

## Foul Play in Context

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*Abstract: Faking results in games or refusing to take the game seriously might sound like the negation of playful experience, it can however also be understood as a way of creating a particular form of ludic experience. It is the context of play that makes an action of playing a playful activity or an act of breaking the rules. Different forms of cheating and of playing the spoilsport have to be differentiated. “Bona fide cheating” and “true cheating” (Salen and Zimmerman 2004) go hand in hand for social networking environments and Online Multiplayer Games. Interpassivity (Pfaller 2008) (Žižek 2007) in games can also be seen as a form of spoilsport practice (Fuchs 2008). The author suggests that there are multiple systems of reference of playful experience at any given moment, and that and that these are not necessarily the ones suggested to be used by game designers or fellow players. By switching from one system of reference to another, the player, the spoilsport and the cardsharp are able to establish playfulness in a chosen context and thereby add to the range of accessible playful experience.*

Recent attempts to hack systems that contain private data on a large and international scale raise questions about what is fair and what is foul in politics. The hackers were in this instance not members of the mafia or of criminal gangs from eastern countries, but rather the guardians of law and order from the West. The NSA and their allies became known to have committed what once was considered foul play – and declared it as fair. The dispute about what is within the canon of rules and regulations and what is not, can be said to be a political problem that is rooted in power structures. Yet, observations about fair play in computer games and cheating in the very same games sheds light on a similar problem: How come that an action taken by a player is considered fair by some and foul by others. The questions to be answered here are:

- What is foul play?
- What does it mean to play fairly?

- When is somebody cheating?

In regard to the first question asked, one can easily show that cheating is not just changing the mechanics of the game. Marking the back side of cards or manipulating a roulette wheel does not necessarily imply foul play. It could be that the parties participating in a game agreed to modify the wheel to create a new game that is governed by unconventional distribution of probabilities for the various numbers from zero to 36. As long as the modification is known to all of the players there is nothing wrong with the altered state of ludic settings. But what happens, if I am the only player in the game? Can I cheat in a game that I play against nobody else then myself? Think of a game like this: You toss a coin and if the side with the head is up, you win. If the coin falls down with the number up, you lose. If I decided to play this game with a coin that has two sides with a head, I would always win. But is this cheating? Not according to the previous definition because all of the players of the game (me and only me) are aware of the modification of the coin.

Can I cheat when playing against a computer? Research carried through by Mia Consalvo (2007) and by Julian Kücklich (2004) demonstrated that cheat codes, cheat webpages and a whole industry of cheating tricks, codes and devices is an integral part of gaming cultures. One of the players, Consalvo interviewed for her study on “Gaining Advantage” mentions that cheating via cheat codes involves “... wrongdoing. Someone has to be worse off because someone else took unfair advantage. ... You can only cheat another person” (Consalvo 2007, p. 92). The rationale to this argument is obviously that cheating hurts other people’s feelings or their right to be treated fairly. If a machine has no feelings and no rights I guess there is no way of cheating on the computer.

