Abstract
This exploratory paper answers questions about how Facebook as a game platform influences players’ gameplay, arguing that platforms can shape play as well as cheating behaviors in important ways. It is based on a survey of players of social network games, exploring their attitudes towards cheating in games such as The Sims Social and Cityville. It also includes results from follow-up qualitative interviews, further inquiring how players theorize cheating in such games relative to their existing social networks, Facebook’s Terms of Service, and the specific types of games that are prevalent on Facebook. It asks how these features shape player’s understandings of what constitutes cheating. It finds in part that platforms do influence how players define or imagine cheating in several ways, including the normalization of new payment models and gameplay mechanics, differences in how cheating is conceptualized by strangers versus friends and family, and how different terms of service can frame what counts as cheating or not.

1. Introduction

Historically, cheating in a videogame has meant a few things: using a cheat code (like the famous Konami code in order to gain unlimited health, items or access to later or secret levels), employing a wall hack or aimbot (code hacks that allow players to see through walls or aim perfectly), maybe looking up an answer to a puzzle in a walkthrough, or purchasing virtual currency via a third party that might be from a foreign country. However, as previous research by Consalvo has found, cheating is a dynamic practice, and there are not only multiple ways that players cheat, but many contexts for doing so, all of which can and do change over time [1]. The growing popularity of new platforms for gameplay—mobile and social networks are two—means that we must investigate if and how cheating practices change, and why. In particular, how does a game’s platform shape the games that are popular on it, and how does a platform’s affordances and constraints help to construct certain discourses and practices of cheating?

In this study we explore that area, focusing in particular on a social network as a platform for gameplay, asking questions about how Facebook as a game platform influence players’ gameplay. Playing a game on Facebook has specific characteristics that differentiate its games from the ones that are played on other platforms such as consoles or computers. Facebook games mainly offer a free-to-play model but in order to access certain game parts or engage in particular activities it can be necessary to pay for them. Secondly, players play such games logged in with a profile that they use for other purposes in the social network. Thirdly, players mainly play with people they have added as contacts in their Facebook profile. And last, Facebook games’ rules do not always include norms that respect Facebook Terms of Service. Such features constitute Facebook as a game platform different from consoles or computers with a different type of gameplay. How do these features shape player’s understandings of what constitutes cheating? This study begins the process of answering this question by examining how Facebook as a game platform works and how players negotiate gameplay within this social network. Ultimately it argues that game studies as a field as well as broader studies of cheating in gameplay must account for a wider array of contexts than prior research has imagined—and specifically that platforms shape player activity in key ways.

2. Cheating in videogames

Within the field of game studies, very few researchers have explored cheating in games and how players conceptualize and engage in that activity. One
early study of player actions in the online game Counter Strike found that cheating was a common topic among players, with accusations of cheating leading to discussions of what actually constitutes cheating within a particular game [2]. One of the first researchers to explore the topic in depth is Consalvo, who found that there is often great diversity in how individuals define cheating in videogames. Most players agree that cheating is anything that gives a player an unfair advantage, but beyond that basic statement there is less consensus [1]. For some players, cheating means consulting a game guide or walkthrough, or asking a friend or family member for help. Other players believe such activities are not cheating, but cheating does include hacking the code of a game or employing cheat codes. And for a final group of players, cheating must involve other players in a multiplayer game—and one must actively work to gain advantage (via various means) against other players [1].

In addition to there being multiple definitions of what cheating entails, there are also many reasons why players cheat. The most common reason that players cheat is because they become stuck in a game—it is too difficult, too buggy, directions are unclear, or they have no patience for multiple attempts at solving a puzzle. To bypass those problems, players employ some form of cheat (looking up an answer online, using a code to bypass a particular level) to move past a problematic area. A second reason players cheat is because sometimes individuals want access to all elements of a game immediately, without ‘earning’ them via regular advancement.

