

Cheating can be good for you: educational games and multiple play styles

Mia Consalvo

Mia Consalvo is Assistant Professor at School of Telecommunications, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio, USA

Abstract

Purpose – Aims to determine how multiple play styles and use of “outside” materials can be successfully taken into account when designing user experiences in educational digital games.

Design/methodology/approach – This research draws on over two dozen qualitative interviews and an open-ended survey of an additional 50 game players with a wide range of gameplay experience.

Findings – Findings suggest that players have different skill sets, and different beliefs about what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable help in a variety of games. These findings are analyzed to argue for different ways to enhance the educational gaming experience for players.

Research limitations/implications – As with all qualitative research, the relatively small sample size makes it difficult to draw broad generalizations from the data. However, the research does suggest that there are many ways to play games, that players use many items and information “outside” the game to help them play or enhance their experience, and such things can be fruitfully used to improve educational games.

Practical implications – Designers of educational games should take into account the materials surrounding games, such as walkthroughs and codes, as ways to enhance the game and educational experience, rather than detract from them.

Originality/value – Very little research has been done examining how players perceive items and information related to game play, as well as how they use such things. This research investigates that area and relates the knowledge to ways to improve educational games, and education.

Keywords Video games, Learning, Behaviour modification

Paper type Research paper

A couple years ago I bought the SquareSoft game *Threads of Fate* (2000) because I had always enjoyed the *Final Fantasy* line of games. *Threads* offered players the opportunity to play as either a boy or girl main character (a rarity for Square) and follow the storyline through each perspective. The game was an action-RPG, and I had mainly confined myself to turn-based RPGs until that time. I jumped into the role of “Mint,” quickly got engrossed in the storyline, and had fun learning various attack combos. After about ten hours of play, however, I hit a wall. During a mini-boss battle I figured out (after laborious trial and error), what I needed to do to defeat the boss, but I could not physically get my avatar to do so, not being very adept at platform-style moves. After several hours of frustration, I threw the game down, and never returned to it. I did a half-hearted internet search to see if there were cheat codes available to make the battle easier or get past it, but could not find any. The game sits unfinished in my game library.

After interviewing dozens of game players about their play styles and interests, I know I am not alone in such “failures”. The reasons for failing to finish a game can vary: some games are too difficult, or too easy (losing their challenge), while others come to a point where players cannot figure out the next logical action. Others have a storyline or action that failed to hold player interest. Whatever the reason, the games at one time commanded attention, but then stopped being enjoyable and thus play ended.

Of course gamers complete many other games, and perhaps replay some of those games because of consistent levels of enjoyment. But even in those games, there may have been times when players got stuck, got bored, or were mystified about the next steps. Yet here, players managed to find a walkthrough or strategy guide with hints towards the next objective or a guide with step-by-step actions for solving a certain puzzle. Maybe there was a valuable code to get past a particularly sticky point, or that unlocked more enjoyment from the game, after an initial play-through.

What those experiences point to, both positive and negative, is the need for help and guidance when individuals play games. Without help at a critical point, a game may come to an abrupt halt. When the consequence is less enjoyment of an entertainment-based game, the result is unfortunate, but for an educational game, it means the end of learning.

Cheating and game playing

Cheating is one of those terms that seem to be very easy to define, but the term quickly turns slippery. In a specific context, poised with a yes or no question (is copying off another student's test cheating? Is buying "gil" off the internet for use in a game cheating?), most people will take a position on which actions constitute cheating and which do not, even if they do not agree with others. Yet, how does this extrapolate into general terms? Who gets to decide what cheating is – the cheater or the cheated, or a third party? If you do not "hurt" anyone but yourself, are you cheating?

Barton Bowyer (1982, p. 47) argues 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". So the cheater is taking advantage, of a person, a situation, or both. Cheating in this definition also involves "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.

Players of digital games have the options of following the rules, overtly refusing to abide by the rules, or secretly not abiding by the rules (although appearing to do so), and thus cheating. Different outcomes occur in each situation, and Johann Huizinga (1950, p. 11) argues that we attach different meanings, and different 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 . . . he robs the play of its illusion.