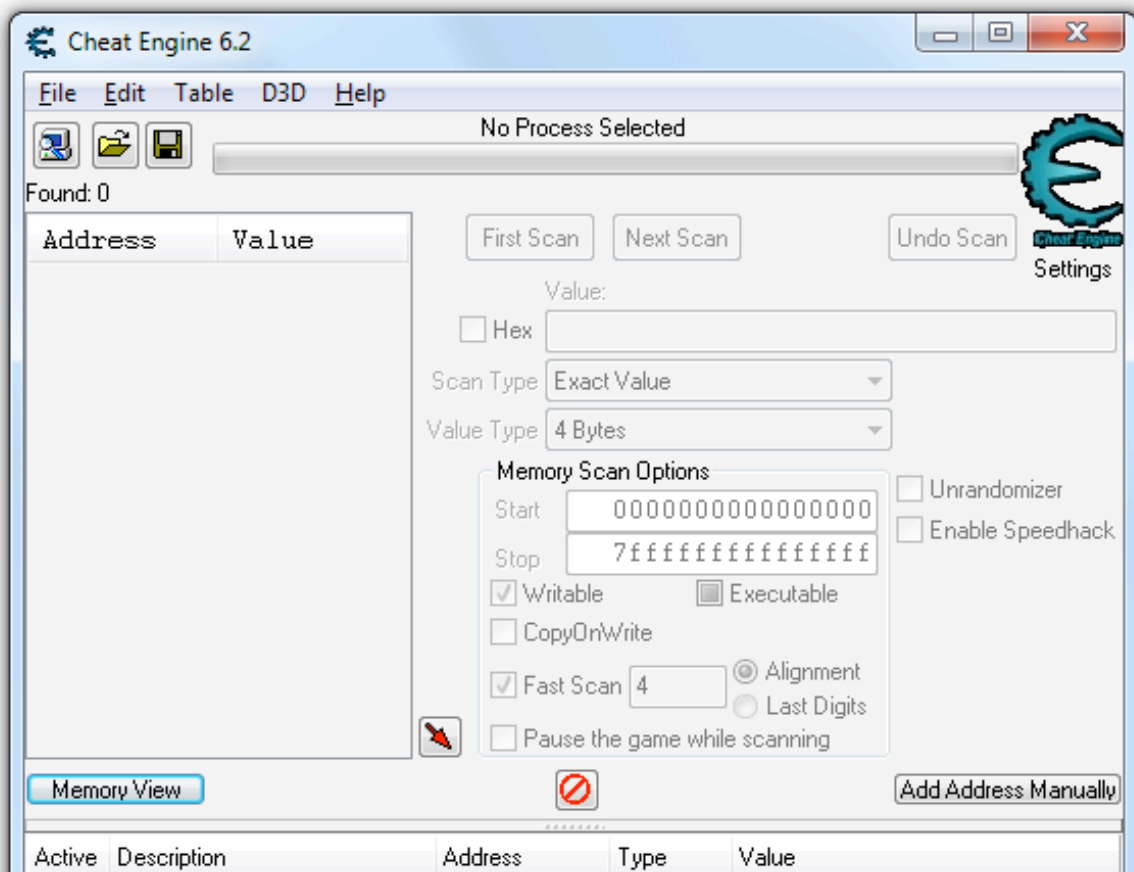


Fig.1: Screenshot from Cheat Engine 6.2, <http://cheat-engine.soft32.com>

With programmes like Cheat Engine that guarantees that you can always win, it is a miracle to me, whom one is supposed be cheating in the case of running the programme. The machine can obviously not be cheated. The player cannot cheat himself or herself. The user manual makes it quite clear to everybody that the player will always be happy with the results:

If you're tired of always losing at a certain computer game, then this is the program for you. Cheat Engine makes single-player games easier to play so you always win.

It might turn out that the only way of explaining who is cheating here, is in assuming that the company who produces the cheat engine is cheating on its users. But that would be a cynical view of the software product and its designers.

