

# Why players cheat:

## The psychology of unfair play



**DENUVO**  
by irideto



It's no secret that the temptation to cheat is persuasive in video games. With both prestigious loot and titles being hidden behind long grind times, players exploiting shortcuts is an inevitability. In many cases, this drive to unlock rare content instantly, often comes at the cost of fairness to other players.

Managing video game cheating is a call to safeguard the integrity of games against exploitation, while considering the ethical lines that game design itself must respect.

Affecting the decisions both on the cheating and safeguarding sides are the complexities of human behavior, technology and the gaming culture, weaving them all together.

This e-book invites developers, players and industry aficionados on a journey to both understand and dismantle the psychology of video game cheating. Strolling through the minds of gamers – why do some embrace cheating and steer away from fair play, while others spend hours enjoying the experience grinding for the rewards? From game mechanics to psychology, we'll uncover how the thrill of achievement can sometimes lead players astray into the grey zones of gaming ethics.

Happy reading!



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# What is cheating in games?

Video games provide a captivating environment for players to immerse themselves in, navigating through rich narratives, solving complex puzzles and competing in intense challenges. This digital landscape, however, is not immune to cheating, where players leverage unorthodox methods to gain an upper hand.

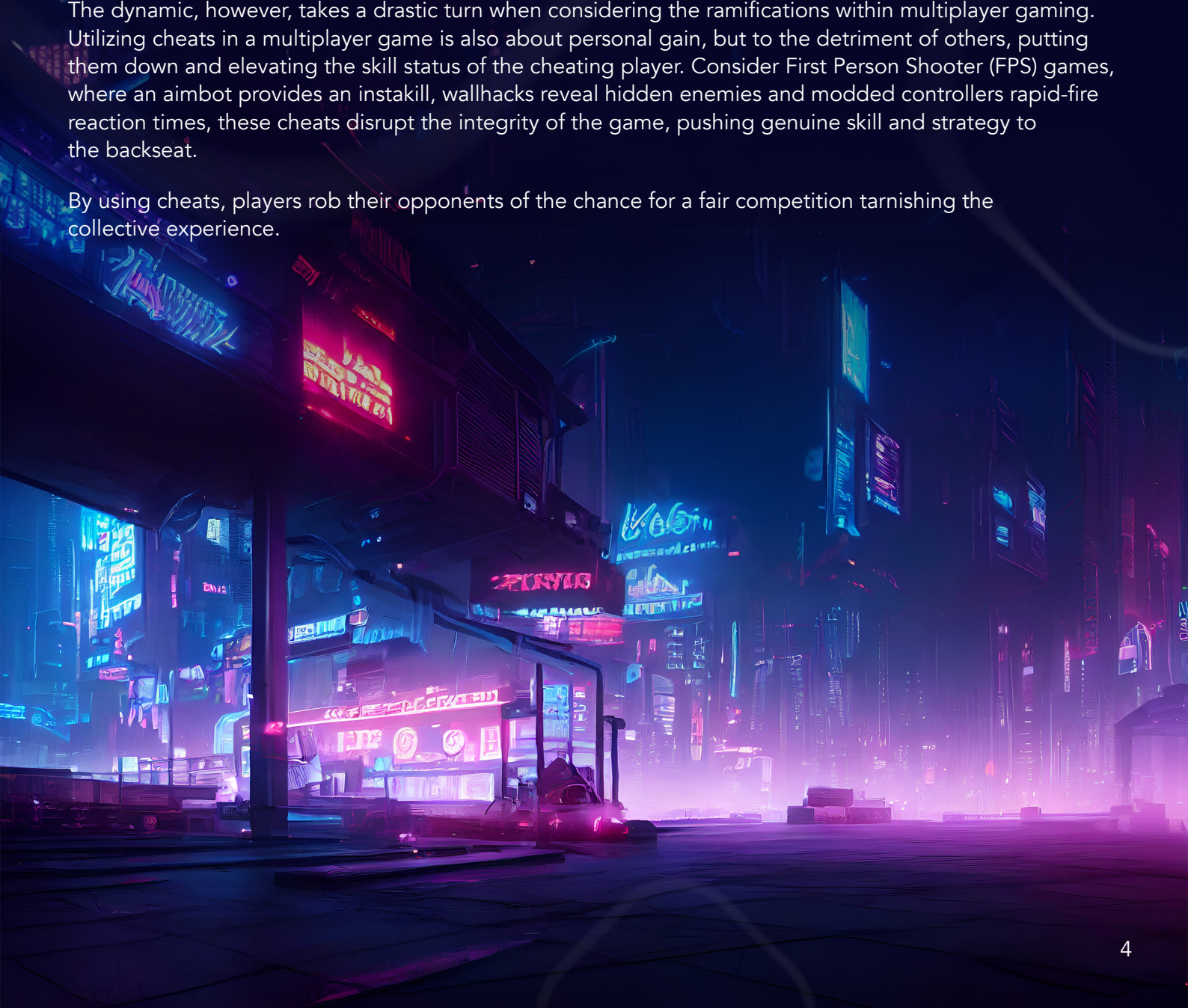
At the core of it, cheating is defined as the act of bypassing the game's intended mechanics to secure a difficult to attain reward without the time investment. Players who utilize cheats gain an unwarranted advantage by exploiting bugs, using unauthorized software modifications or directly manipulating the game's files.

