Cheesers, Pullers, and Glitchers: The Rhetoric of Sportsmanship and the Discourse of Online Sports Gamers

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Abstract

In this article, we examine online sports gamers’ appeals to fair play and sportsmanship in online forums maintained by game developers. These online discussions serve to document and police acceptable behavior and gameplay for the larger community of game players and to stimulate innovation in game development, especially in online ranking systems.

Keywords: discourse communities, game ethics, online sports games, player behavior, sportsmanship

Introduction

Recent probes by the US Congress into steroid usage among professional sports players and reports of murder cases involving overzealous parents of athletes have increasingly brought into question the traditional notions of sportsmanship in the United States and across the world. For example, Dave Sheinin’s piece on the recent congressional hearings on steroid use in baseball cited historical evidence spanning players’ entire careers, claiming that history should determine what is natural or right for athletes today (Sheinin, 2005). Numerous other stories of parental violence at children’s sporting events, including reports filed by ABC News (2005) and Heather Hegedus (2000), question the state of sportsmanship today. Hegedus’ piece - written for a publication aimed at students - concluded with the following solution: “In order for kids to participate in organized sports, parents have to sign an agreement to face the same penalties as their children for misconduct, such as being banned from games for poor sportsmanship” (Hegedus, 2000, n.p.). Moreover, Denham (2004) made the case that media coverage of these events influences policy-making (Denham, 2004). While mainstream media coverage of these probes and reports have raised public consciousness about ethics and sportsmanship, we see a more interesting and substantial discussion taking place on the online message boards associated with sports games. These online discussions not only explore what constitutes good behavior and victory conditions in sport, but they also push the boundaries of what is considered ethical or sportsmanlike in a medium where testing the boundaries of an environment and the limits of the rules is encouraged and expected. Additionally, these discussions help stimulate innovation in game design. For example, players’ online rankings are currently penalized in Pro Evolution Soccer 2009 (Konami, 2008) if they quit the game early, where previously, the quitting of a game early might be a tactic employed to maintain rank.

These tensions between players, groups, and communities stem from the two forms of conflict apparent in multiplayer computer games (Smith, 2004) (and sports more generally). As Smith (2004) clarified, there are “two main types of conflict, intra-mechanic conflict (a direct consequence of the game rules) and extra-mechanic conflict (a consequence of multiplayer games being social spaces)” (p.2). Here we are most interested in the three types of extra-mechanic conflict prevalent in games: cheating, grief play, and local norm violation (Smith, 2004).

Cheating can be characterized as anything used to give an unfair advantage to only one party; for example, using aimbots (a program that automatically targets the opposition avatar’s head) or wallhacks (allowing the player to see through walls) in Counter-Strike: Source (Valve, 2004) would be obvious cheats. Grief play is when a player...
sets out to cause discomfort to another player or group through either ludic or verbal harassment. Thus, such practices as spamming offensive messages within Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) or constantly shooting one’s own teammates in a first-person shooter (FPS) would be considered griefing. This behavior is most comparable to what Bartle (2008) exemplified by the “spade” player: “only in the knowledge that a real person, somewhere, is very upset by what [the spade player has] just done, yet can themselves do nothing about it, is there any true adrenalin-shooting, juicy fun” (n.p.).

Lastly, and most controversially, there are local norm violations, which arise when a player breaks an extra-mechanic rule or convention agreed upon by a group. Local norm violations are often the cause of the most intense debates in player communities. For example, the practice of kill stealing is seen as the violation of a local norm. Kill stealing is where a gamer steals credit for a kill - whether this be score, experience points, and/or items - when another player/group performed the majority of the labour contributing to the kill. Camping, or keeping one’s avatar in one particularly advantageous spot for an entire round/map/session, is another local norm violation that causes much debate in first-person shooter communities. Since camping is seen as cowardly and against the fair play of the game, a camper is often viewed with contempt as being unsportsmanlike.

The etymology of the term "sportsmanship" certainly brings to mind the exclusionary practices of Anglo male sport culture and its attendant notions of the gentleman and the sporting man. Simons (2003) questioned white, mainstream reactions to "verbal and non-verbal behaviors exhibited by football and basketball players, such as trash-talking, taunting, celebrating, dancing, etc. that are penalized and heavily criticized by the athletic officials, coaches, the media, and fans" (p.5). He argued that sanctions against such behaviors support white, mainstream culture while the behaviors themselves represent African American resistance to white male hegemony. That sports reflect and maintain existing systems of social inequality by way of socialization is a perspective that Attali, Saint-Martin, Liotard and Capron (2005) advanced regarding the social power of sports:

Grâce aux valeurs auxquelles tout joueur doit se plier, au risque d'être exclu du jeu, le sport possède la vertu de perpétuer un ordre social inégalitaire et hiéirarchisé et de le rendre désirable. Toute la force du sport réside dans cette capacité.