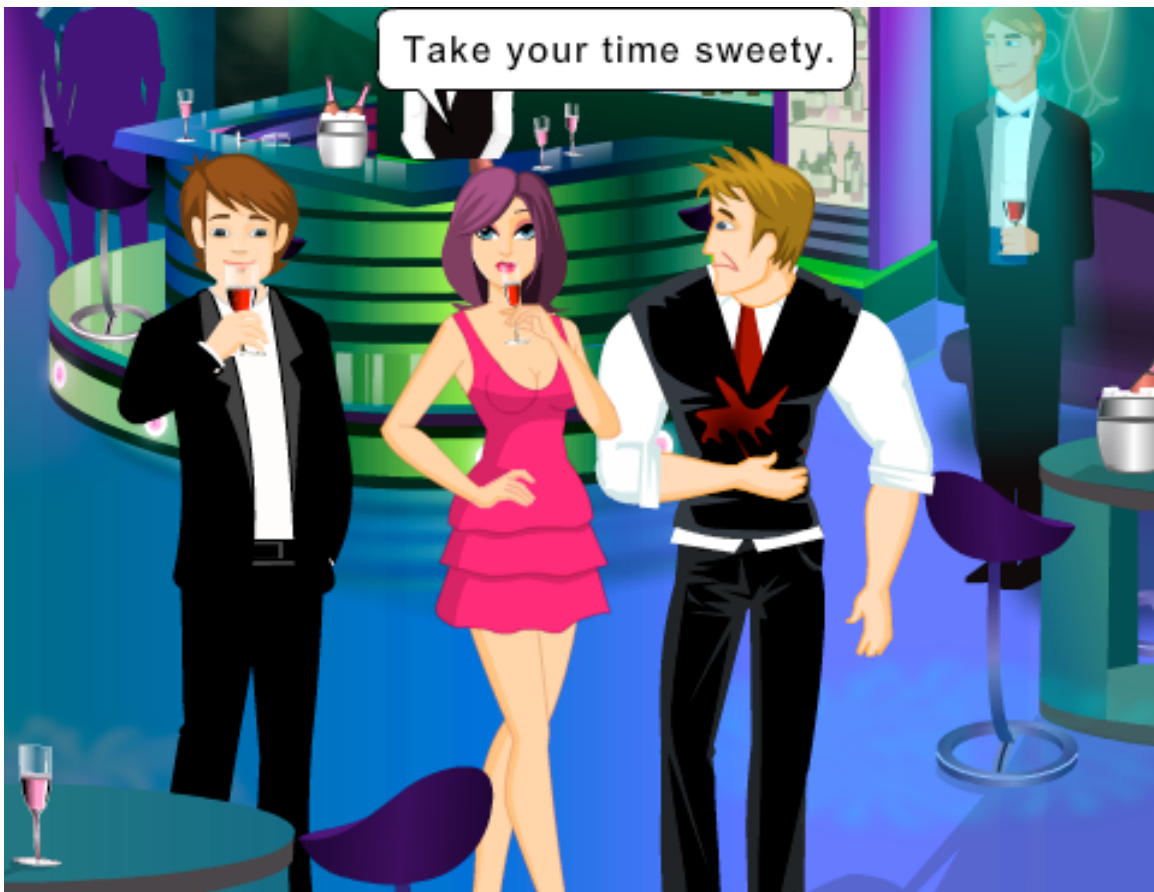


Fig.2: Screenshot from Boyfriend Cheater

Similarly miraculous are cheating games that belong to the now popular category of kissing games. Boyfriend Cheater is a game that asks you to cheat on your avatar's boyfriend by "kissing" the companion to your right, whenever the boyfriend turns away to grab a glass of wine at the bar. The actions that the player can take are limited to clicking

the boy next to the girl in the red dress. “Boyfriend Clicker” would be a more appropriate name for the game than “Boyfriend Cheater”, because cheating involves some social convention on what is fair and what is not. Conventions however require recognition of being such by human beings. The cartoon characters can not recognize a situation as following the conventions or breaking the rules, they just perform according to the code. Obviously a code is not a convention and a convention is no code. The player off he game could cheat on a real boyfriend, but that would require kissing real boys or girls – and not cartoon boys. The act of cheating always needs to be relative to a system of reference. Such a system of reference could be the real world of boys and girls and drinks and parties, or it could be the simulated 2D environment of the Boyfriend Cheater application. Whether something is fair play or not can only be determined relative to the system of reference. It is not a portable property that can be taken from one system to the other. As a preliminary suggestion to define what is fair and what is foul (a cheat) we would like to suggest:

**Fair play:** Ludic actions according to rules and conventions **within a specific system of reference.**

**Foul play:** Ludic actions that break rules within or conventions **about a specific system of reference.**

Sometimes there are more than one system of reference and in these cases it only seems to make sense to speak of cheating as cheating within system A or cheating within system B. Players of Entropia Online know that Entropia prides itself of being the first “Real Cash Economy of Online Gaming”. If system A is the real cash economy than playing with greed and exclusively to make money is fair play within system A. In a system B that is governed by Huizingian renunciation of monetary interests, making money is clearly foul play. “(Play) is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it.” (Huizinga 1949, p.13). In other words: the same set of actions can be considered fair in one case – and foul in the other.

