

Peek-a-boo to their card game of Cheat, children learn the principles of cheating.”¹² And it pervades our world: “to be is to be cheated.”¹³ 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.”¹⁴

How does that relate to videogames? As long as there have been videogames, people have cheated while playing them. But now we arrive at the point where we must turn to players themselves, because only they can tell us what it means to cheat in a videogame.

Paratext

Before a videogame is ever released, communication and artifacts relating to it spring up like mushrooms, much of it (the noncommercial side at least) with little planning or overall design from the game’s developers. Fans of a game series post updates to a blog, mailing list, or chat site. Previews of the game, including screen shots, trailers, and interviews with the developers, appear on television and in magazines. Slots for the game, to allow potential players to preorder it, are created on Amazon’s and GameStop’s Web sites. Rumors may fly. A strategy guide may go into production. Shelf space and advertising are secured.

Before a player loads a game on to a console or computer, the opportunities to learn about that game have become vast. And once a game is released, that steady stream of information becomes a flood. Reviews (both commercial and noncommercial), ads, cheat code releases, G4 TV specials, walkthroughs, discussion board topics on GameFAQs.com, and perhaps the opportunity to pay more real money to upgrade your game experience all appear.

In two decades, we have moved from a trickle to a torrent of information, and it all plays a role in shaping our experiences of gameplay—regardless of the actual game itself. Yet how can we make sense of such a system? This system isn’t the game industry but is closely related to it. To call it peripheral dismisses or ignores its centrality to the gaming experience. Whether we admit it or not, we have learned how to play games, how to judge games, and how to think about games and ourselves as gamers in part through the shaping of these industries. How best to capture that system?

Writing originally about printed works and the surrounding materials that frame their consumption, Genette introduced the concept of the paratext.¹⁵ He argued that the paratext, which could include a table of contents, a title, and a review (among many other things), all helped shape the reader's experience of a text. And centrally, the paratext helped give meaning to the act of reading.

Peter Lunenfeld later took that concept and applied it to digital media, writing that the boundaries now are even more fluid, and the paratexts are often more interesting than the “originary” texts.¹⁶ I believe that the peripheral industries surrounding games function as just such a paratext. Gaming magazines, strategy guides, mod chip makers, the International Game Exchange, Even Balance and other companies, and industry segments work to shape the gameplay experience in particular ways. Those ways have played a significant role in how gameplay is now understood. Yet not all such shaping—or attempts to shape—went unchallenged, either by the game industry or the players themselves. I will explore that history throughout this book. The central tendency remains, though: the creation of a flourishing paratext has significantly shaped games and gamers in the process of creating new markets.

Book Structure and Chapter Preview

Part I: A Cultural History of Cheating in Games

Part I looks at the cultural history of cheating in videogames. It examines how the act began, from the desire of game designers to put in “Easter eggs” for players to find, to the implementation of cheat codes to help designers in constructing the game. The chapters in this part chronicle how those items migrated to several paratextual industries, such as game magazines, tip lines, and cheat books, to GameSharks and mod chips. The focus concerns how the packaging and selling of cheats was developed into a market, and how that market helped define particular modes of playing games that go beyond simple cheating. That growth also spurred the development of subindustries not working together with designers and publishers that actively pushed for player activity outside the bounds of what is deemed fair play. The part ends by asking how contemporary videogame players conceive of cheating: how do they define it in their own terms, and how do or don't they engage in those practices?