Owing to the values to which every player must bow to, at the risk of being excluded from play, sport possesses the virtue of perpetuating social inequality and hierarchy, and make it desirable. The whole strength of sport resides in this capacity. (p.156)

The notion of sportsmanship thus represents no small amount of contention over rules and behavioral etiquette. Nowhere are these better exemplified than in Steven Potter’s 1950 satirical guide to winning, The Complete Upmanship: “For the student must realize that these two young men were both in the highest degree charming, well-mannered young men, perfect in their sportsmanship and behaviour” (Potter, 1950, p.13). In this example, sportsmanship was exhibited by males who are more charming and well-mannered than they are athletic or particularly skilled at the game in question. Instead of these problematic depictions of sportsmanship, in this article, we seek to explore the concept within computer game contexts that present all participants with the same ethical dilemmas, regardless of ability, race, class, and gender. We use the term sportsmanship not to give credence to its patriarchal origins, but instead to explore the concept’s manifestation in the world of online sports gaming.

As indicated above, in this article we conceptualize sportsmanship in online gaming communities as a system of rules that govern game play (extra-mechanic), as opposed to rules defining victory conditions (intra-mechanic). Just as the rules of sport supersede the rules of everyday life in order to guide competition (McIntosh, 1979, p.83), the rules of online games similarly define a new reality governed by the game designer’s moral systems of regulation and by the discourse
community made up of other gamers. As Schott and Kambouri (2006) argued, "The culture of gameplaying involves the ongoing social construction of an 'interpretive community'" (p.121-122).

As evidence of these interpretive communities, we turn to the 2K Sports Forums' online message boards. 2K Sports is the developer of several mass market game titles in several sports, including snowboarding, basketball, football, baseball, hockey, and tennis. Citing the results of a recent IGN poll, Jon Robinson declared 2K Sports as definitively more popular among sports gamers (by 64% with almost 200,000 votes) over Electronic Arts (EA) Sports (Robinson, 2006, n.p.). We found that players use the 2K Sports Forums to negotiate and police their online play behaviors for their chosen game. This seems to be a developer-sanctioned activity as players who enjoy exploring and testing the software system's limitations, or "spade" players (Bartle, 2008, n.p.), often discover glitches in the games, exploit them (or not), and discuss what to do about them (e.g., they will discuss whether a particular glitch counts as a hack or a cheat or an acceptable play). In this way, players take an active role in defining reasonable behaviors for gameplay, or sportsmanship, by constructing their own local norms (Smith, 2004) through community debate and consensus.

Ethics and Gameplay

Before we approach the specifics of sportsmanship in online sports games, we want to define several important terms and situate our argument in relation to existing literature about computer games and social organization. As a rapidly transforming site of technological, commercial, and social exchange across the globe, the phenomenon of worldwide, networked computer gaming calls into question traditional modes of behavior and belief. In Game Work, Ken S. McAllister argued that computer games "construct meanings that shape minds, bodies, and cultures" (McAllister, 2004, p.9). For example, computer games constitute a "mass culture force," that is, they have globalizing and homogenizing effects as consumer products in a mass market (McAllister, 2004, pp.9-12). Games are a form of mass media, representing real-world events such as wars, battles, and even specific sports teams and statistics for a given season. This information is often included within games in such a way as to go unquestioned as fact (McAllister, 2004, pp.13-14). Computer games likewise exert an economic force, both in terms of their presence in the economic sector as an entertainment commodity, and as a cultural artifact whose internal economies and victory conditions represent those found in the world (McAllister, 2004, pp.18-24). For example, many sports games offer "Manager" or "Owner" modes that require the player to deal with salaries, concession stand inventory and prices, ticket sales, and other aspects of the business of sport. For us, the importance of computer games as educational tools lies in the fact that the games themselves teach players how to interact within clearly defined, rule-based environments; consequently, games teach players the ethics of gameplay.