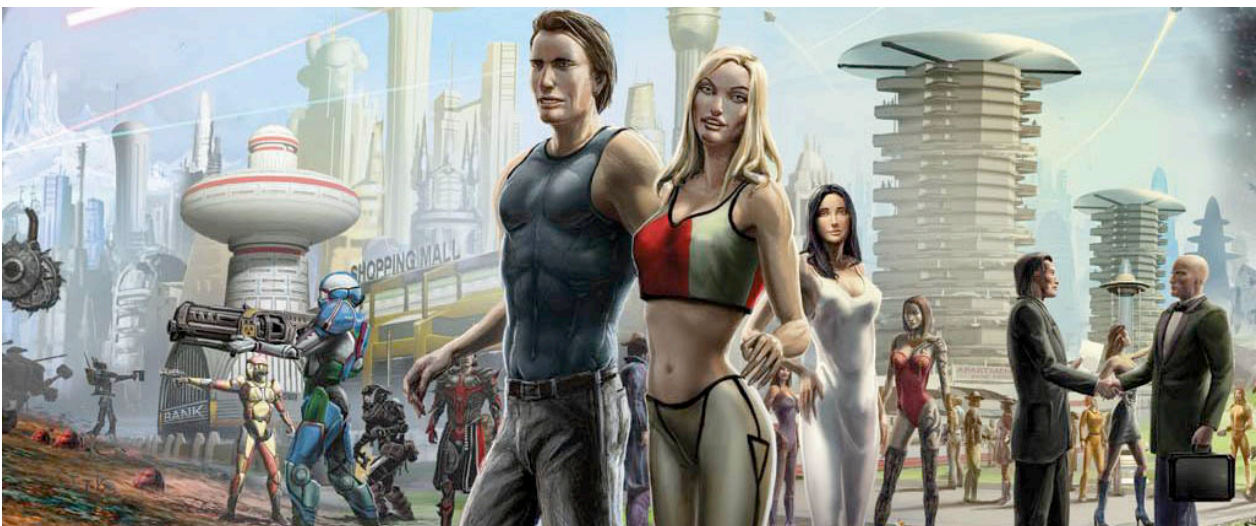


Fig.3: Screenshot from Entropia Universe

Multiple systems of reference do not only exist in ludic context, but they constitute the postmodern condition in general. A political action can not any longer be deciphered as a statement that can be valued on a scale from 1 to 100 with fairness on top of the scale and mean intention on the bottom, but will have to be assessed vis-à-vis a set of rulers with different scales, units and polarities. The Chaos Computer Club's hacking of the Apple iTouch system ranks high on the scale of hacker ethics and low on the Cupertino corporation's scale of product integrity. One describes it as "The biometrics hacking team of the Chaos Computer Club (CCC) has successfully bypassed the biometric security of Apple's TouchID using easy everyday means. All information must be free!" The opponent curses the action as an attack on the clients' safety and data security.

This is however more than antagonistic values of ruling class's values versus rebellious movement's values, because there are much more than two systems of reference at stake here. There is a system of reference for the elegance of hacking, a system for political appropriateness, a system of the protection of private profits, a system of pro-US versus anti-US politics and many more. It is therefore important to become aware of the full range of systems of reference that are contextualising the game – and at the type of players that play the game.

A ludo-typology of players encompasses the obsessive player, the casual player, the games addict, the social player, the professional player – but also the spoilsport and the cardsharp. Faking results in games or refusing to take the game seriously might sound like the negation of playful experience, it can however also be understood as a way of creating a particular form of the ludic experience.

### **1. Lusory Attitudes**

The level of "lusory attitude" (Suits 1978, 2005, pp. 54–55) (Salen and Zimmerman 2004) that a spoilsport might demonstrate seems to be affected by the type of game played. In chess faking and cheating, or quitting the game altogether, is considered to show a very low level of lusory attitude. Many card games on the other hand almost require some cheating when played in certain social contexts. Spoilsport behaviour is not tolerated in bridge clubs. An online bridge site defines bridge-style sportsmanship as follows:

Friendly club atmosphere  
 You must show a courteous attitude to everybody  
 Ethics/ protected environment  
 No robots - ever!

