6. Breaking reality: Exploring pervasive cheating in *Foursquare*[1]

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Introduction

♫ *This ain't Seaworld, this is as real as it gets / I'm on a boat, MF'er, don't you ever forget!* ♫
'I'm on a Boat!' The Lonely Island, 2009

These song lyric lines accompanied a badge I earned in February 2010 while using *Foursquare* on my mobile phone. This location-based social network service, created by Dennis Crowley and Naveen Selvadurai and launched in 2009, offers its users the opportunity to check in at real-world venues, earning rewards (like badges) in the process. The badge I was rewarded, appropriately called "I'm on a Boat!", is the reward for the first time you actually check in on a boat in real life.

The problem, however, is that I never actually was on a boat. I checked in at Amsterdam Central Station to take the train to work. *Foursquare*'s virtual venues are supposed to be linked directly to real physical venues, but Central Station had virtually changed into something else. Amsterdam Central Station "ain't Seaworld", to use The Lonely Island's lyrics, but for *Foursquare* users, it suddenly was also no longer "as real as it gets". And in case I would "ever forget", *Foursquare* had automatically posted the fact that I earned the badge on my Facebook wall, triggering friends to not only question my real location, but also my sincerity: "Have you started cheating?"

After a short investigation, I found out what happened. As a service depending on user participation, *Foursquare* invites its users not only to add new venues to the database, but also to describe what these venues are, or what you can find there, through a system of tags. Many different tags are possible, but only some of them are linked to badge rewards. The person responsible for the "I'm on a Boat!" badge had to know; he or she apparently added the "boat" tag to the station. By doing so, this person not only cheated the system, but also included me – and everyone else checking in before the tag was removed – in his or her devious act.

This chapter deals with the notion of cheating in the location-based mobile social networking application *Foursquare*. It addresses the question if and how devious practices, like the one described above, impact the boundaries between play and reality as a negotiated space of interaction. Having actively participated in using *Foursquare*, and observed its developments for over a year, the application will act as my main case study. *Foursquare*, with its millions of users, is furthermore exemplary for what has become known as "gamification", a phenomenon which stretches the notion of what constitutes a game. To investigate the conceptual boundaries of play, I will start by elucidating what the gamification phenomenon entails. I will then move on to frame *Foursquare* as a pervasive game and, subsequently, cheating in *Foursquare* as *pervasive cheating*. Finally, an investigation of the various stakeholders involved in and around *Foursquare* will show how pervasive cheating impacts both play and the use of the application. This enables me to focus on the pervasive nature of *Foursquare*, which is central to my argument that cheating in these types of location-based mobile media results in shifts in control and agency over play, as well as shifts in identity of both players and users.

The matter of gamification

The term "gamification" is a true industry buzzword, often used to describe applications with game-like characteristics. As game designer Jesse Schell put it during one of the many gamification conference panels, gamification is "taking things that aren't games and trying to make them feel more like games" (quoted in Graft 2011, n.p.). In an effort to show that gamification does, however, demarcate a distinct group of phenomena, Sebastian Deterding, Dan Dixon, Rilla Khaled, and Lennart Necke describe it as:

– *the use* (rather than the extension) *of*
– *design* (rather than game-based technology or other game-related practices)
– *elements* (rather than full-fledged games)
– *characteristic for games* (rather than play or playfulness)
– *in non-game contexts* (regardless of specific usage intentions, contexts, or media of implementation) (Deterding et al. 2011, 5, emphasis in original).

Or, as a short definition, gamification is the "use of game design elements in non-game contexts" (ibid., 2). While Deterding et al. do not explicitly link gamification to specific usages or purposes, in many cases the goal of gamification is to make applications and online services more like games and therefore more engaging for the user, i.e. the consumer.

As an industry term, gamification is in danger of following the path of "interactivity", which, as game scholar Espen Aarseth has noted, became a form of industry rhetoric implying that "the role of the consumer had (or would very soon) change for the better" (1997, 48). The way gamification in media use is sometimes put forward as a revolutionary force is similar in terms of rhetoric. Take, for instance, this quote about *Foursquare* from game designer Jane McGonigal's prominent book *Reality is broken*:

> [W]hat makes a *Foursquare* social life better than your regular social life is the simple fact that to do well in *Foursquare*, you have to enjoy yourself more. You have to frequent your favorite places more often, try things you've never tried before, go places you've never been, and meet up more often with friends whom you might not ordinarily make time to see in person. In other words, it's not a game that rewards you for what you're already doing. It's a game that rewards you for doing new things, and making a better effort to be social (2011, 166).

