



## Gaming the System? Digital Ethics and Cheating in Massive Multiplayer Online Games



[BagoGames](#) / CC BY 2.0

Since the creation of online multiplayer video games, conniving gamers have lurked in the dark corners of the digital realm, waiting to pounce on unsuspecting players with software and codes designed to give them a competitive advantage. Such cheat codes manipulate glitches or bugs in the game design to create “advantages beyond normal gameplay,” like gaining in-game money or increasing the likelihood of hitting an enemy target. “Massive Multiplayer

Online” (MMO) games are a growing category of multiplayer gaming which permits a “large number of players to participate simultaneously over an internet connection” (Hardy, 2009). *Fortnite* is one of the newest MMOs to take the world by storm, allowing for up to 100 players to play together in a single round, making it one of the most competitive online games in existence. Launched in July 2017, *Fortnite* has attracted over 125 million players and earns about \$300 million every month from in-game purchases. It also creates an ideal environment for hackers and sophisticated cheaters to make an appearance.

Cheating in MMOs creates an uneven playing field for the devoted gamers who just want to enjoy their favorite pastime. Video game companies across the country are attempting to crack down on MMO cheaters by issuing severe real-life consequences. However, in an attempt to create a friendly, cheating-free gaming atmosphere, many organizations are finding themselves involved in legal battles, like in the case between Epic Games (the creators of *Fortnite*) and Caleb Rogers, a 14-year-old boy. The video game company filed a lawsuit against Rogers after he was caught using cheating software while playing *Fortnite: Battle Royale* that made it easier for him to aim weapons at oblivious players. Rogers knew what he was doing, as he also created and shared a YouTube video that gave step-by-step instructions on accessing and using this “aimbot” software. While it is not clear whether Epic Games knew of the boy’s age before filing the lawsuit, a spokesperson for the company stated that “Epic is not okay with ongoing cheating or copyright infringement from *anyone at any age*... we’ll pursue all available options to make sure our games are fun, fair, and competitive for players.” They argued that the YouTube video encouraged others to also download the cheating software, further promoting the *Fortnite* MMO to be filled with cheating players. In response to the lawsuit, Rogers refused to take down the how-to video and instead proudly “admitted to using the software, live streaming himself cheating” in another post on YouTube (Statt, 2017).

While the company’s intentions to sustain a fair gaming environment might seem justifiable, the 14-year-old’s mother would argue otherwise. Lauren Rogers sent a letter relaying her



anger to the U.S. District Court Eastern District of North Carolina. In it she asserted that her son did not develop or distribute the cheating software; he only downloaded it for his own use. She contended that Epic Games, like many other video game companies, forces a vague end-user licensing agreement (EULA) on users that was so complex that Caleb could not possibly agree to because of his status as a minor. Further, there was no parental consent agreement, meaning that she nor any other adult was required to read the terms and conditions. Rogers asserts that regardless of Caleb's age, the EULA was vague and has probably never been read in its entirety by any gamer. Nick Statt, a writer at *The Verge*, says that "nearly every piece of technology... carries with it some type of murky agreement regulating the behavior of consumers... We agree to these contracts without reading them or even understanding what types of behavior scale from prohibited to illegal." Rogers also argues that even if Caleb wasn't a minor, Epic Games would have difficulties demonstrating that a cheating software could harm the company's revenue, as it is a free game and its only profits come from purchases made by users within the game. She challenges that the possible \$150,000 fine against a 14-year-old is just a way for a major corporation to make money from a minor infraction.

Cheating in an online video game might not be glaringly harmful, but hacking can cause frustration and anger in an environment designed to provide escape for the users from the stressors of reality. In the end, using cheating software exploits the purpose of the video game's social elements and undermines the artistic intent to entertain. Should video game companies move toward drastic legal action in the persisting battle against MMO cheaters?

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. What is the ethical problem with cheating in games? Does the meaning of cheating change in digital realms such as that created in *Fortnite*?
2. Did Rogers commit one or two ethically problematic actions when he used an aimbot to gain an advantage and then explained his use in a YouTube video? Would your reasoning change if he had only used the aimbot but not helped others use such programs?
3. How far can companies go in enforcing fairness in their games? What principle would you argue for that governs ethical game companies and the behaviors they allow on their platforms?
4. If fairness is an important value, what other values might matter in the social worlds created or implied by games? Should game companies also worry about other senses of equality and inclusion beyond fair competition?

### **Further Information:**

Gilbert, Ben. "One crazy statistic shows how incredibly big 'Fortnite' has become in less than a year." *Business Insider*, June 13, 2018. Available at:



<https://www.businessinsider.com/fortnite-size-statistics-players-worldwide-2018-6>

Shafer, Josh. "Video game maker goes after cheaters, including a 14-year-old boy." *The News & Observer*, November 27, 2017. Available at: <http://www.newsobserver.com/news/local/news-columns-blogs/josh-shaffer/article186695018.html>

Statt, Nick. "Epic Games receives scathing legal rebuke from 14-year-old Fortnite cheater's mom." *The Verge*, November 27, 2017. Available at: <https://www.theverge.com/2017/11/27/16707562/epic-games-fortnite-cheating-lawsuit-debate-14-year-old-kid>

Technopedia. "Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOG)." *Technopedia*. Available at: <https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/handle/10919/31881>

Thomsen, Michael. "Cheating: Video Games' Moral Imperative." *Fanzine*, January 8, 2013. Available at: <http://thefanzine.com/cheating-video-games-moral-imperative/>

**Author:**

Alex Purcell  
Media Ethics Initiative  
Center for Media Engagement  
University of Texas at Austin  
November 2, 2018

[www.mediaethicsinitiative.org](http://www.mediaethicsinitiative.org)