Somebody could qualify as a spoilsport in such an environment for being unfriendly and impolite, or by placing robots in the game. For the Unreal Tournament community neither friendliness nor courteousness are required, bots however are a must. Little is required to exit the magic circle in each of the environments. Other than Salen and Zimmerman suggest, the act of playing the spoilsport can be quite playful. Not only in hardcore computer games, but also in social networking environments, the level of involvement is a continuous matter of debate. Platforms like Facebook, Bebo, or MySpace encourage participants to engage with the content offered and to remain playing as long as possible. To check the level of lusory attitude and to increase involvement, opinions have to be polled all the time. New add-ons and minigames challenge the users to participate even further. For good reasons the alternatives "I will participate" and "I will not participate" are often accompanied by "I don't care" options. What looks like an offer to leave the game is

however an attempt to create an in-game spoilsport alternative that allows spoilsports to stay in the game. Ticking a checkbox of negligence is different from not replying to the question. In politics not taking any notice of an election differs from actively attending the polling station and marking the ballot paper. Selecting such an option is different from not selecting anything and might lead to intense forms of communication amongst voters, non-voters and “make believe” voters. Slavoj Žižek reminds us of the constraints of binary choices offered in a set of rules in political games: e.g. voting for a candidate. In a critical analysis of the setting of elections like one in the US state of Louisiana when

... during the election for governor for the State of Louisiana, the only alternative to the ex-KKK member David Duke was a corrupt Democrat, one saw on many cars a bumper-sticker which read, ‘Vote For A Crook -It's Important!’ Contained within the message of this sticker resides the ultimate paradox of democracy; that within the existing political order every campaign against corruption ends up being couped by the populist extreme Right. (Žižek 2009)

Contained within the sticker resides however also a piece of spoilsport playfulness, a strategy to break the rules in a situation where obedience in regard to the rules seems mandatory. The doctrine of the political game designers is: Make your choice! The spoilsport's subversive game is: What, if we didn't make a choice?

Being a spoilsport is common artistic practice and artists like Tracey Emin demonstrate that neglecting the rules can be a lot of fun. (Emin 1999) It can also be serious business, as the example of Marcel Duchamp proved, when he allegedly quit art-making for the sake of chess-playing. In 1923 Duchamp declared that chess “has all the beauty of art – and much more. It cannot be commercialized. Chess is much purer than art in its social position.” He was immediately interpreted by art critics as having renounced art for chess, which he actually never claimed. The spoilsport act of playing chess in an art context created a debate situated in an art context and thereby built a magic circle around Duchamp's activity which was seen by many as destructive of the art circle's magic. From a historical perspective however, it never was. Similarly Tracy Emin pretended to be the spoilsport with her “My Bed” piece, which won her the Turner price in the first instance - and some £ 150,000 for the bed thereafter. The provocation to exhibit a bed with dirty linen and seemingly not a painting or sculpture made her the spoilsport first and London's art world's most cherished child then. The playful act of Tracy Emin's consisted in leaving the magic circle and re-entering it at the same time.



Fig.1: Tracy Emin: My Bed, Turner Prize winning installation, 1999

There is of course a certain risk contained in the strategy applied by Emin and others. The risk consists of not being able to re-enter the circle one just left. Tracy Emin is clever enough to keep this risk very low. She does so by positioning clues to the art world and the art market. The bedlinen does not differ substantially from a painter's canvas and everyone familiar with the history of painting in the 20<sup>th</sup> century will immediately recover Oldenburg's spoilsport masterpiece "Soft Bathtub—Ghost Version" (Oldenburg, 1966) or other sculptural Oldenburg pieces on canvas.



Fig.2: Claes Oldenburg: Soft Bathtub—Ghost Version, 1966

It is the way how artists show their spoilsport activities, rather than the fact of not following the rules that makes spoilsport strategies a driving force in the development of the arts. Other than Huizinga's assumption that the spoilsport leaves the magic circle (Huizinga 1955), we would like to suggest that there is a playful mode of trespassing the rules, that reinitiates the magic circle in the very same moment it seems to have broken into pieces.

