the responses of game developers and publishers—both positive and negative—to such actions are examined.

Chapter 4: Gaining Advantage: How Videogame Players Define and Negotiate Cheating

This chapter explores how different individuals actually play games, and how they draw from various sources available to help them play as well as have more fun (and occasionally cause trouble). It examines how players themselves differentially define cheating, and whether or not they engage in those activities and why. Through extensive interviews with game players of varying ages and ability levels, a typology of player activity in games is presented, thereby explaining the differences between how various individuals conceptualize the boundaries of the game and its related materials, such as walkthroughs and cheat codes. The key reasons for cheating (as well as not cheating) are also delineated. Ultimately, this chapter argues that players choose to cheat or not cheat in order to enhance their gameplay, and that cheating is a dynamic concept that cannot be easily defined or limited.

Chapter 5: The Cheaters

This chapter looks at the behaviors associated with online multiplayer games that most everyone considers cheating. These behaviors include practices such as hacking the code of a game for various purposes and gaming the system along with more debated practices such as griefing and the use of exploits. Are such behaviors the hallmark of a typical sort of player—the cheater—or more fluid behaviors that different players engage in at different times, for different reasons? Is the cheater an iden-

tifiable playing position, a personal identification, or something else? To investigate such questions, evidence is drawn from interviews with players that cheat as well as popular accounts of cheating and industry reactions toward it.

Chapter 6: Busting Punks and Policing Players: The Anticheating Industry

This chapter studies how different game-related companies have responded to cheating—including game developers and publishers as well as new businesses that have been created to combat cheating such as Even Balance and IT GlobalSecure. The chapter also examines how such practices work to define, stabilize, and secure specific definitions of cheating that occasionally may be at cross-purposes with each other as well as with player interests and activities.

Chapter 7: A Mage's Chronicle: Cheating and Life in Vana'diel

This chapter draws from an online ethnography of the MMO *Final Fantasy XI*. It provides a closer look at how cheating and its practices are debated and defined in an ongoing, dynamic manner. The chapter provides a detailed account of the design implications of a particular virtual world, and how such designs attempt to limit certain player activities in addition to allowing for others. I explore, through the eyes of my avatar Leiya, the gameplay and player activities on the Lakshmi server. Specific practices such as real-money trade, bot use, and power leveling are discussed in terms of design limitations as well as players' perceived knowledge of those activities and their own feelings about them. Player responses to those activities are also delineated and studied in order to better understand how players can help maintain game worlds that have agreed-on norms as well as systems for ensuring that such norms are adequately enforced.

Part III: Capital and Game Ethics

Chapter 8: Capitalizing on Paratexts: Gameplay, Ethics, and Everyday Life

The concluding chapter explores the growing corporatization of the paratextual industries, read through practices such as the 2005 purchase of the MMO-focused Allakhazam.com site by RPG Holdings, which also owns real-money trade giant International Game Exchange. Such practices

suggest that the paratext is gaining ground on the primary game industry, and thus the paratext becomes critical to consider as a way to understand gameplay as well as the business of digital games.

Additionally, this chapter brings together final thoughts on gaming capital and what cheating means for gameplay as well as digital life. How we use and think about digital games are expressions of ethical choices. Likewise, digital games are spaces for play and experimentation, and are systems with (perhaps) fewer consequences for actions taken there. How we use such spaces, experiment and play with them, and then relate that use elsewhere, is crucially important, and the subject of this last chapter.