The idea that the spoil-sport is somehow worse than the cheater is echoed in Bowyer's (1982, p. 300) accounting of cheating in history, 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", and pervades our world "to be is to be cheated" (Bowyer, 1982, p. 428). 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" (Bowyer, 1982, pp. 300-301).

According to past thought on the practice of cheating, then, the pursuit has a negative connotation – both in real life activities as well as in game playing. Yet when players are questioned about what the term means, different meanings emerge. Most abstract definitions given by players center on the idea of an "unfair advantage in gameplay". Cheating is seen as something outside the bounds of fair play, even if it is technically legal or allowable within the game. However, when pressed to identify specific practices that constitute cheating, interesting divergences in answers occur.

One central difference is between single-play and multi-play experiences. A large number of players believe that cheating can only occur between people – "you can't cheat a

computer” was a common response in my research into cheating behaviors. For a person to cheat, another player, or a group of other people, had to be either disadvantaged, or lacking access to (or awareness of) specific objects, abilities, or actions that could help a person “get ahead” in the game.

For another group, cheating could include cheating against other players, but also against technology – the console, computer, or related hardware – even in a single-player game. For this group, cheating in single-player games centered on “cheating oneself” out of a particular type of experience. It meant ruining the surprise of what came next, or the sense of accomplishment earned from solving a puzzle all alone, or beating a boss after a tough battle.

But no matter how individuals defined cheating, many engaged in those actions – either occasionally or with regularity. Because of the negative connotation associated with cheating, justifications for the practice were frequently offered. So why do they cheat, if it has such an off-putting undertone to it?

They cheat for many reasons. And these reasons can help us understand the gameplay process for different people, in different locations, at different times and in different contexts. That is because cheating is not just about subverting the (game) system – it is also about augmenting the system. It is a way for individuals to keep playing through:

- boredom;
- difficulty;
- limited scenarios; and
- rough patches or just bad games.

Cheating, or however these activities might be differently defined, constitutes players asserting agency, taking control of their game experience. It is players going beyond the “expected” activity in the game. Knowledge of how, when, and why people cheat (or refuse to) can help us improve the gameplay experience. So what is this cheating, why does it occur, and how can we use this knowledge in a beneficial way?

Giving aid

Players want to play the game. They want to “have fun”, but more importantly, they want to succeed. Success comes through advancement, achievement of goals, increasingly interesting and challenging environments, and firm control of elements within the game. Yet games do not always offer players equal chances at success – the players may have different skill levels, be in a bad mood that day, or the game may simply be poorly designed. Yet even with these challenges, game players try to play the game, and elements of cheating practices can help players get through certain spots, and still attain larger goals.

In interviews with game players, one of the most common reasons for using walkthroughs or tips from online sites is “getting stuck” in a game and being unable to progress any further. Players often view this situation as an unfortunate event – they would like to be able to progress in the game on their own, but admit that at times their skill is not at the level of the gameplay, or more frequently, the game does not provide clear instructions about the next logical steps to take.

These situations, common in entertainment-themed games, should be expected and planned for in educational games as well. Although there has been a significant amount of analysis of educational games and their helpfulness in learning (a short list of early research could include sources such as Coleman, 1989; Hsu, 1989; Hughes, 1981; Liedtke, 1980; Salend, 1979; Shubik, 1989; and Winner and McClung, 1981), practically no attention has been paid to peripheral products or aids that might help players complete or succeed in these games. Items such as walkthroughs or basic strategy guides could help players, especially those not familiar with game playing or with a particular genre of game, succeed in learning the structural aspects of the game, and then focus more deeply on its content.

But wouldn't this be "cheating?" Perhaps, if the player ends up using the walkthrough as a hand-holding device and does not attempt any original input into the game. However, the historical use of strategy guides, and their construction, works against that type of use. From their beginnings, guides have urged readers to use them "as a last resort" and to look for "only the part you need" and then put the guide down and get back to the game. From guides for *Myst* in the early 1990s to more recent walkthroughs for the *Final Fantasy* series, guide authors understand that over-reliance on a guide actually decreases the fun involved in gameplay. Likewise, with educational games, overuse of a guide or walkthrough would destroy the "game" part of the learning experience, leaving a simplified direction set to follow.

