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The Ethical Significance of Cheating in Online Computer Games

Abstract:

In this article cheating in network and specifically online computer games is looked into as a moral offence. Reasons for the public ignoring the issue are brought forth. We present what could be considered as cheating in generic terms and in context. Different kinds of cheating are delineated, and remedies proposed. We also identify what is not cheating.

Agenda

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Introduction

This paper discusses the question of cheating in network gaming communities. Cheating in network—particularly online—gaming is often overlooked and thought to be of little relevance to "real" ethical questions. We present some arguments to the contrary.

For some reason, the effects of cheating on other players have been largely ignored. Cheating in computer games is often dismissed with "well, it is not very important, it is just a game". Cheating in other games, such as chess or poker is typically not regarded as such a small issue but can lead to conflicts between the players. This holds true for computer games as well. Anyone enjoying a game, be it computer game or other, does not enjoy being cheated.

Spending substantial amounts of time creating something implies that one considers it of value. Disrupting that is typically, in the liberal tradition, considered morally questionable. Creating and nurturing a game character could be compared to an author writing an article. If someone was to destroy the article and thus deprive the author of the work done, the fruits of their labour would be lost; what specifically is different in that situation compared to destroying a game character, for example?

According to Bissett and Shipton[1] breaking into other persons' computers and destroying their digital works is considered immoral and even illegal in many if not most countries. It is, however, difficult to press charges based on a destroyed computer game character[2]. The offence may be lesser in the consequences it creates, since typically the livelihood of a person is not affected by transgressions in a game[3] but the intent is still blameworthy.

If we get above the basic levels of "food, warmth, etc." and can start to find the meaning for our life from the more abstract pleasures, then we must consider cheating an offence of the same type, if not of the same consequence, as destroying creative "work". If cheating reduces the happiness or joy which comes from the gaming experience, then cheating could be considered morally wrong.

In subsequent sections of this paper we examine the reasons why cheating in computer games is not generally considered an offence and why it should be considered an offence. We discuss various forms of cheating in the realms of first person shooters (FPSs), real time strategy games (RTSs) and computer role playing games (CRPGs) or massive multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGs) and discuss the amount of harm done to others in these various game types. We are by no means suggesting that these are the only types of games in which cheating can happen, but for the sake of the argument presented, they will clarify certain issues considering the gravity of cheating. Following Benford et al.[4], we introduce a taxonomy of circumstances in which cheating can take place. We use this framework to discuss different kinds of cheating, with illustrative examples.

Our argument stands on the basis that cheating in a game without any other players might be bad for one's virtue, but in other respects it is not morally wrong. However, when actually cheating other players, other human beings, it will become a moral offence, which should be remedied where necessary.

Moral starting point

In this paper we have a liberal starting point; we do not presume to know what values people hold dear.

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[1] Bissett, A. and Shipton, G.: Some human dimensions of computer virus creation and infection

[2] see e.g. Krotoski, 2005 on trying and failing. A player of an online computer game in China lent a virtual sword to another player who then proceeded to sell the sword in an Internet auction. The first player tried to approach the police in getting compensation for the sword, but the police interpreted the law as inapplicable to virtual objects such as the sword. The case ended up in a very real knife being struck in the offending player's chest which resulted in the death of the offending player.

[3] although there are counter examples of this—see e.g. ibid., in which the virtual sword was auctioned for three months' pay in China, or the Cyberathlete Professional League for players who get a major part of their income from playing games, at http://www.thecpl.com/league/

[4] Understanding and constructing shared spaces with mixed-reality boundaries

Thus the only values we presume are those necessary for people to pursue their own values. We propose the right not to be forcibly prevented from doing whatever the person sees valuable and thus the duty of not aiming to hinder others to do what they choose. Other ethical theories will also be addressed, but the fundamental ethical theories used are 1) the traditional liberalist ethic of trying to pursue one's own happiness *as long as it does not directly hamper another's possibility to pursue their happiness*, 2) the (Kantian) deontological standpoint, in which the others should be seen not merely as means to one's own ends (i.e. in this case gaming satisfaction) but as ends in themselves and 3) a consequentialist (utilitarian) view, according to which the aim of the game-ethic is the pursuit of happiness of the people choosing to play the game.

