3-16-2018

Adolescents' Perceptions of "Cheating" in Gaming and Educational Settings

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Recommended Citation

Nease, B., & Samura, M. (2018). Adolescents' perceptions of "cheating" in gaming and educational settings. *Simulation & Gaming, 49*(2): 134-145. doi: 10.1177/1046878118757008

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ABSTRACT

Background: Given the widespread popularity of video gameplay among adolescents, it is important to understand the relationship between video gameplay and adolescent behaviors in various contexts.

Aim: This exploratory study aimed to explore adolescent gamers use of player guides and cheat codes during video gameplay in order to understand how they reason about the relationship between cheating in video games and cheating in academic settings.

Method: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with adolescents in order to gain in-depth insight into participants' perspectives on video gameplay and their perceptions of cheating in video games and academic settings. Interview data was coded and qualitatively analyzed to identify patterns and key emergent themes.

Results: Findings from this exploratory study highlight seemingly contradictory views on cheating among adolescents. On the one hand, participants viewed player guides, cheat codes, and other forms of gameplay resources as simply part of the overall gaming experience. They did not view this type of assistance as cheating. On the other hand, participants viewed unsanctioned assistance and taking others' ideas as their own as cheating within academic settings.

Conclusion: As findings from this study suggest, understanding how student navigate video gameplay may provide much needed insight into providing effective supports and tools in academic contexts. Findings from this research can inform the development of more effective approaches to address cheating in academic settings, including the integration of study guides, student-created aids and guides and additional materials as part of an effective support system.

With over 11 million people playing video games worldwide (Kuss, Louws, & Weirs, 2012), video games have dominated the entertainment industry. Although video games have become a major source of enjoyment and entertainment for many, providing a range of activities from role-playing to puzzle games, the utility of video games within educational settings has been widely debated. Teachers are often uncertain about the value of video games in classroom settings or lack training in how to utilize video games as a learning tool (Turkay, Hoffman, Kinzer, Chantes, & Vicari, 2014). The effects of video gameplay on individuals also is unclear. A growing body of research indicates players learn and mimic social and behavioral skills from video games (De Simone, 2012). Drawing upon social cognitive theory, De Simone (2012) asserted that, in the same way people tend to copy behaviors they see in society, they also may copy behaviors they see in video games. Furthermore, skills observed and utilized during video gameplay have been found to directly influence the behavior of adolescent players.

At the same time, research has highlighted the prevalence of academic dishonesty among adolescents. According to the Josephson Institute's *2010 Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth*, almost 60% of high school students (of 43,000 surveyed students in the United States) self-reported cheating on a test during the last year, and 34% indicated cheating more than two times. Given the widespread popularity of video gameplay among adolescents, it would be useful to understand the relationship between video gameplay and adolescent behaviors in various contexts. The present study aimed to explore adolescent gamers use of player guides and *cheat codes* during video gameplay in order to understand how they reason about the relationship between *cheating* in video games and *cheating* in academic settings.

Research on Effects of Video Gameplay

Existing research has begun to uncover some of the effects of the video gameplay on players' daily lives. In particular, studies have shown an effect on players' levels of empathy (Happ, Melzer, & Steffgen, 2013; Stenico & Greitemeyer, 2014). Happ et al. (2013) examined the amount of empathy a player had after operating a villain character versus a hero character. They examined gameplay of 60 randomly selected undergraduate students randomly and found that those who played the Joker character perceived neutral human faces as more hostile than those who were playing as Superman. Superman players were found to be more empathetic, picking up lost letters and seeing neutrality rather than hostility.

Relatedly, Stenico and Greitemeyer (2014) examined empathy among 78 randomly selected students when multiple computer players were introduced. They found that the number of video game characters interacting on a team with a player influenced the player's empathy levels outside of the game (Stenico & Greitemeyer, 2014). Players who had multiple teammates during their play time were less likely to volunteer more of their time to aid another researcher since they had already become accustomed to others solving their problems. Stenico and Greitemeyer (2014) explained this as an extension of the bystander effect, which states that if surrounding people are able to help, you are less likely to offer your assistance. Simply by playing a villain character or by having a team of computer players, the empathy levels of the player were reduced, causing overflow of this emotion outside of the game.