## Cheating in single and multiplayer games

In single player games, the view on cheating is more nuanced and open to interpretation. Some argue that using cheats is a harmless way to tailor the gaming experience to one's own preference. Players might use cheats to bypass a frustrating level, unlock secret content or simply add a humorous element to the game. In this context, the act of cheating becomes the player's prerogative, altering only their experience without affecting others.

The dynamic, however, takes a drastic turn when considering the ramifications within multiplayer gaming. Utilizing cheats in a multiplayer game is also about personal gain, but to the detriment of others, putting them down and elevating the skill status of the cheating player. Consider First Person Shooter (FPS) games, where an aimbot provides an instakill, wallhacks reveal hidden enemies and modded controllers rapid-fire reaction times, these cheats disrupt the integrity of the game, pushing genuine skill and strategy to the backseat.

By using cheats, players rob their opponents of the chance for a fair competition tarnishing the collective experience.





# What is the difference between exploits, mods, hacks and cheats?

Over the years, gaming has developed its own distinct vocabulary. Words like exploits, mods, hacks and cheats are commonly tossed around, but what do they truly mean?

## EXPLOITATION

Exploitation in gaming is an interesting concept. It's about players finding innovative ways to use the game's mechanics to their advantage, often in ways that the developers may not have foreseen or intended. This isn't classified as cheating, at least not in the traditional sense as players who engage in game exploitation are not utilizing external manipulations, but simply maximize the potential of what is already available to them within the game's environment in unique ways.

The speed-running community is a perfect example of this, where players strive to complete games in the fastest time possible. They meticulously analyze every aspect of the game looking for ways to save time, whether through taking advantage of a game's physics, finding shortcuts or employing strategies that may otherwise seem unconventional, but are entirely within the bounds of the game's mechanics.

Games like Minecraft and Super Mario are popular choices for this community. In Minecraft, for example, players have discovered numerous glitches and mechanic-exploits over the years, such as the 'Ender Pearl Stasis Chamber' glitch, allowing players to teleport across great distances instantly.

Similarly, the Super Mario games have been the subject of extensive analysis leading to the discovery of the 'Flagpole Glitch' in the original game, allowing players to skip the flag lowering animation at the end of a level, saving precious seconds.

The speed-running community thrives on these exploits. They don't "cheat"; they just play differently, optimizing every action.

## MODDING

Moving on to modding, this is where the community's creativity truly shines. Mod, short for modification, is additional software that can offer players more information, potentially giving them an edge in gameplay. Alterations made to a game can range from superficial changes, such as new character skins or improved graphics, to complete gameplay overhauls. Utilizing these mods, however, still requires a considerable amount of effort and skill from the players, ensuring that the playing field remains challenging and engaging.

Developers often embrace this aspect of gaming culture, encouraging player creativity by providing scripting or plugin interfaces. Such platforms define clear boundaries for modding, distinguishing between encouraged creativity within these parameters and modifications that may stray beyond them. This structured approach allows players to explore and expand the game environment while adhering to the developer's vision and rules.

A shining example of this is Pokémon Emerald Kaizo, a mod which takes the base game (Pokémon Emerald) and elevates the difficulty to extreme levels, offering a brutal but rewarding experience for players. It's a testament to how modding can breathe new life into a game, offering players new challenges and experiences long after the game's initial release.

It's important, however, to draw a line between mods that enhance the gaming experience and those that may provide an unfair advantage, especially in multiplayer settings. Mods that give players extra information about their opponents or the game environment or mods that automate certain aspects of gameplay, can cross into the territory of cheating. It's a fine line and one that the gaming community and developers continue to navigate.



## HACKING

While historically, hacking has been about exploring and understanding software systems, today it often implies working on, or challenging, the security aspects of these systems. This could mean identifying vulnerabilities, testing defenses or in some cases, manipulating software in ways not originally intended by its creators.