In their guide to computer game design, Rollings and Adams (2003) defined the ethical dimension of games as the rule-based system a player must negotiate and "adopt" in order to play a game and be successful. They explained:

when [designers] tell a player that he must perform certain actions to win the game, we are defining those actions as good or desirable. Likewise, when we say that the player must avoid certain actions, we are defining them as bad or undesirable. (Rollings and Adams, 2003, p.77)

And yet, even while Rollings and Adams admitted that the ethical dimensions of games rarely map directly onto those within a given culture, they argue that richer games are those that prompt players to make complex choices within the game environment. So, the point of computer gameplay, to a large degree, is to discover a game's ethical dimension by testing the limits of the rules established by the game. The more complex and versatile the rules are, the more interesting the gameplay. Games such as Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas (Rockstar Games, 2005), Black & White (Lionhead Studios, 2001), and even Sid Meier's Civilization (Microprose, 1991) and the Sims (Maxis, 2000) to a certain degree, are compelling and interesting because the games are designed to respond to the ethical choices
players make while playing the game. It is not uncommon, on the other hand, to find sports gamers mashing buttons on their controllers to capitalize on every possible advantage within the game environment.

Interestingly, we have found that sports games in particular claim to present players with the most realistic or authentic gameplay. As Scott and Ruggill (2005) put it,

Sports games such as FIFA Soccer ([EA Sports,] 2004), ESPN Major League Baseball ([Blue Shift Games,] 2004), and NHL 2004 ([EA Black Box Studios,] 2004) claim at once to authentically represent both "sport" and the commodification of sport, or rather competition and how that competition is packaged in and by the media (Scott and Ruggill, 2005, pp.63-64).

Scott and Ruggill argued that this promise of authenticity goes mostly unfulfilled as no computer or franchise can capture the complex minutiae that comprise real-world sports - including luck, player superstition, inclement weather, and so on. Because of this, sports games operate essentially as any other computer game, with ethical dimensions that approximate the rules and dimensions of sports. We argue that what are left out of this approximation are what online sports gamers must explore, exploit, and negotiate based upon the one guaranteed rule of computer games: whatever a player can do within the environment of a game is allowed and is therefore good.[3]

The problem with this rule becomes apparent when more than one player is immersed within the game environment at once. Suddenly, a play tactic such as quitting a game at the last moment to avoid a loss on one's record becomes more complicated when consequences for such actions exist outside of the game environment. Friedl (2002) argued that,

for online multiplayer games, the player faces the challenge of analyzing complex game mechanisms, and playing the game expands to deconstructing the player community. To succeed in the game, [s]he has to understand the multifaceted social system that accompanies the game; the inner workings of a virtual community that follows rules and principles not known in [her] real social life. (p.37)

Many sports gamers have begun playing online against one another as a way of increasing the level of competition and, as they describe it, the "reality" of the games. As a consequence of this additional level of reality, they are beginning to police one another publicly according to rules that extend beyond those in the game environments in which they play. They appear to be appealing to a lost art of sportsmanship.

For example, Gxanthis (2007) wrote:

dream teams, glitches, 9 defenders, keepers holding the ball for 20-30 minutes at a time without me being able to do anything, and most of all these [Removed by Adroit - swearing] hacks celebrate with the SHHHHHHH celebration when they score one piece of [Removed by Adroit - swearing] goal.

ive had enough, anyone will know if you've played me i am a VERY FAIR PLAYER. . . . no hacks, no corner glitches, no half way glitches, no dream teams, NOTHING!

. . .

these hackers have reached new lows . . . ive had enough, thanks EA for a bugged piece of [Removed by Adroit - swearing], it was the most demoralising game. it promoted hackers, and they got away with every single [Removed by Adroit - swearing] thing. i play honestly, and what do i get? Personal messages from the dream team hackers saying "HAHAHAHAHA BYE BYE!!!! AHHHHH I WIN YOU LOSER"

Notice Gxanthis' appeal to fair play, which includes not exploiting programming glitches or otherwise unfairly hacking (fixing) his team by trading for only the best players. Later in this article, we will deal
more specifically with what Gxanthis refers to as hacking and glitching. In a less emotional post, RockyTopTNVOLS (2008) wrote:

I noticed everytime I play online and get a big lead the connection is lost. Most of the time after I make a 3 or big play to go ahead a lot. I do not get a win. Why? This is stupid. Players can just quit when they are losing. . . . Has anybody else noticed this?