A third reason for cheating is to fast-forward through events, levels or situations that players find boring or unpleasant. One example would be gold buying in Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) where the practice is against the Terms of Service. In such cases players don’t want to engage in gameplay scenarios they find tedious, simply to gain the gold required for some particular item. Finally, players cheat to gain advantage against other players. Players might hack the code of a game to allow themselves to aim more accurately, or to duplicate valuable items. In such cases players may also enjoy annoying or upsetting other players in the process, but their main goal is to gain advantage against other players and ‘succeed’ in the game’s ranking systems [1].

More recent studies of cheating have discovered similar findings. Kafai and Fields found that players of the youth oriented online game Whyville actively created sites that revealed the answers to many of the game’s science-based puzzles. They argue that those ‘cheating’ practices demonstrate just how much players “are invested in Whyville, in promoting others’ success on Whyville, and in displaying their knowledge of Whyville” [3]. Fields and Kafai also examined the types of cheats that players created on cheat sites, finding that there is “a social and creative value in cheats that goes beyond purely logistic motives” and that “creating or posting the cheats also positions players as knowledgeable participants of the Whyville community” [4].

Dumitrica investigated cheating practices in the online game NeoPets [5], finding that cheating practices in that game include “using an autobuyer, exploiting a physical limitation deriving from the software, using a hidden cheat code, and relying on an optimal strategy.” Those methods mainly center around letting players gather more in-game wealth and such practices are not isolated or rare, but instead are part of “a widespread culture, encouraged by and embedded in the structure of the world itself.” Dumitrica argues that such cheating practices have turned into one way to signal that a player is dedicated to the game, as well as being a way to achieve greater wealth within it [5].

The consequences of cheating in online communities have also been a topic of interest amongst researchers studying cheating. Blackburn et al examined Valve’s Steam Community for the presence of cheaters, and to figure out the extent to which those players were integrated into the network as well as what penalties accrued to those labeled as cheaters [6]. Valve takes cheating seriously, policing its games via a proprietary Valve Anti-Cheat (VAC) service that “detects players who cheat and marks their profiles with a publicly visible, permanent VAC ban” [6]. Blackburn et al’s study found that despite being not that different from non-cheaters, “cheaters end up having more cheater friends than the non-cheaters have” and “cheaters lose friends over time … an indication that there is a social penalty involved with cheating” [6]. They conclude that non-cheaters actively try to distance themselves from players who have been identified as cheaters.

A few studies have started to investigate cheating practices in social network games, as compared with online games more generally. The use of phantom (or fake) user profiles was studied by Nazir et al in relation to SNS gameplay [7]. They found that such fake profiles were created “in order to achieve a strategic advantage within social games.” Because so many social network games strongly encourage players to maintain or acquire vast friend networks to aid gameplay, some players resort to creating phantom profiles in order to supplement those numbers and thus gain advantage.

Related research on the structures of social network games suggests that the gameplay mechanics of such
games can vary quite a bit compared to traditional, console-based games, leading to potential differences in types of and approaches to cheating. In a large number of popular SNS games (such as those in the simulation and/or build and harvest genres) players are given a couple of ways to advance in the game: through exploitation of player networks (i.e. one’s friend list) and/or via buying a game’s virtual currency [8]. If players have small networks or refuse to pay for in-game elements, progress can be slow, tedious, or possibly non-existent. In such cases purchasing in-game currency or artifacts to speed up play is legal and usually encouraged by the game’s creators, rather than being considered cheating. Such games are also usually simple enough in terms of challenges and puzzles that getting stuck is not an issue, so cheating to get past such barriers becomes irrelevant.

The growing popularity of social network games has created new types of play environments that eliminate certain situations where players might feel compelled to cheat, yet has also introduced new play environments—such as Facebook as a platform—that might alter the context of play in important ways. Those changes suggest we need more studies that investigate how players think about and conceptualize cheating in games that run on relatively new platforms (such as Facebook or Google+), as well as in games where one’s network is comprised of mostly known individuals. Those changes to the play context could have implications for how individuals approach play, conceive of cheating and engage (or not) in cheating practices.