Looking at the issue from a deontological standpoint, if one cheats in an online computer game, the other is not seen as an end in themselves, but only means to one's own direct satisfaction. This would clearly be against the categorical imperative[5]. The problem is that it does not necessarily feel like doing something to another person. Distancing oneself from the other player is the main reason for not seeing even direct actions towards their characters as being wrong when cheating is done. On top of this indirect actions such as copying items instead of finding them from the game can harm the other players playing the game fairly.

The consequentialist problem appears most strongly in the possibility of the game becoming eventually unplayable for all. If enough cheating is done, e.g. through aiming proxies[6], the game itself can loose all of its entertainment value and thus become unplayable by all players.

Why is cheating in online computer games ignored?

The prejudice that computer games are for kids is still prevalent. This is often used as a justification for ignoring the field. The justification is false for two reasons: computer games, and especially online computer games are not played solely by kids; and children do worthwhile things as well and are moral subjects. The average age of a computer game player is 29 years[7]. On top of this, it is very common to run into more mature players in online games. If we are consistent in the liberal ethic in which we cannot presume to know what is important to others and what is not, we must acknowledge that anything someone is willing to spend a lot of time on is worth something for them, then we should also consider things children do important—at least to them. Children can also of course be morally wounded by immoral behaviour.

Games are often considered to be low level entertainment and thus not worth serious consideration. The same argument which holds for children holds for anyone—if one is willing to spend considerable amounts of time on something (e.g. a computer game) it must be worth something to them. Locke's labour theory of work[8] rests on the assumption that if one spends one's effort on something else, they own that other (as long as much and as good is left to others). Why would that only concern work in the liberal thinking? Is it not "work" which the players are devoting to the game and thus do they not "own" the results of that work? If those results are then reduced in value by cheating, is that not a moral question worth our consideration?

What is cheating?

Cheating in games has probably been done as long as games have been played. Following Fairweather[9], we note that cheating can be seen as "performing some act that falls outside the normal methods of play or competition with an expectation or hope that it will convey an unusual competitive advantage within the game or sport"[10]. Fairweather discusses how many cheating methods in stand-alone, single-

[5] Immanuel Kant: Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten, 1785

[6] An aiming proxy is a third party software which aids the player of a first person shooter in aiming i.e. sees to it that he or she does not miss but instead hits a point (typically head) in the opposing player's character which causes most damage.

[7] Entertainment Software Association: Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry: 2004 Sales, Demographics and Usage Data

[8] John Locke: Two treatises of government

[9] N Ben Fairweather: Cool New Cheats: cheating and the computer games industry

[10] Ibid.

player games are actually deliberately designed extra features that are usually publicized as a marketing aspect of the computer game in question. They are far from secret, deceptive, actions. Cheating in self-contained single-player games involves at most self-deception, but no deception towards other persons. Whether the rules programmed in the code are bypassed, it is done with the consent of all the players—namely the ones playing the game.

Issues such as the effects of playing computer games on one's virtue[11] have been addressed in the literature. This kind of thinking is easy to extend to cover cheating as well. It can be considered bad for one's virtue if one learns to cheat on a computer game environment since learning to cheat in a computer game might well affect the player's view on cheating in general. We do not consider the virtue-ethical point of doing bad to one's character by cheating the focus of this paper since the harm to others is, if any exists, indirect. The issue is handled by others, for example Fairweather or Reynolds[12].

Beyond this self-contained game is the newer dimension of network computer games. Here we argue that cheating can cause offence towards other players. We agree with the point that Powers[13] makes that the possibility of direct real moral wrongs in virtual communities exists.

Cheating in network computer games

In online computer games the other person is not physically present and often (typically) is not even known outside the context. Where the other can be considered to be known at all is not relevant to this article due to the other in any case being a person investing their effort in the game.

