

Ethics In Online Games

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Is that player who just shot you in the head three times in a row in CounterStrike cheating, or is he just that good? What about your friend in World of Warcraft, who just bought gold on eBay so he doesn't have to actually have to spend the time playing the game to get it? The question of where to draw the line on cheating in online games is a very difficult decision to make, and as competition has gotten more fierce and massively multiplayer online games have spread in popularity, it only gets more blurred, mimicking ethical dilemmas in real life.

Cheating has been a part of video games from the days of the first personal computers, when a game was loaded into memory and then run, commands could be run to change values in the memory. At first, this was done mostly by programmers or others who had the technical knowledge, but eventually there became an industry of publishing codes for invulnerability or infinite ammo, cheats that didn't really affect anyone else as the Internet and the multiplayer competitive gaming that came with it wasn't around yet. This can be seen as fairly harmless, it is the player's own decision to affect his game, the real ethical questions come in to play when interaction with other players is allowed.

When played in a local setting, with the players all on one screen or at least one local network, cheating could still be caught fairly easily, and was shunned, but the internet gave a shield of anonymity, it became very hard to tell whether someone in Quake was a really good shot, or they had a computer program helping them aim. One perspective on this is that it is still a game, but players take games very seriously sometimes, online FPS games like Quake or Counterstrike have been developing technological methods to combat cheating almost since the start, as widespread cheating could ruin the experience of the game for everyone who wasn't cheating.

FPS games usually last for about five minutes, and while it can be infuriating if someone in the game is cheating, at least it is over soon. In MMOs (massively multiplayer online) games, the world is

persistent, a cheater will keep whatever advantages they have and affect the game world with what they do, possibly destroying the balance or giving themselves an unfair advantage. There are many different levels of this cheating, or game modifying, and it isn't always easy to draw the line at where it becomes unethical.

Macros, or modifications to a game to automate actions usually performed by the player are a particularly grey area. Is it an unfair advantage to be able to cast your spell just by pressing F1 when anyone else would need to click the mouse several times? Perhaps that's just a nice convenience, but when the activity being automated usually takes hours, and the person running the macro doesn't even need to be at their computer, it starts looking much more like an unethical level of cheating. Many MMOs specifically ban this practice, threatening to ban your account if you are caught doing it, which carries enough of a risk to discourage the practice, if not eliminate it.

Gold selling and the gold farming that precedes it is another gray area, or perhaps a swirling mix of black and white, as not many people actually seem to be in the middle with their opinion. Most MMOs have some form of economy, and buying gold is a way to spend real world money to get ahead in the virtual economy, which often angers the people who feel that the virtual world should remain separate from the real world. If the fastest way to gain gold in game resulted in 1 gold an hour, someone buying gold might be able to save themselves an hour of in game work and time by buying it on an auction site, hopping past all of the other players who would otherwise be at around the same skill level, in a way that had nothing to do with in game considerations.

What makes these instances of cheating worth of consideration is that they actually affect a huge number of people, including those who would otherwise not be involved with the game at all. There is an obvious effect on those in the game who are trying to compete with a vanilla, unmodified copy of the game versus someone who has macros to make every action they take easier, or a 1st level character that suddenly becomes rich from an out of game expenditure and can buy equipment they shouldn't be able to get for months if they were playing the game normally. The larger effect comes

from a look at the out of game economy. Gold buyers create demand for gold sellers, who have to get the in game gold somewhere. Some game developers have tried business models where they sell in game gold, profiting off of people who want to gain in game, and having basically no limit to what they can sell, but this often results in an outcry. Other providers surface however, it has become a viable career for many in China, as people take 12 hour sweatshop like shifts with the intent of earning as much gold as possible, and then selling it through an online merchant or brokerage to someone more willing to part with their money than play the game. The way this blends considerations of virtual and real world ethics is a really interesting dilemma, with plenty of changes as operators of the games and the in game communities themselves react.

Sometimes cheating in MMOs can become an even bigger scandal, as with EVE Online, when the developers of the game were caught aiding one of the large player alliances, which set off even more of an uproar than it would in other games because it is a very competitive game with large alliances of thousands of players fighting against the other, with no real cap on how strong a player can become, so there's no catching up to someone who has the creators of the game on their side. Most people are interested in playing a fair game, cheating like this takes that chance away from them, even if it allows the cheaters to experience more of the game sometimes.

Experiencing more of the game was one of the main arguments for cheating in single player games, where it didn't ruin anyone else's experience of the same game, and some people transfer that to online multiplayer games, claiming that they can't hope to compete otherwise, so they should be able to have some advantages to level the playing field, much like those who are against cheating and game modification want everyone to play with the same game program, it becomes a duel of what is really equal and fair.

Sometimes the act of catching cheaters brings up its own ethical questions, as this often requires either a judgment call based on in game actions, or a potentially invasive program that has to run to spy on the user's computer. These programs can often get false positives, or have bugs that cause users

playing without cheats to have difficulties with the game, and sometimes updates to a game meant to patch cheats or bugs wind up causing even more problems and occasionally can make an entire computer unstable, and it becomes a trade off of what leads to the greater good for the most players of the game.

Dilemmas in video game ethics often mirror similar problems in the real world, and I think much can be learned by following this particular microcosm that is only going to make the news more often as MMOs and other online games increase in popularity.