In this post, RockyTopTNVOLS appeals to the larger gaming community to explain the rules of behavior guiding online play, rules that extend beyond the programmed rules of the game. In the next section, we look at the difference between sportsmanship and game ethics.

**Sportsmanship and Game Ethics**

Traditional sportsmanship can be thought of as a rule-based system also: adherence to a body of written conventions and unwritten local norms (Smith, 2004) shared by athletes, officials, and spectators that serve as guides to ideal conduct in and around a sport. In Loland's (2002) terms, acceptable behavior in sport is determined by notions of both "formal fair play" and "informal fair play" (p.16). As adherence to these norms of fair play cannot always be enforced, one's choice to play within these expectations is often voluntary (Fraleigh, 1984, p.70), requiring a player and/or fan to police his/her individual emotional response and game strategy. Intended for the benefit of not only other athletes but also for society, these behavioral norms are seen to reflect an ethical, even perhaps moral, sense of duty and personal discipline (Fraleigh, 1984, pp.17-18). This notion of self-policing and governance is compounded by online sports games, whose rule systems extend beyond the game environment and the rules surrounding the sporting event itself to include entire communities of players who interact with one another through the medium of online gaming. There is an obvious tension or multi-layering of rule-based systems here, and online sports gamers have begun to define a sportsmanship of online sports gaming:

- Respect other gamers, unless they have somehow wronged you first.
- Adhere to the programmed rules of the game without using computer hacks and cheats.
- Play to the conclusion of a match.

We should also point out that sportsmanship should not be confused with gamesmanship or gaming ethics. While the concepts are not mutually exclusive, their fundamental differences bear mentioning. In *Fair Play and Sport*, Loland (2002) characterized sport as a competition guided by rules that expand on the "social logic" of games (p.15). Involving interaction between player, spectator, and official, sports follow the logic of games while attaching additional systems of regulation; sports become more complex activities than games. Fan participation at the stadium, for example, constitutes just such a dimension that extends beyond the basic mechanics of games. Spectators help determine the significance of the sporting event and at times, even influence the action itself. They must be policed: if they do not refrain from throwing objects at opposing players or entering the field of play their team will be penalized. The spectators, also, must be required to adhere to the ethics of sportsmanship. Similarly, martial arts tournaments such as K1 or the Ultimate Fighting Championship also provide opportunity for fan-player interaction: spectators' call for bloodier, more action-packed fights often pressure the athletes to assume riskier fighting styles. US football fans who watch the Super Bowl on television or soccer fans who follow the World Cup and discuss the game's action and ads the next day at work also determine the sport's cultural significance. By sharing in a game's rules, action, and spectacle, sports fans "have become play-fellows and choose to be so" (Huizinga, 1950, p.49).

Whereas sportsmanship governs the way sports are played in relation to larger societal expectations and values, game ethics describe adherence to the rules governing fair play within games played by only a few participants or those sports with minimal impact on the larger sporting culture. As Huizinga (1950) stated, "A game of chess may fascinate the onlookers although it still remains unfruitful for culture and devoid of visible charm" (p.8). Similarly, Backgammon and Parcheesi are examples of games that lack the social and cultural
significance of larger team and individual sports around the world, at least, while still sharing similar systems of ethics and fair play.

Based on this reasoning, online sports games also fall under the rubric of game ethics. While these games might appear only significant to those that play them, the increasing self-consciousness of gaming communities with emerging codes of conduct indicate that online gaming has become more than just a convenient means to arrange anonymous matches: there is a larger, growing social significance to this group play. Specifically, the public negotiation of online games’ simulated rules by concerned users on the 2K Sports Forums’ online message boards demonstrates that gamers are thinking beyond a game’s baseline programming and perceive its increasing interplay with existing ideas about sportsmanship.

Cheesing, Pulling, and Glitching

Online sports games differ from other computer games in one important respect: the rules of game intersect with the rules of sport. Specifically designed to simulate the rules of real life sport, these games encourage players to associate their input with the rules of the actual sport, not the computer game’s technology. However, as most gamers find, the limitations on programmed responses cannot compete with the randomness and spontaneity of real life: a true overlap of the two rule systems is not yet possible.