## **2. Magic, Enchantment and Enlightenment**

The dialectics of magical enchantment and rational thinking were carried out on the intellectual battlefields in the age of enlightenment (Felderer and Strouhal 2007). It was quite characteristic for practitioner/ scientists like Johann Christian Wiegleb to comprise magic and modern sciences in one subject area. His "Onomatologia" from 1759 refers to

“electricity”, “the telescope”, “dragons”, and “sorcery” - all of them at the same level of discourse. In his chapter on illusion (“Blendwerk”) he refers to a methodology of cheating for the sake of enlightenment, a process recently described as “Enlightenment by smoke and mirrors” (“Aufklärung durch Täuschung”) (Hochadel 2004). For Wiegleb and his contemporaries magic would not reside in a circle that could be drawn around the “non-scientific”, rather were science and magic two overlapping terrains of knowledge equally intensely explored by us to find out about phenomena surrounding us. The understanding of what we consider “magic” and “scientific” changed during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Peter Rawert points out that magic enchantment was no longer considered to be of either a diabolic or natural origin, but that legerdemain (“Taschenspielerei”) gained the status of the most innovative, up to date, and enlightened magic (Rawert in: Felderer and Strouhal 2007). The new focus of interest was on “speed, cheating and the appropriate instruments required” for that. Superstition or religious connotations were definitely out in enlightened circles.

I would like to suggest that our mode of playing computer games has reached a quasi-enlightened level during this decade. It seems likely that we experience an enlightened playfulness by leaving and re-entering the magic circle as spoilsports with an attitude - or as cardsharps. The fundamentalistic believe in the game, the obedience to follow rules and the tabu to question them seems like a distant echoe from the past.

### **3. Interpassivity**

Interactivity is at the core of gameplay in any conceivable computer game. It seems impossible to imagine how gameplay would work, if there was no interactivity between human and computer involved. But what happens if a gamer writes a script to enable his or her avatar to perform certain actions in the absence of the player? Game artists like Corrado Morgana of furtherfield find joy in running games in auto-execution mode and do not interact except for the minimal start command. Non-action as an activity, or interpassivity (Pfaller 2008) (Žižek 2007) in games can also be seen as a form of spoilsport practice (Fuchs 2008). The game artist who lets the game engine go on its own, rejects his responsibility to control the avatars, he does not get entangled into the quest of loss or win, and he rejects the basic rule of any game, which is: You have to play! The spoilsport does however not leave the arena completely. He remains a voyeur, a spectator of an action he enjoys passively. In this regard the introduction of auto-executables, i.e. software agents physically detached from the players, and other modes of delegated play can be righteously called interpassive gaming. Pfaller and Žižek point out that the psychological aspect of interpassivity is grounded in our subjectivity. Pfaller and Žižek convincingly demonstrate how certain works of art seem to provide for their own reception. One cannot help feeling that these artworks enjoy themselves or that we enjoy through them (Van Oenen 2008). The mechanism described by Pfaller and Žižek can again be found in games and their modes of performance. It is not only Game Art, but everyday gamers’ practice where interpassive phenomena can be observed. Delegated enjoyment and delegated fear are possible forms of letting go in First Person Shooters. We know that it can be fun to just camp in an MMORPG and watch others play through the eyes of an avatar. We have experienced delegated death fears when about to be shot and we know peer players who take some masochistic and interpassive delight in being fragged. But even less martial areas of disguise and simulation like the SecondLife environment will disclose interpassive delegation of love, lust and longing. If we can enjoy the outsourcing

of enjoyment, we have to either declare this as a perverse, a hysteric, and a neurotic attitude in a Lacanian perspective (Van Oenen 2008), or analyse it as a spoilsport/sportsman attitude of staying in the magic circle when pretending to leave it.