At their best, guides and walkthroughs designed for educational games might be along the lines of the Universal Hint System (found online at www.uhs-hints.com), which gives players hints that start from the very general and progress to the very specific, one at a time, to help them solve puzzles and solutions on their own and not spoil progress in the rest of the game. Such systems would allow players that are unsure of an answer, or a next move, to get a little bit of help without breaking the illusion of the game. Such a system also allows players at different skill sets, in both educational content and game skill, to play the same game. Repeated play can allow those that had initially rocky starts to go past the formerly troublesome spots unaided.

Cheat codes: the next step?

Another activity related to game play that players engage in is the use of cheat codes, either entered in via a controller, the keyboard on a PC, or through a device such as a Game Shark. Such codes allow players various things – god-like abilities such as full health or unlimited money or ammunition; the ability to go to any section of the game desired; and fun additions to the game such as bobble-heads for avatars or bicycles in a driving game.

Players use these codes for some of the reasons mentioned above (getting stuck, being unable to perform a specific move or action), as well as for others. A code can help a player get past a difficult enemy or puzzle that has caused them substantial frustration. It can also provide new content to explore in a game, either for a player that has already finished the game, or who is bored or tired with the game "as it is" and might wish for different experiences without having to progress in a linear fashion (or through advancement of any sort) through the game.

These uses can also be integrated into the playing of educational games. Codes would allow players that are interested in content, but not as skilled in a particular genre, to get past difficult skill-based portions of the game to access additional levels/parts/areas. They would also give players that had completed the game once access to new areas to explore, or the ability to jump to any area instantly, in order to review or replay those portions. That would allow more experienced players greater control over their experience, and the ability to replay aspects of the game of interest (or need). It would also reward players for playing the game well – codes could be awarded based on certain achievements or benchmarks in the game, or they could be released to all players after a certain period of time.

Another interesting use of the codes might be discussion of their use as an ethics-based case study. Players could discuss the advantages and pitfalls of "cheating" and their beliefs in such activities. I have found that players have varying views on the uses of such codes, with some believing codes to be cheating (and refusing to use them) while others see them as an acceptable part of gameplay. Having such discussions would lead players to clarify their own ethical stances, and determine how their actions accord (or do not) with their stated beliefs.

If the game cheats for you, is it still cheating?[1]

If we wanted to disallow players the option of adding in codes to make gameplay better or more rewarding, but still give help to less skilled players, another option is adding "auto-dynamic difficulty" (ADD) to the coding of the game (Miller, 2004). Scott Miller, a game designer, argues that when players encounter huge difficulties in games, it is the fault of the designer, rather than the player. He proposes adding code to games that would let the game

“auto-adjust” to a player’s level of achievement. If such a system had been in place in *Threads of Fate*, for example, the game would have recognized that I had died “x” number of times in a specific battle, and would then have made that battle slightly easier for me to complete (and then perhaps more and more easy if I kept dying), or would have slowed my damage rate to keep me going longer. Such systems would give the player subtle nudges towards success. Alternately, if a whiz at platform games picked up the game, it would become more difficult for that person.

Such a system has the advantage of allowing designers the authority to determine how much or how little help players should receive. It also creates a better system for the stronger game player, who might find such games consistently designed for more novice gamers. However, it also has drawbacks. Players do not get to decide how much help they “need” and the system might still not be adequately designed to anticipate every kind of player. Further, designer/educators would need to decide in advance what the primary objectives are of gameplay – if it involves learning a particular skill, or set of content, then allowing a game to adjust would not give everyone the same experience, and would not guarantee that all learning objectives had been reached. ADD is another potential tool, but one that requires more technical planning, and very careful consideration of its implementation.