Other studies have found that individual's desire to play video games is based on recreation as they seek rewards and relaxation associated with video gameplay (Hamlen, 2013; Mentzoni et al., 2011). In addition to experience the enjoyment or escape offered by video games, video games also seem to have an effect on players' social behaviors, such as empathy and teamwork (Stenico & Greitemeyer, 2014; Happ et al., 2013). If skills learned in video games

can transfer to school and work settings, as some research suggests (Hamlen, 2013), further research is needed to fully understand the range of ways people's behavior may be influenced by video games.

Cheating in Video Games

Guides and walkthroughs, created by players as well as video game companies, are frequently used by players during gameplay. The specific instructions offer players insights into how to navigate a game and, in some instances, to by-pass difficult section or defeat an daunting opponent. The ways these forms of assistance are viewed by players varies. For example, Newman (2008) examined player-created walkthroughs and found that "the use of walkthroughs, or indeed what are frequently referred to within games themselves as 'cheat codes' or 'cheat modes' is not uniformly considered cheating among players" (p. 58). Newman (2008) concluded that players create walkthroughs and guides in order to accomplish every aspect of the game and not always to cheat. However, changing the game code itself would constitute cheating.

Relatedly, Consalvo (2007) examined gamers definitions of cheating. Interviews were conducted with 24 gamers between the ages of 14 and 21 categorizing cheating in video games in three sections ranging from a strict to a loose interpretation. The first group defined cheating during gameplay as a solo effort. These players felt that cheating occurred if a player's guide or other similar resource was utilized. The second group defined cheating as altering the game itself. This group stated that if the actual code of the game is altered, then cheating has occurred. Therefore, this group felt as though other forms of assistance do not constitute cheating. The final group defined cheating as entirely social. "Cheating means the introduction of deception and possible chaos into the game world which is shared with other players" (Consalvo, 2007, p.

92). The group explained that whenever there is an unfair advantage over another player, cheating has occurred.

Analyzing the multiplayer game systems, Mortenson (2010) explained that gaming and cheating in games is a social construct. Players are encouraged to assist each other, rather than calling it cheating. Mortenson (2010) explained, “the next time you meet somebody who struggles with something you know the solution of, rather than shrugging and assuming they will figure it out, you tell them about your solution” (p. 81). Therefore, cheating involves creating an unfair advantage over another player.

Hamlen (2013) studied the video gameplay of three high school boys and utilized in-depth interviews to examine their perspectives toward cheating and gameplay. Amongst the three students, none of them could produce a clear definition of cheating. The severity of cheating seemed to be very minimal when related to video gameplay as it was seen as a method of completing the task. The boys felt as though the most important aspect of gameplay was to complete the game, and did not care as much as to how they achieved their goal. If a student could not pass a specific challenge, they would utilize outside resources in order to accomplish the goal. The above studies highlight the fact that interplayer assistance, including player guide, are used and viewed differently by different people.

Research Design

This qualitative research explored adolescent gamers perceptions about cheating and how they reason about the relationship between cheating in academic settings and cheating in gameplay. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to gain in-depth insight into participants’ perspectives on video gameplay and their perceptions of cheating in video games and academic settings. Interview data was coded to identify patterns and key emergent themes.

Setting and Participants[1]

Data collection took place during Fall 2014. A non-probability purposive sampling technique was employed to find participants who were adolescents who played video games. A total of 12 participants between the ages of 14 and 17 participated in this study. Of the respondents, 4 of the participants were female and 8 participants were male (see Table 1 for participant demographics). Participants were recruited through the Summer Camp and Science Exploratorium's volunteer groups. Summer Camp is a nationally accredited summer program in Southern California that runs a volunteer training program for adolescents. The organization seeks young people who have a desire for education, and requires them to complete a minimum of 30 hours of service. As part of their volunteer base, Science Exploratorium maintains a group of adolescent students to aid in their educational programs. The volunteers are required to serve at least four hours a month in order to remain a part of the organization. Emails were sent to both groups in order to invite individuals to be a part of the research.