On a positive note, hacking can lead to discoveries of vulnerabilities, contributing to more robust and secure software systems. Ethical hackers, for instance, use their skills to improve security and protect systems against malicious attacks. On the other hand, when hacking is used for personal gain it can mean the theft of sensitive information or the creation of software exploits. In gaming, particularly mobile games, malicious software can sometimes be hidden behind catchy thumbnails and the promise of a good game experience.

## CHEATING

If hacks are about altering the game, cheats are about directly giving players an edge, ranging from the nostalgic cheat codes many of us entered to gain infinite lives or unlock secret levels in single-player, to the damaging ones used in online multiplayer games.

The emergence of online multiplayer games has led to cheats that significantly compromise the essence of fair play. While earlier cheats might have been simple code injections, today's cheats involve sophisticated software capable of evading detection. Some mimic human behavior, making it even harder to detect with anti-cheat systems.

Games like GTA5, Fortnite and Call of Duty Warzone have seen their share of players employing wallhacks and aimbots, ruining the experience for others and going against the very essence of competitive play. What motivates players to cheat and how are they classified?

# What is the psychology behind cheating?

Gaming is and has always been a virtual escape from reality, either as a form of entertainment or a place to showcase skill progression. To truly grasp the reasons why some individuals lean toward cheating, it's essential to see the world from their perspective and explore their motivations.







### The quick-fixer

Players who are swamped by the fast pace of life and tight schedules find solace in gaming – a world free from deadlines and duties. Nevertheless, given that leisure moments are precious and few, some might resort to cheats as a means to expedite their progress.

Their goal isn't to dominate or reduce the game's challenge; rather, they aim to maximize their experience and cover more ground in the limited time they have to play.



### The profit-seeker

Cheaters often seek more than just the thrill of victory or the prestige of a high rank; some have an eye on financial gain. The dark underbelly of this digital world is a marketplace where high-ranked accounts and in-game items (obtained through dubious means), are traded for real-world currency.

Numerous sites attest to this, with accounts being bought and sold for hundreds, sometimes thousands, of dollars. In such an environment, cheats become tools of trade as ways to inflate an account's worth.



### The ego-booster

Multiplayer Online Battle Arenas (MOBAs) and FPS-shooters often see players who thrive on leaderboard dominance. Reaching the top in these environments becomes more than just gameplay; it's a pursuit of glory and recognition.

Even if it means resorting to cheats, the irresistible allure of victory and the bragging rights that accompany the top position, can sometimes overshadow the pure love for the game. The focus shifts away from enjoyment toward triumph, as players seek validation and esteem in their virtual victories.



### The power-displayer

Virtual environments shroud players in anonymity, allowing them to be someone else for a while. This can be freeing, giving them a chance to act in ways they normally wouldn't, though sometimes, this freedom leads to less-than-nice actions, especially when people feel like they won't face any real-life backlash.

Whether it's relentlessly spawn-killing new players, camping or spamming chat, these acts create an illusion of dominance, venting real-life frustrations or simply deriving a twisted sense of joy from another's misery. For many, their online persona provides the opportunity to express things they wouldn't dare do in person.



### The self-esteem riser

Cheating in games can often be traced back to the player's sense of self-worth and their perceived social standing within the gaming community. For many, the pressure to succeed and be acknowledged by their peers can be overwhelming, and individuals with low self-esteem may find refuge in the artificial success that cheats provide, elevating their online persona and, by extension, their self-worth.

This digital façade of competence and achievement serves as a compensatory mechanism, offering them the recognition and status they crave, coupled with the fear that they cannot earn it legitimately. This virtual validation becomes a substitute for genuine self-esteem, creating a cycle where the player becomes increasingly reliant on cheats to maintain their social status in the gaming world.



### The code-masterer

There's an element of the cheating spectrum that's fueled by curiosity and a desire for an intellectual challenge. Some individuals approach both the creation and use of cheats as a way to learn and hone their programming skills. Their satisfaction isn't derived from in-game achievements, but rather from the knowledge that they outsmarted a system designed to stop them.

This mindset often starts from a place of wanting to understand how things work, leading to them exploring coding, reverse engineering and software manipulation. Although the outcomes of these endeavors can impact the gaming experience for others, the initial intent may not be malicious, but rather an unorthodox method of self-education in the field of programming.

# Ethical gaming: The real victory

Ethical gaming refers to the culture where success is valued, and fair play is promoted. It's the ideal environment for players to engage in, allowing for competitiveness and achievement in a balanced and maintained atmosphere.

Using cheats to win eliminates the purpose of fair competition. Success in gaming is a reflection of one's skill, strategy and dedication, and when a player resorts to cheating, the victory is not truly theirs. Instead, using cheats strip away the satisfaction and pride that comes from these otherwise genuine achievements, and by confronting this perspective, individuals may begin to question the integrity of their actions.