For example, in the competitive world of online football games (e.g., the Madden NFL and ESPN 2K series), where players spend hours accruing online statistics and win-loss records against human opponents, winning online has appeared to become a far more rewarding experience than succeeding in standard single player simulations of NFL football. Poole (2000) argued,

Videogames allow for, are often specifically built for, a form of social play activity. Indeed, a great many gamers, including me, find videogaming at its most pleasurable in such a context. . . . the social aspect of board games and certain sports is multiplied innumerable times in the burgeoning phenomenon of online videogaming. Now there is a possibility of social play that is greater than at any time before in human history. (pp.166-7)

Similar to real sports, the pressure to win publicly online results in a stretching of the rules on all sides. Just as athletes utilize deceptive strategies such as feigning injury for a timeout or intentionally fouling opponents (see, for example, the Portland Trailblazer’s foul-based strategy in the 2000 US National Basketball Association Playoffs), sports gamers similarly push the limits of acceptable play by exclusively drawing on plays that exploit strategic technical possibilities of the gaming system - some gamers argue that they are detracting from the game and exercising poor sportsmanship. Notice in Zepol’s post a call for an idealized, masculine system of rules to guide behavior and etiquette (i.e. that the losing player should “take it like a man”). Outraged gamers police the community according to their own standards of sportsmanship, going so far as to warn future opponents of such players, known as pullers, by posting their screen names on message boards. In one such post, Shanahan (2004) offered advice for avoiding pullers: “All you have to do to avoid cheesers is look at their stats . . . 50 quits, don’t play ‘em” (n.p.).

Some online players simply disconnect their game systems when they are not winning; depriving their opponent of victory. In an online message post, Zepol (2003) complained that “Plug-pullers’ are those dudes who while getting their butts whipped disconnect their internet connection instead of taking a loss like a real man or at least quitting the game” (n.p.). When sports gamers draw on such tactics - tricks that exploit strategic technical possibilities of the gaming system - some gamers argue that they are detracting from the game and exercising poor sportsmanship. Notice in Zepol’s post a call for an idealized, masculine system of rules to guide behavior and etiquette (i.e. that the losing player should “take it like a man”). Outraged gamers police the community according to their own standards of sportsmanship, going so far as to warn future opponents of such players, known as pullers, by posting their screen names on message boards. In one such post, Shanahan (2004) offered advice for avoiding pullers: “All you have to do to avoid cheesers is look at their stats . . . 50 quits, don’t play ‘em” (n.p.).

Basic technical structures in football simulators like NFL 2K5 (Visual Concepts, 2005) and Madden NFL 06 (EA Tiburon and Budcat Creations, 2006) provided the foundation for such conceptions of sportsmanship. For example, default settings standardize game length
and gameplay settings, conditions players must agree upon before each game. Thus, players can expect an equal experience in regards to computer artificial intelligence and level of difficulty. Default team rosters and restrictions on team choice also prevent gamers from dominating the game by importing custom-built rosters. Finally, online play can also include an equalizing function designed to eliminate the lifelike advantages of more dominant sports teams, though we have observed that this function is rarely used. These baseline structures help establish the fact that the game will be played according to a simulation of professional sport rules.

Yet for many gamers, these rudimentary controls still do not provide an adequate level of competition, and players find ways to exploit the system. Players who exploit weaknesses in programming and technical limitations of online play are labeled cheesers, a catch-all term for players who bend the rules. Much like Huizinga’s “spoilsport,” who in his conscious flouting of the rules “reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world in which he had temporarily shut himself with others” (1950, p.11), cheesers destroy the illusion of playing real professional sports, shattering the magic circle. In a message posted on the NFL 2K5’s online message board, The Last Ending (2005) defined cheesing as any “unnecessary” or “unrealistic” play compared to real NFL games (n.p.). Others, like Raynman, claimed that all such unrealistic plays can be stopped: “Everything you guys cry about can be countered. You’re just too lazy to figure it out” (n.p.) The volume of complaints accusing specific players of cheesing reached such heights that in October 2004, 2K5 Sports forum administrators abolished such accusatory posts on all of its message boards (Guest, 2004, n.p.). Despite this prohibition, similar posts still appear with great frequency.

Like The Last Ending (2005), many gamers argue that cheesers destroy the fun of playing sports games by ruining the feel of simulating a real, professional game, and by extension their suspension of disbelief. Typical cheesing might consist of using the same play over and over by repeatedly throwing to the same receivers or switching lineups to put star players in unexpected positions (e.g., using NFL all-star wide receiver Terrell Owens as a tight end or halfback, or Manchester United’s striker Wayne Rooney as defender due to his high aggression and tackling statistics). In most other computer game genres this would be perfectly acceptable as the “preferred performance” of the game (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006), the constant repeating of the most effective maneuvers within the gameworld to achieve optimal results.