[Table 1 about here]

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to understand participants' perspectives in-depth (Kvale, 1996). Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was recorded for transcription at a later time. In order to understand their perspectives, participants were asked questions about which video games they play, use of player's guides, cheat codes, or walk-throughs, and perspectives on cheating in academic settings. Interview recordings data

[1] Pseudonyms were used for all participants and sites.

were transcribed, and the data was then evaluated for similarities between participants' responses.

Data Analysis

We employed inductive analysis using coding processes from the analytical tradition of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We used a three-step coding process of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Babbie, 2013) to identify emergent patterns and central themes. Open codes were created to categorize the answers to questions. For example, several of the open codes were first person shooter games, copied homework, and Minecraft tutorials. Emergent themes were then collapsed to create axial codes. An example of this was Minecraft tutorials and World of Warcraft boss fights collapsed into YouTube walkthroughs. Finally, axial codes were then further collapsed into 3 selective codes which were also the key emergent themes. into the following three selective codes: usage of additional tools and resources, definitions of cheating, and cheating in school.

Limitations

The primary limitation of the current research is the sample size. By no means did this exploratory investigation intend to offer a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon. While it would be useful to expand the participant pool to see if similar issues emerge, we also believe that the issues examined and questions posed throughout this study are extremely valuable in and of themselves. Additionally, the emergent themes seem to suggest that they may be experienced by other adolescents.

Findings and Discussion

Two primary themes emerged from the interview data: the utility of additional tools and resources for gameplay and perceptions of cheating in academic settings.

Utility of Additional Tools and Resources for Gameplay

The interviews revealed that YouTube walkthroughs, player's guides, and other online help tools were prominently used by participants. Eleven of the 12 participants disclosed having used a YouTube walkthrough or player's guide while playing video games. In fact, the use of these additional tools and resources seemed to be a critical aspect of playing the game. Dylan, a 16-year old male who averages 10 hours of video gameplay per week, explained: "[During gameplay] if I don't know how to do stuff I'll look it up and figure out how." He went on to explain that while he plays a specific game he frequently looks up the answers to solve the different puzzles. This process involves finding videos of other players playing a level, written descriptions of a challenge, or a company generated guide book. Participants utilized these aids whenever they had a problem with one of the challenges of the game. The game in which the participants were playing affected how quickly they would desire an aid. For the games that were designed for storyline, the participants would use an aid almost immediately after running into an issue. For the puzzle games, the participants would only seek assistance after a few attempts.

When asked about their usage of additional tools, none of the participants viewed them as cheating. Since there were no punishments for the usage of the aides, the participants did not have any problems using the material. According to Stephen, a 17-year old male who averages 20 hours of video gameplay per week: "It's how you want to play the game, it's how the buyer wants to entertain themselves. So if that is with cheat codes then go ahead." The participants viewed supplementary tools and resources as methods to advance the story of the game, with some even watching them to view alternative story lines. They saw them as a means to an end rather than defeating the purpose of the game. The majority of the tools used included free online resources, and viewed by the participants as available for their use.

When asked to compare these tools to other aspects of life, participants viewed the player's guide and YouTube walkthroughs serving a similar purpose as a study guide in the classroom. Jessica, a 15-year old female who plays video games an average of 20 hours per week explained:

> Like in school having something to study for. You don't exactly know how to study for it, or like a teacher giving you a study guide, that would be kinda like your players guide. All I need to know what to study or what to do to be able to pass this test.

Similar to Jessica, other participants felt as though the player's guide and YouTube walkthrough provided the ability to guide the participant in the right direction rather than just giving them the right answer since they still had to complete the task. The present study discovered similar findings to that of previous research (e.g., Hamlen, 2013). Namely, we found that participants utilized outside tools to solve difficult tasks.

Perceptions of Cheating

Interestingly, the participants in this study shared a similar definition of cheating. They defined cheating as using someone else's work as their own (see Table 2 for participants' definitions of cheating). According to participants, examples of cheating ranged from looking over a neighbor's shoulder during a test to plagiarizing an essay that they did not write. The participants all felt that cheating was wrong, and knew that these actions were subject to punishment. They stated that if they had done the work to complete a task, anyone who took credit for that task would be cheating. Although the participants in our study all provided similar definitions of cheating, the examples they gave varied. Many students mentioned plagiarism and looking at a neighbor's test as constituting cheating, but copying a peer's homework or talking about test questions with peers were not commonly mentioned.