3. Methods

Following from the current literature, the aim of our study was to investigate how a game's platform and the affordances and constraints of that platform shape gameplay and thus cheating behaviors. This study is part of a larger project that in the first stage inquired into how beliefs and definitions relative to cheating might have changed with the rise in popularity of social network games. This paper is built on some of the results from the first phase of the project and has been augmented with additional data. The first study was based on responses to an online survey that was distributed via Facebook and Twitter, through different calls on game forums and in a story about the study posted on Gamezebo.com. Responses were gathered from April 20th to June 3th, 2012. Overall, a total of 151 individuals completed the survey. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 70 years old, with most falling into the 30-39 year old age range. Approximately a quarter (22.5%) had a high school diploma or lower, 47.5% had a Bachelor’s degree or some college, and 30% had a graduate, professional or other degree. Nearly half (42.6%) reported playing such games more than once a day, with another 27.9% saying they played once every few days. Those gameplay frequencies are most likely greater than would be expected of the larger game playing population, and such reports are due to the non-random sample obtained for this project. However, we believe this exploratory study still yields interesting findings that should be pursued in larger scale studies that can determine representativeness.

During the second phase of the study, immediately following the first stage and running until early September 2012, we conducted 17 in-depth interviews with a subset of participants from the first stage. Due to this small sample size we did not track demographic data on this group, as we felt making generalizations based on those breakdowns would not be reliable in any way. Rather we sought to find overall trends, beliefs and practices among players as well as significant departures in beliefs or activities.

The initial online survey was composed of 48 questions, including closed-ended as well as open-ended questions which offered space for respondents to express themselves however they chose. It included questions in relation with the participants’ demographic information and game preferences, as well as questions about their perceptions of cheating in social network games. The survey included questions in relation to how some strategies adopted by players to advance gameplay might be considered cheating, about the cheating-related practices users consciously engage in and about the differences between cheating in a social network game compared with doing so via more traditional PC-based or console-based gameplay.

For the in-depth interviews, we contacted a subset of the survey respondents who had indicated their potential interest in participating in this second stage of the study. We conducted ten voice (Skype or telephone, depending on respondent preference) interviews, which lasted between 30 and 45 minutes in length. Seven email interviews were also done, which included a list of questions, with follow-ups sent as needed upon receiving initial replies. We asked questions about how the social components of Facebook games affected the way that respondents thought about cheating, how playing with their ‘real’ identities influence their gameplay and about the differences between individual Facebook game rules and Facebook’s own overarching Terms of Service. The objective of these interviews was to answer the following research questions:
1. How do norms for social interaction on Facebook impact play practices and expectations related to cheating in social network games?

2. How do players negotiate and understand the differences between Facebook’s own Terms of Service and the individual rules of games running on the Facebook platform relative to cheating behaviors or practices?

3. How does Facebook as a game platform mediate, change or alter players’ definitions of cheating?

4. Facebook social interaction norms & cheating

In our survey questions, 76.2% of participants answered that their Facebook profile represented their everyday self, while only 9.9% responded that their profile was a gaming identity. Moreover, 30% said that their friends in this network are a mix of current distant friends, current local friends and family, 22.7% answered that their friends in Facebook are current distant friends and 20.7% responded that their friends are current local friends. That is to say, the majority of those who participated in our survey played these games logged in with a profile that represented their real identity and in most of the cases they played with other users that they knew in real life. This type of gameplay differs from online console or computer gameplay, where players create digital identities that don’t necessarily correspond with their everyday self. Thus, we wondered how these features affect gameplay, players’ strategies and considerations about cheating.

Following this idea, during the in-depth interviews we asked questions such as ‘Would it bother you to find out that a friend or family member was cheating (in any way) in a Facebook game?’ or ‘Would you consider cheating if your game account wasn’t linked to your real Facebook profile?’ and more generally ‘How does the social component of Facebook games affect you when thinking about cheating?’ First of all, we found that knowing the people you are playing with affects the way one plays a game. One interviewee expressed his concern about his family’s reactions in relation with his selection of avatar in Facebook games: “In games, I like to play with female avatars. It’s really interesting looking at how designers treat female avatars. It’s also a chance to express different things. In Facebook? Gave me pause if I wanted a female avatar. I knew family members would rib me.”