Multi-play and cheating: punishment of other players

Most players, if willing to cheat in a single player game, adamantly oppose the idea of cheating when there is more than one player involved. Perhaps the only exception is if everyone is cheating, and everyone knows about it. However, overall, it seems that cheating should be disallowed in games with more than one player, unless the play is cooperative, rather than competitive. An interesting idea, though, might be to allow all players access to walkthroughs and guides, even in competitive games, as these might help games from ending prematurely if all players are unable to progress. However, if players do manage to find ways to “cheat” that are unauthorized by the game/educator, determining ways to sanction offenders is likely to be an important part of establishing gameplay and its rules and keeping the game going successfully.

In past experiments it has been proven that if players do not have the ability to punish those caught cheating (or suspected of cheating) then group cohesiveness disappears, and the gameplay experience will suffer (Fehr and Gächter, 2002). Various options include the ability to “call out” and blacklist cheating players, as well as giving players options within games to punish offenders, including fining them, limiting their progress temporarily, or perhaps forcing them to start over in the game as a new character. As Fehr and Gächter (2002) have shown, allowing individuals in a group the ability to “punish” those that have transgressed the rules can be a way to incorporate cheating practices into a game and co-opt them, rather than letting them halt or destroy the game. Again here, such practices can also lead to further educational moments, as players negotiate how to deal with transgressors appropriately. It also allows players another level of agency or activity in the game, rather than forcing them into the role of “passive victim of the cheat”.

Evaluation

Finally, players can complete the circle and enter the production of game-related materials by producing guides, walkthroughs, FAQs or other devices on their own. Such activities can allow educators (as well as players themselves) to see how well individuals have played the game, in that players must be able to recount or explain levels, actions, and other abilities in great detail. This can serve as an evaluation of what is learned through gameplay, on both micro and macro levels. Additionally, the creation of such guides can help serve future players of the game – giving the activity relevance beyond a basic (and isolated) “test of knowledge”. Players can also help in refining aspects of the game that are difficult or troublesome, buggy or just poorly designed.

Conclusion

These are preliminary ideas for how players’ difficulties as well as play styles can be better served in educational games. Until now, there has been no attention placed on how

educational games might need out-of-game materials, or elements that could later be incorporated into the games, to help players in keeping the game going, in learning more, and in adding new, fun, as well as education material into a game. Players want to do well at games, sometimes in spite of the game's very design. We must pay attention to FAQs, walkthroughs, codes, and player-created behavioral rules as critical parts of the gameplay of all games, and especially those where we wish players to take away more than just "satisfaction" – where education is a primary goal.

Note

1. Thanks to David Thomas for suggesting this topic and pointing me to a great discussion about it.

References

Bowyer, J.B. (1982), *Cheating*, St Martin's Press, New York, NY.

Coleman, J. (1989), "Simulation games and the development of social theory", *Simulation & Games*, Vol. 20 No. 2, pp. 144-64.

Fehr, E. and Gächter, S. (2002), "Altruistic punishment in humans", *Nature*, Vol. 415, pp. 137-40.

Hsu, E. (1989), "Role-event gaming simulation in management education", *Simulation & Gaming*, Vol. 20 No. 4, pp. 409-38.

Hughes, K. (1981), "Adapting audio/video games for handicapped learners: Part 1", *Teaching Exceptional Children*, November, pp. 80-3.

Huizinga, J. (1950), *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA.

Liedtke, W. (1980), "Games for the primary grades", *Arithmetic Teacher*, December, pp. 30-1.

Miller, S. (2004), "Auto-dynamic difficulty", available at: http://dukenkem.typepad.com/game_matters/2004/01/autoadjusting_g.html (accessed 19 January, 2004).

Salend, S. (1979), "Active academic games: the aim of the game is mainstreaming", *Teaching Exceptional Children*, Fall, pp. 3-6.

Shubik, M. (1989), "Gaming: theory and practice, past and future", *Simulation & Games*, Vol. 20 No. 2, pp. 184-9.

Winner, A.-A. and McClung, M. (1981), "Computer game playing – 'turn-on' to mathematics", *Arithmetic Teacher*, October, pp. 38-9.