Yet due to the existence of a real-world referent, players complain these behaviors violate the promise of the sports game (the faithful simulation of real life play [Scott and Ruggill, 2005]), even though there are real-world referents for the substitution of unlikely players into unexpected positions: the Chicago Bear’s occasional use of lineman William “Refrigerator” Perry as an offensive back is a well known example, as is the practice of playing defenders as attackers in soccer, such as Chelsea’s use of centreback John Terry as a striker in desperate scenarios. While ESPN 2K5 allows for limited switching among offensive players, restrictions exist to prevent the more unrealistic player switches.

Perhaps what is at work here is a break between the abundant historical details of a sport and its simulation as an abstract concept, a phenomenon examined by international relations scholar J. Der Derian (1990) in the realm of war gaming: “in the construction of a realm of meaning that has minimal contact with historically specific events or actors, simulations have demonstrated the power to displace the ‘reality’ of international relations they purport to represent” (p.301).

For gamers opposed to such substitution, the fact that William Perry played different positions multiple times throughout his career - even to taunt opponents - figures little into their conceptions of player substitution as an aspect of sportsmanship. Rather, gamers imagine sportsmanship as an idealized concept divorced from the actual history of professional sport. This notion is readily reinforced by sports computer games and their designers; who, seeking to achieve the right balance between accurate simulation and enjoyable game play, still root their virtual world in the idealized representations of the rules, statistics, and players in professional sport.
In addition to controversial play calling and unconventional player substitution, *glitching* is another maligned playing style that involves the use of rapid button mashing combinations and exploitation of control glitches to a player’s advantage. The most common example is where a player finds a glitch or problem with the game and uses this to his or her advantage. Because these tactics work every play, some glitchers rely on them throughout the entire game.

One of the more extreme ways to express frustration at glitching (or even losing) is the simplest form of protest: pulling the plug. Akin to flipping over a chessboard at the decisive moment, shutting off the gaming console or pulling out the network cable immediately terminates a game. In the early days of online gaming, this was a common, frustrating experience for the winning player. As mentioned earlier, to combat this behavior, many online games have begun to log the number of quits a player accrues over time. For example, EA Sports logs every player’s “Did Not Finish” percentage:

DNF stands for Did Not Finish. Basically, this is a measurement of what percentage of games a player did not complete. So if you quit, disconnect, reset, power off, or do not finish your game in some other way, it will increase your Did Not Finish percentage. (Dewiel, 2009, n.p.)

This ensures a player who regularly quits will be less likely to find a willing opponent. A less egregious infraction, pulling out the network connection cord, will also terminate the game. In some games, network disconnections are logged separately from quits so pullers do not lose as much credibility.

Despite innovative game mechanics and the rigorous self-policing efforts that limit cheesing, players still find ways to exhibit gameplay objectionable to the community. In *NFL 2K5* (Visual Concepts, 2005), for example, automatic instant replays may be employed as a means of taunting or retaliating against an opponent by disrupting the rapid flow of the game. A typical scenario might go like this:

One player, f00tball_gam3rer, is forced to watch his opponent, gam3grrl, replay each of her own scoring drives numerous times throughout the game. This creates a frustrating wait time while f00tball_gam3rer is forced to watch his opponents’ accomplishments. One replay in particular features replay in slow motion and from multiple angles. After f00tball_gam3rer retaliates with his own repetitive replay taunt following a score, gam3grrl ultimately responds with an extended replay of her game winning play. Frustrated, f00tball_gam3rer finally pulls the plug.

Similar techniques include running down the play clock - regardless of the score - so that the opponent will have less time with the ball and will be forced to wait an extra thirty seconds on each play - an agonizingly lengthy period of time in the fast-paced gaming world. Such strategies do not easily fit into the categories of cheesing or glitching, being instead designated as valid or invalid (unsportsmanlike) dependent upon the community’s previously agreed upon local norms (Smith, 2004).