We also noticed that what happens in Facebook games can have certain impacts in a player’s real life. For instance, some interviewees expressed their disapproval about friends and family members’ cheating practices. One interviewee indicated that she would take a “mental note” about those friends who cheat while another admitted that discovering that a friend is cheating would change his opinion of that person. A third interviewee went as far as commenting that he “used to love harassing” a friend “about buying cash and cheating.” Those who answered that they “won’t bother” if someone they know cheats on a Facebook game, tended also to reveal that for them Facebook games are not really social. From such responses we can see that players can have differing attitudes towards others who cheat in social network games, but that even for those who disapprove, the level of disapproval does not seem equal to that of more traditional console or computer game players, who usually express strong disapproval towards those who cheat. Likewise, players we interviewed made no mention of game companies punishing those who cheat, or hoping to see such individuals banned from the games—although some discussions like this can be seen on game forums for popular Facebook games. Importantly, most of those discussions center on the actions of strangers, or those who are not close friends or family members. Individuals have different tolerance levels for behaviors they might consider inappropriate, based on who is engaging in them. And likewise, those differences are also perhaps due to the differing levels of seriousness with which individuals approach these games, and the ways that cheating is defined and understood in such games. Facebook has created an atmosphere where players, most of whom know one another, approach games with different levels of commitment, but because most games are not direct competitions, instances of cheating are not seen as threatening to others’ enjoyment.

We also found that interviewees have different ways of understanding what constitutes a ‘social’ game. For some of them, Facebook games are social, because you need people to continue playing your game. However, other interviewees commented that Facebook games aren’t really social since, due to the asynchronous gameplay, you don’t actually play with or alongside other people. For example, one of the interviewees explained that she used to play MMOG’s with friends and talk to them at the same time using Skype. In contrast, she explained that when she played Facebook games she wasn’t able to virtually meet or talk with friends. For that reason, she didn’t consider Facebook games as promoting socialization. Another player felt that while MMOG’s require more “in depth play” with other players, Facebook games require just “interaction.” That disassociation with the games being social might be another way that players take the games less seriously, and then also take potential
 cheating behaviors less seriously as well—either in themselves or when seeing that behavior from others.

To sum up, social interaction via Facebook games is strongly influenced by three components: most people that play are using their real identities, they mostly play with friends and family, and they do so via asynchronous gameplay. These three features affect the way in which some people play as well as their reactions to cheating. Since gameplay happens in a real life environment, some players will limit their choices and strategies in the game. Playing with acquaintances can also affect their feelings about other people’s cheating practices, carrying over to life outside the game. Yet in other cases, the asynchrony of gameplay can make players feel Facebook games are not ‘really’ social, leading them to disregard traditional norms of social interaction.

5. Terms of service v. Game rules

In our initial survey we discovered a disagreement between players regarding what “formal rules of the game” meant. According to some participants, the rules were determined by the Facebook Terms of Service, while for others the rules were more specifically each individual game’s programmed or coded rules. We found that these different ways of understanding Facebook game rules determine a player’s definition of cheating. For that reason, in the in-depth interviews we specifically asked ‘Do you find differences between Facebook Terms of Service and Facebook game rules?’ and ‘Is it possible to violate Facebook’s Terms of Service and at the same time not cheat on a Facebook game?’

Perhaps surprisingly, the majority of interviewees never thought about the differences between Facebook Terms of Service and Facebook game rules, although it was constantly mentioned in open-ended answers on the survey. Instead, some of the interviewees recounted their frustration related to needing friends in order to advance their gameplay. Some even indicated that such games “force you” to add strangers and act in certain ways that can be against Facebook’s Terms of Service. This need for contacts to advance gameplay is the main reason why players engage in practices that go against Facebook Terms of Service. Some players without enough contacts who play such games use multiple accounts as a way to be able to advance in games. This strategy, although not expressly prohibited in the games’ rules, is a Facebook Terms of Service violation—users are officially not allowed to have more than one account in the social network. However, in our initial survey 58.1% of participants said they wouldn’t consider it cheating if someone made additional accounts for the sole purpose of advancing gameplay. Thus, even though this practice is banned on the platform where the game is played, most players don’t consider it cheating.