[Table 2 about here]

Out of the 12 participants, 11 of them admitted to cheating at some point in their educational careers. None of the students, however, said they had ever been caught cheating. As Laura explained, “I have cheated on tests before, I think everyone has.” Participants described their cheating including copying a friend’s homework to turn in, looking at a peer’s test when they do not know the answers, or even discussing the contents of an exam before taking it. Participants stated that they only cheated when they did not know the answers, or had no idea how to attempt to solve the problem.

Participants reasoned that cheating was wrong only because they were punished if they participated in cheating. Sally, a 15-year old female who averages 20 hours of video gameplay per week, explained:

> It’s kind of inevitable. Everyone does it at least once or twice. It’s the way you learn not to do it, by doing it. If people just tell you that cheating is bad it doesn’t really affect you.

Sally’s explanation indicates that students may not feel anything was wrong with the cheating that they participated in previously since they were not caught in the act. This shows that the current practice of simply telling students the rules and consequences may not have the effect educators think it will. Some of the participants felt bad about cheating; however, they felt they needed to cheat in order to get the good grade. The need to succeed is shown to outweigh the desire to only use their own work.

Research on academic dishonesty sheds light onto why students would cheat in school settings. For example, Chiao-Ling, Ching, and An-Sing (2015) found that, “students who habitually rationalize misconduct tend to engage in all types of [academic dishonesty], with

opportunism, inadequacy, and self-promotion as their main motivators" (p. 35). The participants in the current study each stated similar motivators as their reason for engaging in academic dishonesty. With students having the opportunity to cheat, and the desire to succeed in an area they felt they were lacking in, they would cheat. Since the participants would rationalize the usage of additional tools in video games consistently, rationalizing academic dishonesty was not as difficult for them to do.

The participants in this study additionally relate to research about the seriousness of participating in academic dishonesty. According to Schrnelkin, Gilbert, and Silva (2010),

> Students' perceptions of the seriousness of the violation are intertwined with three points: the degree to which they believe that it is a clear example of academic dishonesty; the possible consequences associated with the behavior; and the degree to which particular behaviors are examples of intentional cheating and thought of as common occurrences (p. 163).

Each of these points was mentioned by the participants during the interviews. Possible consequences and how close to their definition of cheating were the primary factors in which the students defined it as being wrong.

Conclusion and Implications for Further Research and Practice

Although participants' perceptions of cheating were similar to, and thus confirmed, findings from previous research, the present study contritubes to the existing research literature by considering both adolescents' perceptions of cheating in game play and in academic settings within the same study. In doing so, this exploratory study revealed seemingly contradictory views on cheating among adolescents. On the one hand, participants viewed player guides, cheat codes, and other forms of gameplay resources as simply part of the overall gaming experience.

They did not view this type of assistance as cheating. Participants viewed unsanctioned assistance and taking others' ideas as their own as cheating within academic settings. Interestingly, for a number of participants, a primary indicator of whether or not an action counted as cheating was whether they were caught and punished. This may explain why participants did not view outside assistance in video gameplay as cheating. Without negative repercussions, the use of player guides and cheat codes were considered by participants as permissible. In fact, they were viewed as part of the game.

Future Research

Future research should examine a possible relationship between the two. This may lead to uncovering possible effects of player guides and cheat codes on academic cheating. For example, further research can examine whether adolescents' methods of problem solving in academic settings are being altered by their experiences in video gameplay. Is there a rationalization or acceptance of behaviors in video gameplay that can lead to students rationalizing cheating in academic settings? While gameplay has been found to increase collaboration, creativity and communication (Groff, Howler, & Cranmer, 2012), students also learn to rely on other forms of aid. By utilizing player's guides, walkthroughs, and cheat codes students may increasingly rely upon access to additional support structures that they do not feel are available in school settings. Future research should examine different demographics to see if there are differences in use of players' guides and cheat codes and perceptions of cheating among different age groups or gender. Additionally, conducting interviews with a larger sample size would be beneficial. The larger sample size would allow insight into whether or not the research is consistent across all students. Conducting interviews with teachers also would be helpful to see how they believe cheating has been addressed in their classroom and at their school.