Although much maligned, glitching and cheesing strategies challenge dominant notions of sportsmanship in computer games. Naturally, many gamers feel that such playing styles detract from the game and even violate its basic promise: faithful simulation of real sports games (Scott and Ruggill, 2005). They assume that the designers and marketers of *ESPN NFL 2K5* (Visual Concepts, 2005), for instance, expect players to focus solely on the simulation aspect by imagining the actions of favorite players and recreating their moves. In fact, the design of the game packaging itself, featuring Terrell Owens reaching up to make a one-handed catch, emphasizes the reality of the simulation: gamers will have a chance to recreate the plays of their favorite players and beloved teams. While some players want to emulate their preferred star, others play for the competitive challenge that playing against another human provides. If those players in favor of true simulation were to completely ignore weaknesses in programming and control, the games they play would be lengthy, predictable affairs. As Vorderer, Hartmann, and Klimmt (2003) argued, “competitive elements are considered the most important determinant of the enjoyment arising from playing computer...
games" (p.2). While faithfully simulating reality, the games would lack a competitive aspect: the very reason players choose online games rather than mere single-player games. The human factor engages and fascinates players with unpredictability and competitiveness.

Conclusion

While finding glitches and bugs in the software gives game developers the feedback they need to improve game design and develop new features, many gamers argue that it is those same developers who should be held responsible for not providing well-crafted structures and rules to govern play, not the savvy gamers who learn to exploit them. Most importantly, cheating and glitching are not prohibited by games themselves: by the nature of being allowed, these are moral acts in game worlds. Attaching additional levels of regulation entails messy, subjective interpretation of the nature of sportsmanship by a host of players, all with different ideas about what constitutes appropriate behavior. This is currently becoming even more complex as certain sports games have begun to integrate common forms of cheating in the sport into their games. For example, Pro Evolution Soccer 2008 (Konami, 2007) added a "dive" feature, mirroring the "diving culture" (Manchester Evening News, 2006) of modern day soccer. If certain cheats are not only allowed by the simulation but specifically programmed into the game as a claim to authenticity or to becoming more real, can there ever be a clear demarcation between cheaters and rule-abiding players?

Thus, the dispute between die-hard simulators and cheasers over the purpose and nature of online sports games is not likely to fade away any time soon. Rooted in philosophical discussions about the purpose and nature of sport and games, these debates will continue to fill message boards as long as computer games continue to provide opportunities to reveal what games teach us about ethics and competition. Just as Huizinga (1950) draws on games and play to interpret developments in society and culture, online games can also tell us important things about human behavior, social interaction and sports culture in the information age.

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Notes

[1] In this essay, we follow McAllister's (2004) convention for referring to any game that requires a computer to work as a "computer game" rather than a "video game" since a computer - whether it’s an actual PC or a platform, handheld, mobile phone, etc. - is the essential component (vii, 39).

[2] In saying this, however, we realize that there are technological, institutional, and economic barriers to participating in games that may have very much to do with ability, race, class, and gender. Rather than challenge these barriers here, we ask our readers to allow us to use the term sportsmanship in this article without directly referring to the term’s specific cultural baggage.

[3] Rollings and Adams referred to this ethical dimension as exploring the moral or ethical world of the game set forth by its designers. For example, upon entering a game, a player must weigh each action with its potential consequences. In Online Game Interactivity Theory, Friedl (2002) referred to the moral world of the game as a set of rules that are agreed upon when entering the environment:

You can predict another's behavior because the environment has already established certain rules of how to behave - rules that both of you agree upon as you enter that space. If these rules - the way you can predict other people to interact - is not what you are after at the moment, you have to choose: either don’t enter, or never mind and risk the potential consequences. (pp.117-118).
In either case, the point is that the ethical dimension of the computer game is established by the game's designers and it is expected to be explored and tested through the process of playing the game.

[4] While we would never suggest that all injury timeouts are faked, we do argue that embellishment is a vital strategy of many team sports, as illustrated by Fraleigh (1984, p.3). In one such example, the Portland Trailblazers - a professional US basketball franchise - repeatedly fouled Los Angeles Lakers' player Shaquille O'Neal because he was notoriously bad at free throws. This strategy, aimed at slowing down the game and limiting the Lakers' offensive potential, became known as the "Hack a Shaq" strategy. For a more detailed account, see "Shaq" (2000).

[5] In an October 1985 game against the San Francisco 49ers, Bears coach Mike Ditka used the bulky Perry as a running back to retaliate against rival coach Bill Walsh's use of lineman Guy McIntyre in a similar play the previous year (Pierson, 2005).

References


**Ludography**


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