# How does behavioral design affect players?

Behavioral design in video games is the art of merging psychology, design and technology to hook players into recurrent engagement. Here's a brief overview of how this design feature influences players:

## COMPULSION LOOPS

Cycles of actions and rewards that keep players engaged, for example DuoLingo's Night Owl Chest, which requires players to complete a lesson during specific hours to unlock, encouraging them to return at a later time.

## UNPREDICTABLE REWARD SYSTEMS

Variable reward schedules – mimicking slot machines – are where players are rewarded at unpredictable intervals. An example of that are loot boxes, offering random cosmetics, cards for player-decks, skins and virtual currency, stirring ethical debates and even leading to regulatory challenges in various countries.

## IN-GAME DECISIONS

Decisions within games can significantly affect the game's narrative or mechanics, thus providing a sense of control and investment for players. These are normally found in Role-Playing Games (RPGs) and roguelikes, where repetitive play gives a unique experience.

## BUILDING COMMUNITY AND COMPETITION

Multiplayer games leverage the human need for social interaction by incorporating features that encourage cooperation, competition and community building.

# Behavioral design as a motivator for cheaters

While these design elements can lead to highly enjoyable gaming experiences, they also raise concerns regarding excessive play. When games are confronted with excessive grinding, or long-winded efforts for rewards, the desire for shortcuts rises.

Behavioral triggers within games require an ethical consideration, both from the monetization side, as well as how players might approach bypassing it entirely.





# Fair play: The soul of gaming

At the heart of every game lies an unspoken assumption between the developers and the players – a commitment to fairness. Fair play, in gaming, is more than just a principle; it's the very bedrock upon which memorable gaming experiences are built.

Games, whether they're sprawling RPGs like *The Witcher*, or competitive shooters like *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*, there is a predefined set of rules defining challenges, boundaries and achievements. Cheating, in essence, is a breach of this contract and betrays the spirit of the fair play.





# What makes cheating so difficult to stop?

eSports stands as a shining beacon of how stringent regulations can curb cheating. With millions of dollars at stake in tournaments, the incentive for maintaining a clean playing environment is enormous. Rigorous monitoring and player verifications might work for eSports, but the general multiplayer landscape holds a lot more unpredictability.

## Ever-evolving cheats

Much like technological advancements, cheats progress at an alarming pace. For every wall developers erect, cheaters chip away searching for a breach.

Popular multiplayer games regularly release patches, both for gameplay improvements and to fix vulnerabilities that may otherwise be exploited. However, within days, if not hours, cheat developers find ways to bypass these fixes, creating a continuous cycle of action and reaction.

## The constant state of imbalance

Modern anti-cheat systems employ machine learning algorithms, behavioral analysis and real-time monitoring to detect anomalies. Some major titles have even invested heavily in sophisticated anti-cheat solutions, delivering swift punitive actions against transgressors. That said, however, cheaters now also employ methods like deep learning and AI-assisted tools to fight back.

## Seeking recognition

Reducing cheats is one thing, but understanding the psyche of the cheater and what drives their behavior may be the key to lasting solutions. By engaging the community and opening up dialogues, the gaming industry can move toward reducing the inclination of using them.

## How big of an impact is cheating?

Cheating devalues in-game items and rewards that honest players work hard to earn. Moreover, there is a broader impact on the game's reputation and potential revenue losses for the developer; new players may be deterred from joining and loyal ones disheartened from continuing.

Making the decision to combat cheating effectively can ensure that game developers use the value of their environment to attract more players, and in turn, have more to reinvest into content itself.





# Denuvo: Beyond just anti-cheat

Denuvo's proactive approach does more than just level the playing field; it safeguards the community's trust in the fairness of the game. With its flexible technology adapting to various gaming formats, thousands of cheaters in multiplayer lobbies are detected annually, all the while leaving single-player scenarios untouched.

Beyond detection, Denuvo maintains a detailed logbook of cheating attempts, providing a wealth of telemetry data that is instrumental in understanding the scope and patterns of cheating. This data-driven approach enables them to continuously refine their techniques and develop new strategies in staying one step ahead of cheaters.

Denuvo's suite, encompasses more than just anti-cheating measures. Recognizing the multifaceted nature of game security, we also focus on combating modding, botting and hacking. This holistic approach aligns with our dedication to providing a complete 360° security solution for game developers.

By vigilantly monitoring the online availability of cheats, mods, bots and hacks, Denuvo's solutions remain dynamic and adaptive, evolving with the gaming landscape and ensuring that the most up-to-date defenses are always in play. Our goal is to safeguard against all forms of cheating that can undermine the gaming experience.

## Curious how Denuvo can help you protect your games?

[Contact us!](#)

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