Another practice that can help players to advance gameplay that is banned in the Facebook Terms of Service is logging into someone else’s account. In this case, 50.8% of participants in our initial survey did consider this practice as cheating. However, in the open-ended questions, the majority of participants answered they considered this practice something other than cheating: it could be considered an invasion of privacy. Yet when asked about the practice, several of the interviewees admitted to engaging in such actions: one young woman said that after her father stopped playing a certain game, she would regularly log into his account in order to send her own account needed items. Another player mentioned logging into family member accounts in order to help them with their gameplay if they were busy and could not log in. Such practices are not out of line with other multiplayer games, where Taylor found players will do similar things in order to help one another with time sensitive activities [9]. And in line with that research, we found that some players felt this was an unacceptable practice no matter the purpose. But perhaps surprisingly, only two out of 56 responses mentioned the Facebook Terms of Service when asked about logging into someone else’s account.

6. Facebook as a game platform & definitions of cheating

Most players continue to see cheating as any practice that gives unfair advantage to someone during gameplay. Yet what constitutes ‘unfair’ proves to continually be in flux, both over time as well as in different game-related contexts. One major shift in cheating definitions is closely tied to payment or monetization models for games, which have also had the result of changing game designs or mechanics. This is particularly evident with the rise of free-to-play (f2p) or freemium games, where instead of purchasing a game and then being allowed unrestricted play, individuals may play certain parts for free and then choose (or not) to purchase additional game elements such as access to certain areas, time saving components, or in-game luxury items. Along with these changes to how players play come redefinitions of what may count as ‘cheating’ in such new environments. While Facebook is not the only platform on which freemium or f2p games exist, it is a major purveyor of these types of games, particularly compared to subscription-based or pay upfront titles.
And because of Facebook’s huge footprint in the social media space, it has become a dominant force in normalizing such models, discursively constructing them as legitimate game forms.

We can see this normalization at work in how players define cheating in Facebook games. While in MMOGs the purchase of in-game gold was not only against the Terms of Service of most such games, it was considered morally reprehensible by many, and something that contributed to poor gameplay experiences for all. In contrast, Facebook games do not simply allow, but have instead legitimized, monetized and encouraged the purchasing of virtual currency for gameplay. And most players of Facebook games now agree that such practices do not constitute cheating: only 7.8% of players felt that purchasing currency or points cards would be considered cheating. While it is certainly the case that it is not against most Facebook games’ Terms of Service, it’s interesting that the moral judgment has disappeared as well—players do not see anything wrong with this practice ethically. As one respondent explained, “if everyone has the option to do it” it is not cheating; while another player explained it has become part of the expected gameplay and a legitimate strategy to get ahead, and so is a fair way to play. It is no longer ‘unfair’ as anyone can purchase currency, whether they actually choose to do so or not (or whether they can actually afford to do so). Further, the use of Facebook credits as a form of currency for games further underlines the credibility of the practice, making it seem safe and acceptable, in line with other services or items one might purchase while on Facebook.

And key to that practice, in many of the games our players reported enjoying there was no real advantage to be gained against other players if one purchased currency. One might advance one’s own farm/world/dungeon leveling more quickly than others or via non-currency related means, but many such games are not actual competitions—as one respondent explained, Facebook games “are constructive, while other games are based on conflict.” However, even if they do become competitive, such opportunities are offered to all players. But here things can become more problematic, as some players do feel that ‘buying a win’ is somehow wrong—perhaps not unfair, but the game is thus not a battle of skill, it has become a battle based on purchases.

The second major way that Facebook mediates player definitions of cheating is through the particular constructions of community that Facebook offers its users. As Lina Eklund has explored in other contexts [10], individuals privilege certain groups of players over others when engaging in online play. Specifically, they prefer to play with family members, friends, and then strangers as a last resort, if no friends or family are available. Reasons for such choices are because of the greater trust placed in friends and family, and the additional levels of accountability they have to one another. Other online gaming platforms, such as the Steam network, are built on the assumption that many individuals do not know one another, they are present only in order to play games, and there are few means of being accountable to one another aside from Valve’s own efforts to block cheating.