As Powers[14] notes, "it would seem easy to dismiss these actions and reactions as morally insignificant, due to the play-like [and in our case actual play] nature of the online community and the mediations of events by 'make-believe' characters." Benford et al.[15] have created a chart which illustrates the point. In the chart, they identify four different types of situations with shared-space technologies. 1) Physical Reality, which is both local and physical, 2) Telepresence, which is physical but remote, 3) Augmented Reality, which is synthetic but local and 4) Virtual Reality, which is both synthetic and remote. Most network computer games fall within the fourth category, and thus the game is distanced from the user. This distorts the feeling of importance in the mind of a person not playing computer games. For a gamer, the distance is irrelevant in the sense that the hours spent on perfecting skills or characters in a computer game do not disappear even though the distance from the user's physical space can seem to matter. A very emotional relationship to the characters and even items results from playing the games. After all, some items are so rare that the players are willing to specifically design characters around such items or do tasking quests in order to name the items.[16] Although it is clear enough that the relationship is not one-to-one with the person in question, this, however, does not mean that the wrongs made in the virtual would not have consequences in the real world for the non-virtual player. The acts done in real world cause the acts which happen in the virtual environment and those again affect the people in the real world[17].

What could be considered cheating in network computer games?

We will start by introducing several forms of cheating in different kinds of computer games (see tables 1-3). These examples are by no means meant to be all-inclusive, but just examples clarifying different categories of cheating possible in different gaming environments.

[11] See e.g. Ibid and Bissett et al.: Addressing Ethics In Entertainment Software Development

[12] N Ben Fairweather: Cool New Cheats: cheating and the computer games industry, Ren Reynolds: Playing a "Good" Game: A Philosophical Approach to Understanding the Morality of Games

[13] Thomas Powers: Real wrongs in virtual communities

[14] Ibid.

[15] Benford et al.: Understanding and constructing shared spaces with mixed-reality boundaries

[16] See e.g. Ren Reynolds: Intellectual Property Rights in Community Based Video Games

[17] Thomas Powers: Real wrongs in virtual communities

Cheats	Countermeasures
"Camping", i.e. reserving a spot which is optimal for spotting and killing other characters; typically near a respawn area	Verbal (written) complaining, although there are modifications to games which slay or kick the character if they camp too long. Also, some more creative methods exist, such as changing the character to a chicken which cannot attack at all
Non-stop jumping to make aiming harder	Verbal (written) complaining, although there are some patches in some games which have rectified this problem
See through walls, "wallhacks"	Try to find out if extra information is going in the packets sent to the server from the player and try to divide the map information going to the player to smaller parts to hamper the use of the map information
Reflex augmentation	Use program counter measures which try to stop the cheating applications from being used
Aiming proxies, i.e. third party applications which enable the player to shoot unerringly	Use program counter measures which try to stop the cheating applications from being used, data scrambling e.g. via encryption
Enhanced damage by compromised client	Using checksums

Table 1. First Person Shooters

Cheats	Countermeasures
"Unfair" alliances	Verbal (written) complaining
Raw materials which do not belong to the player	Turn beta testing features off from the games before releasing them
Map and other information revealing applications	Do not send more information than necessary to the player's client about the map
"Horde" handling applications, i.e. third party applications which enable handling of large groups easily	Try to snoop the players using them and shut down the accounts if encountered
Enhanced damage by compromised client	Using checksums

Table 2. Computer Strategy Games

Cheats	Countermeasures
"Muling" items (moving items from the played character to characters which are kept as "mules")	If wanted, can be stopped or hampered with game technical measures
Creating characters specifically designed to kill other players' characters and then killing other players' characters (designed for player vs. environment play) with them	Verbal (written) complaining
Killing and stealing from inexperienced and ill equipped players	Verbal (written) complaining
Fake messages from the server administrations	Rising user awareness or trying to protect account names that resemble administrator accounts
Money that does not belong to the player	Turn beta testing features off from the games before releasing them
Item duplication or creation	Try to snoop the players using outside applications and shut down the accounts if encountered

Enhanced damage by compromised client	Using checksums
Outright killing of characters by cheating	Finding out about these players and closing down their accounts

Table 3. Computer Role Playing Games[18]

Where to draw the line?

