Negotiating Students’ Conceptions of ‘Cheating’ in Video Games and in School

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ABSTRACT

Technology use, and video game play in particular, occupies a large amount of time in a typical teenager’s life. Methods of learning and playing video games differ from that of traditional learning settings in that it is common to collaborate and use alternative methods known as “cheats” in the gaming world, strategies that might be considered unethical in the traditional classroom setting. This study took a phenomenological approach to developing an understanding of student views of cheating in these two different settings, and investigating their motivations for engaging in cheating behaviors. Researchers explore the narratives of three teenage males as they described their experiences in gaming and in school, and their views of ethics, honesty, and acceptable forms of information gathering in the two contexts. Analyses reveal three themes relating to students’ conceptions of cheating. Implications are discussed, particularly as they relate to setting and maintaining ethical standards in the school setting.

Keywords: Academic Honesty, Cheating, Education Research, Phenomenology, Video Games

INTRODUCTION

Children are engaging in video game play for increasing amounts of time (Walsh & Gentile, 2007), and game play occupies a significant role in many children’s lives outside of school. Some have suggested that video game play and other uses of interactive media are changing the way children think and learn (Gee, 2003). In the literature about video game play there has been a strong focus on children’s cognitive development. There has also been some consideration of morals, particularly as they relate to violence because of the prevalence of violent video game play among children. Less represented in the research is a thorough investigation of the morals involved in learning and playing a video game, and how these morals relate to those of the classroom environment.

Video games are spaces that often operate by completely different rules, codes, and social norms than “regular life,” so there are no universal standards relating to ethics for their play. Given that ethical standards are not necessarily set in video game play and that “beating the system” can even be a positive and respected...
pastime in the video game world, it is reasonable to question how these fuzzy standards and shifting ethics apply to other settings. This study used a phenomenological approach to explore the ways in which adolescents negotiate the ethics of the different spaces within their lives and to attempt to frame a perspective on their definitions of cheating in video game worlds and in the classroom.

DEFINITIONS

What constitutes cheating in a video game is still an emerging issue with widely varying opinions on the matter. With such diverse possibilities, it becomes difficult to define cheating within this realm. A weblog entry (O’Halloran, 2007) discussing cheating in the massively multiplayer online game *World of Warcraft* illustrates the complexity of this issue, stating:

Most people would probably say that cheating is breaking the rules. Paying someone else to level your character or to give you gold for RL [real life] money is currently viewed as “unfair.” ... So if using RL resources to get ahead is cheating, what about people who are rich with time? After all, the principal mechanic for MMO progression is time spent playing the game. Aren’t people with enormous amounts of free time using their RL resources to gain an unfair advantage of those who have limited play time? Where is the line between cheating and working within the game rules to get the most out of your game time?

Before engaging in a discussion of which practices players may consider to be cheating in a video game, we must first define the gaming-specific terms used by the three participants in the current study:

1. **Walkthroughs** are detailed explanations of how to solve a video game. They are written by those who have already figured out the secrets of a game and are posted online to benefit others who are stuck. Often walkthroughs are collaborative, with other users adding their comments and secrets to the cumulative guide.

2. Video games often contain **cheats**, codes intentionally programmed into the game to allow players who know the codes access to higher levels, rewards, or different experiences than they would have if they played through the game in the traditional way.

3. Another way to circumvent traditional game play is through **glitching**. This involves taking advantage of unintentional programming mistakes or glitches in order to do things the game designers did not intend to be possible, such as walking through walls. Some glitches are easily found online, while other times players choose to search for them independently, as this gives a person distinction in the gaming world (Bainbridge & Bainbridge, 2007; Stevens, Satwicz, & McCarthy, 2008).

4. Even more extreme methods of gaining advantage in video games involve paying others to play as your character or buying virtual, in-game items with real money. There are also websites for sharing cheat codes and game glitches, and discussion forums devoted to the practice of sharing information for succeeding in video games.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study attempted to determine the ways in which three adolescent males view cheating and ethics in video games, and to relate this to their conceptions of and experiences with cheating in academic environments. Thus, we will examine some of the literature related to students’ conceptions of cheating in school as well as the literature surrounding cheating in video game play.
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