In contrast, Facebook presents a very different form of player network or community—one based on pre-existing ties, and likewise one that revolves around many forms of communication, not just playing games with one another. Although some (approximately 10%) of our respondents did create Facebook profiles simply to play games, many more already had profiles that included networks comprised of friends and family members, along with some additional colleagues and unrelated others. And because of those pre-existing ties, the norm becomes that one plays games with an already known network of players, with ties that will endure beyond the existence of that particular game. For example, one player mentioned playing Farmville with his wife when she was on maternity leave, as a way of “passing a stressful time” together. When her leave ended their gameplay together did as well and they moved on to other activities.

The prioritization of friends and family as gaming partners, as against strangers who may also have been playing the game also means different attitudes towards cheating. Many of our respondents did not see logging into a friend’s or family member’s account as cheating, particularly if they were helping that person to advance in a game. Clearly, family and friends are given wider latitude in relation to what might be considered a cheating behavior, as account hacking is something that Facebook expressly forbids, and that will get most players banned in other online games. Evidence from gaming forums suggests such leeway is not granted to strangers, who seem to have a lower bar for demonstrating fair play [8]. Such evidence suggests that not only do players take into account the contexts that might define something as cheating or not, they also consider who is engaging in the activity to further make that judgment. Not all players will make the same judgments, but clearly ‘who’ can be just as important as ‘what’ in relation to what is defined as cheating.

7. Conclusions

Prior research has shown the dynamic nature of cheating, uncovering multiple ways that players can
cheat, a plethora of reasons for doing so, and different ways that it might be considered a valuable or beneficial activity in addition to a destructive practice in the eyes of game developers and/or other players. As we witness increasing numbers of individuals playing games across new and different platforms, cheating demands re-investigation. This small study of players of social network games is a preliminary look at how some players think about cheating in this context, and how the platform itself (here Facebook) has implications for how players define and enact cheating practices.

One of the biggest changes to gameplay with the rise of social network games is the shift toward different payment models, including freemium and F2P. With that shift, traditional ‘fast forward’ and ‘have everything’ reasons for and ways of cheating disappear—they have become monetized and turned into acceptable forms of gameplay by developers. With their spread across social network platforms, players increasingly accept such practices as legitimate, even if they do not themselves do things like buy virtual currency. And alongside acceptance of the practice is the related disappearance of disapproval of others who might also make such purchases. As developers themselves legitimized the practice, so too did players. One area that does remain contested is the use of snag bars in order to more quickly gain needed items. Some players do consider this cheating, perhaps in part because the practice is not condoned by the game companies, and feels uncomfortably close to a ‘cheat code’ that alters a game in some way beyond other players’ help.

Players also make judgments about cheating based in part on who is engaging in what might be considered questionable activities. Friends might be questioned, but are given more leeway than strangers when it comes to cheating. And Facebook as a platform encourages more of us to play with those we know, rather than faceless strangers. That lends another layer of accountability to play and behavior toward one another.

Finally, players often disregard the strictures of the Facebook platform if they see potential benefits in certain gameplay strategies, such as creating multiple accounts or logging into a family member’s account in order to help themselves or the family member in question. While some of these activities are not new—going back at least to Ultima Online and the practice of ‘dual-boxing’ with multiple accounts—they are becoming increasingly widespread and their practice considered unremarkable by the player population. Players do not seem bothered that such activities violate Facebook terms of service, and indeed many players did not distinguish between Facebook’s rules and a game’s own rules for play.

Such findings are based on a subset of players that responded to our survey about playing social network games, and thus this area needs more intensive and sustained investigation. In particular, it is important to see in what ways players distinguish or not between a platform and a game, and how that distinction affects gameplay. Likewise, we need finer grained analyses of different types of players of social network games, to see where other divergences about cheating practices apply. What we can conclude however is that players will continue to make their own judgments about what does and does not constitute cheating, in relation to but never solely dictated by those who make games or those who publish them. This research also suggests that play activities are context-dependent in more ways than previously imagined, with platforms being another key element to investigate. Likewise, this study suggests that social networks are becoming key sites for play activities, and that online gameplay is perhaps being re-defined as something regularly enjoyed with one’s friends and family, rather than with anonymous strangers.

8. References