#### **4. Social dimensions of cheating and spoilsport behaviour**

Cardsharps and cheaters make us pose another question: How does cheating contribute to the cohesion of the player community? In many forms of childrens' play the obvious possibility of cheating seems to create a strong link amongst players and serves as a special form of joyful entertainment. The game known in German as "Eins-zwei-drei! Dreh dich nicht um" would seem completely boring, if cheating was not a possibility. The playful experience of closing the eyes with the hands and expecting others to believe one would not look through the fingers involves a high degree of self-deception and mastering of a cultural technique of half-believe (Pfaller 2000). "Bona fide cheating" and "true cheating" (Salen and Zimmerman 2004) go hand in hand for social networking environments like SecondLife. We can find pretention, cheating, discovery and possible forms of punishment in SecondLife when we follow the conversations taking place.

The following hide and seek ritual is typical for SecondLife conversations and was recorded by the author at "France Pitoresque" on 15<sup>th</sup> December 2008:

[12:37] apache Kips: c'est toi Anne?  
 [12:38] DavRodrigS Turbo: bonsoir Chavez... ;-)  
 [12:39] fra Pelazzi: c'est vous Nirina?  
 [12:39] melya Galaxy: coucou !!  
 [12:39] beuzatom Orfan: coucou  
 [12:40] Chavez Warwillow: b bonsoir tous les monde  
 [12:40] fredenbois Allen: ho mais ta grandi nirina ,.?.? L O L ??.  
 [12:40] Nirina Bing: oui c'st moi ;-)

The SecondLife users seem to be enjoying a certain level of hide and seek about their names or real identities, they widely accept cheating, yet seem to prefer certain forms of cheating. The question could to be asked here of whether financial exploitation in SecondLife needs to be named cheating, and why profit making in SecondLife is appreciated in one form and condemned in another. User agreements and informal codes would have to be compared to a practice of rule-breaking and rule-following.

#### **5. Border-crossing between systems of reference**

The author suggests that there are multiple systems of reference of playful experience at any given moment, and that those are not necessarily the ones suggested to be used by game designers or fellow players. What I mean here is that at a certain point during the game played, the player can legitimately create connotations to not only one, but many systems of reference: The system of historically grown rules of the game, the system of aesthetic value and acoustic beauty, the system of casually agreed modes of play, the system of technical constraints, the system of cultural context, the language the game's rules are expressed in, the system of amateurism or professional gambling, the system of academic research and the systems of ludology or narratology.

Any activity taken at any time differs in meaning, regarding on the system of reference we denote it in. A shot at an aim with a rocket launcher can be aesthetically pleasing, ethically embarrassing, economically fruitful, technically sophisticated, and rebellious in regard to the rules of the game. The very same action can therefore make you a hero in one system of reference and a villain in another. It also becomes apparent, that you might become a spoilsport in one system of reference and not in another. By deliberately switching from one system of reference to another, the player, the spoilsport and the cardsharp are able to establish playfulness in a chosen context and thereby add to the range of accessible playful experience. The cheaters, the spoilsports and the players in general will find themselves in a situation that has once been described as: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair: Hover through the fog and filthy air" (Shakespeare : Macbeth 1606)

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**Author Bio**

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Mathias has pioneered in the field of artistic use of game engines in various game art installations. He started the first European Masters Programme in Creative Games at the University of Salford in Greater Manchester. Creative Games is a discipline on the borderline of games, art and critical discourse. Mathias also was lead in developing the European Joint Masters in Ludic Interfaces and is now director of the Gamification Lab at Leuphana University Lüneburg/ Germany.

He has had sound and media installations in Vienna, London, Mexico City, Tokyo, Helsinki, Stockholm, Norwich, Cairo, Vancouver, Paris, and in Providence, Rhode Island. Commissioned work for ISEA94 and ISEA2004, 2006, and 2008, transmediale, resfest, ars electronica, PSi #11, futuresonic, EAST, the Greenwich Millennium Dome. He designed creative games for museums, urban planning and theatre performances.

His publications include *Passagen des Spiels II. Das Spiel und seine Grenzen.* (2010) Fuchs, Mathias, Strouhal, Ernst (Eds.): Springer Verlag, Vienna, New York

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