From the previous we can identify at least the following categories that could be considered cheating:

1. Macros
2. Game mechanical cheats
3. Beta functions
4. External information sources
5. External software
6. Third party user interface
7. Client changing software
8. Password scams
9. Server affecting software
10. Server hacking

Macros offered by the game itself are very implicitly available and thus can hardly be considered cheating. Game mechanical cheats[19] in which one finds something that one can exploit in the game that was not meant by the game programmers or designers to gain a large amount of experience for the character are more problematic. In-game cheats, through the game beta testing functions can be left in the game and then exploited. The previous two are more a question of patching the game rather than cheating. They should be corrected or turned off if the game provider does not intend them to be used.

External sources, like web pages which provide in depth information about the game, to a detail not available to a single gamer or even in any direct form through the game[20] are more problematic. For this information the player must go outside the game itself and can then use information which is not necessarily available to all players. Also, external software which does not affect the game itself in any way but offers a possibility to quickly check things not readily available from within the game, such as the Runeword wizard for Diablo II, or even within the game as user interface enhancements such as Ingredient helper in World of Warcraft, change the game balance towards those who have knowledge and access to such programs. Many of these are, however, approved by the game developer. If we compare this with using chess-playing computers to aid in a game against another human player, it is typically considered cheating when used in over-the-net or over-the-mail games and it is definitely not allowed in tournaments.

Software which changes the client's functioning, e.g. map hack; getting passwords off new players by fooling them with administrator-like messages either in-game or outside[21]; software which directly affects the server functioning, sending certain packages directly to the server; and straight hacks into the server to change things—these are clear situations in which cheating is taking place. These should be closed with any legal means possible. Counter software is available[22] and should be used even more aggressively than is done now. Bans should also be used to exclude players exploiting these.

Conclusions

To conclude, at least some of the cheats used (specifically the last four listed) can always be considered non-allowable cheats, while others are more problematic. Some seem to be in the spirit of the inherent rules of the game, and thus could be considered to be comparable to "cheating" others in

[18] Various sources used for the tables 1-3 from personal online gaming to consulting other online gamers, also see e.g. Suler and Phillips: The Bad Boys of Cyberspace: Deviant Behavior in Multimedia Chat Communities; Brundage: Making EverQuest Easier to Play: Cheating or Not?; Pritchard: How to hurt hackers: The scoop on Internet cheating and how you can combat it; Smed et al.: Aspects of networking in multiplayer computer games; Smed: Offending other players; Smed and Hakonen: Preventing Look-Ahead Cheating with Active Objects.

[19] E.g. luring a monster to a place where it gets stuck and then it is easy to destroy even though it is considerably higher level than the player.

[20] See e.g. www.diabloii.net

[21] E.g. in news groups or e-mail

[22] See e.g. Smed & Hakonen: Preventing Look-Ahead Cheating with Active Objects

poker by giving them clues on what one has in one's hand while having quite something else. Where to draw the line seems to be the difficult issue, but in some cases, such as the use of most unapproved third party software, it is also very clear.

Destroying other peoples' work is always immoral if no other motive than personal gain or pure maliciousness exists, and in the cases handled, no virtuous motives are to be found. Gaining an unfair advantage in the game is also taking away—at least indirectly but often also directly—from other players through the direct loss of items or characters, or at least through devaluation of the worth of the items fairly playing players gain through approved methods. Unfair players gain them either through the use of "bots"[23] or other advantage-giving third party software.

The arguments according to which games are of little or no moral significance are false—at least from a liberal standpoint. Games are obviously of value to the players of the games, and to the industry, and thus moral issues resulting from them cannot be bypassed by claiming that games would not be important—they are. Also, children and youth both do things which matter, and as humans are most clearly moral subjects.

The issues regarding online computer games and their moral significance have largely been ignored. The authors hope this will not be the case in the future, but that steps are taken to ensure a more fair and moral playing ground in online games.

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[23] Automated software which plays a character very quickly through a certain area in which items of value are easily found.

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