Implications for practice in academic settings

This line of research also has implications for practice in academic settings, as the present study has illuminated issues relating to students' perceptions of cheating. Teachers may want to consider referencing processes of video gameplay to help students gain a different perspective on academic learning processes. Drawing upon knowledge from existing research on how behaviors and skills can transferred from video games (De Simone, 2012), teachers may be able to more effectively guide and support students who experience situations for which they are not prepared or in which they are unsure. Students may search for solutions, including ways to cheat. Chiao-Ling, Ching, and An-Sing (2015) contend that the more a student can rationalize cheating as being natural, the more likely they are to participate in it. Therefore, the role of the teacher could be more clearly defined so that students can view teachers as a resource to provide the needed assistance rather than resort to other unsanctioned behaviors that would be considered cheating (e.g., copying a peer's work).

The participants in this study all had similar definitions of cheating, but also committed the act. This brings into question the effectiveness of the punishments put into place to deter academic dishonesty. The students in this study appeared to have no remorse since there was no negative outcome. In order to address this disconnect, teachers and parents may want to reexamine the sources and types of messages that students receive about cheating. Jones (2011) also suggested modeling cheating behavior is a useful way to provide examples to students. Teachers also may want to consider teaching students about academic dishonesty, a definition which may need to be redefined for the new generation. Students would benefit from being educated on the various types of cheating, along with what support systems are in place if they need the additional aid. The integration of study guides and additional materials to aid may need

to be implemented into more classrooms so that there is a support system present. As findings from this study suggest, understanding how student navigate video gameplay may provide much needed insight into providing effective supports and tools in academic contexts.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank the reviewers for their thoughtful feedback and suggestions for revisions that helped strengthen our article.

Research Ethics

This research was approved by our institution's Institutional Review Board.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Table 1. Participant Demographics

Name	**Gender**	**Age**	**Ethnicity**	**Hours a week spent Playing Video Games**	**Favorite Type of Video Game**	**Use Additional tools**
Ron	Male	16	Caucasian	30	First Person/Story driven	cheat codes and walkthrough
Zena	Female	15	Pilipino	15	Puzzle	walkthroughs for fun
Jessica	Female	15	Caucasian	20	First Person/Story driven	walkthroughs for fun
Zach	Male	16	Pilipino	15	Puzzle	walkthroughs to solve problems
Laura	female	15	Caucasian	10	First Person/Story driven	players guide
Kayla	Female	16	Caucasian	1	Open World	walkthroughs to solve problems
Johnny	Male	15	Asian	1	Puzzle	Walkthroughs for fun
Brad	Male	15	Caucasian	10	Puzzle	Walkthroughs when at a problem
Dylan	Male	16	Caucasian	10	First Person/Story driven	gameplay videos and tutorials
Sally	Female	15	Caucasian	20	Puzzle	tutorials
Stephen	Male	17	Caucasian	20	First Person/Story driven	Walkthroughs when at a problem
Balboa	Male	17	Pilipino	20	First Person/Story driven	Walkthroughs when at a problem

Table 2. Participants' Definitions of Cheating

Name	**Definition of cheating**
Ron	Finding an easier way out when the harder way is the way that's supposed to be taken
Zena	Doing something that you had no effort in doing
Jessica	Using resources to make solving a problem easier than it should be
Zach	Not doing it the way you are supposed to in the legal matter of it.
Laura	Copying off of someone or taking work that's not yours and using it to your benefit
Kayla	Copying other people's work finding ways around to solve your problem
Johnny	Taking the easy way out and not really benefiting yourself
Brad	When you take something that is an issue or being tested on and get the answer without using your own knowledge to figure it out
Dylan	A cheap way to get out of something tough (the easy way out)
Sally	Anytime you look at something that doesn't come from you but your using it (plagiarism)
Stephen	Taking credit for someone else's work or copying down someone else's answer
Balboa	Taking somebody else's stuff and using it for their benefit