While McGonigal calls *Foursquare* a "good game" (2011, 167), gamification's detractors would argue that an app like *Foursquare* is hardly a game at all. It is a borderline case at best when viewed through standard game definitions (cf. Salen and Zimmerman 2004; Juul 2005), and some argue that apps like *Foursquare* consist mostly (or only) of feedback systems, not any game mechanics (Deterding 2010; Bogost 2011). Feedback systems, like points or badges, are seldom part of gameplay; they usually communicate the results *of* gameplay. As game designer and critic Margaret Robertson argues, "what we're currently terming gamification is in fact the process of taking *the thing that is least essential to games* and representing it as the core of the experience" (Robertson 2010, n.p.; emphasis in original). She proposes the alternative term "pointsification" to describe the phenomenon, adding that while the implementation of game-like reward systems in media are not bad *per se*, it has the potential to strip the sense of agency and competence so important for gameplay (Robertson 2010). It should also be said that the team behind *Foursquare* does not consider it to be a game – on the official website it is referred to as a location-based mobile platform. That the company sometimes has trouble addressing the exact nature of this platform, becomes clear in a statement by Alex Rainert, head of production at *Foursquare*'s. In an interview he stated that they "don't consider *Foursquare* a game", adding that they do "recognize the value of using game mechanics to change behaviors" (Van Buskirk 2011, n.p.), seemingly disagreeing with both supporters (it is not a game) and critics (it *does* have game mechanics) of gamification at the same time.

While the discussion above is certainly interesting, it is not my goal in this chapter to untangle the different, sometimes conflicting views on gamification, or argue for or against the phenomenon. Rather, I want to explore play practices that emerge from the increased implementation of game-like characteristics in location-based mobile media. In their overview of current uses of the term, Deterding et al. point to another industry use of gamification which refers to the "increasing adoption, institutionalization and ubiquity of (video) games in everyday life" (2011, 1-2). This use of the term gamification can be seen as part of a larger process of "ludification" of culture, which can be traced back to the 1960s (Stenros et al. 2009; see also the introductory chapter of this book). With games and play increasingly pervading mainstream culture, the gamification phenomenon only adds to the articulation of the playful dimensions of our individual and cultural identity.

While some critics might lament gamification's exchange of gameplay for feedback-systems, as the core experience of play, for other players playing the feedback system *is* the core of their experience. For these players, the "new things" they undertake through *Foursquare* might not involve getting out more or being more social, as McGonigal attests in her work. Instead, these new things could involve finding out new ways to actually not leave the house at all, or being rather anti-social, while still receiving the same rewards as those who play "by the rules". Such players, who do not play *by* but rather *against* the rules, are usually referred to as cheaters.

According to the *Foursquare* FAQ, cheating is "not a widespread phenomenon" within the service (Foursquare 2010). Many instances of cheating are subtle and often indirect, creating at most annoyance with other users. I will, however, point out that such instances of cheating not only raise new considerations for thinking about identities which I consider to be playful (as is also explained in the introductory chapter of this volume), but that cheating practices can also impact the relationship between play and non-play (i.e. regular use) in location-based mobile applications like *Foursquare*. If we want to explore the notion of cheating in these media, we need to first acknowledge that cheating, both as a practice and as a term describing such practices, is rather hard to define. To understand the volatile nature of cheating, one should first look at the boundaries of play.

Framing the *Foursquare* experience

Cheating describes a host of deviant, devious, anti-social, and/or unsportsmanlike practices which break the metaphorical "magic circle" that separates the activity of play from the outside world. This magic circle supposedly defines the boundaries of play. The concept is that breaking the magic circle, which some forms of cheating can do, results in play being suspended momentarily or indefinitely by the players and/or referee. The term originates from Johan Huizinga's *Homo ludens* (1955) and has been subject of much discussion within Game Studies since the early 2000s (see also the chapters by Aupers and Calleja in this volume).

The consensus seems to be that the magic circle, even if such a boundary actually exists, never really excludes the outside world. It is framed as an imperfect separation that players negotiate and uphold (Juul 2008); a ritualistic contract based on implicit agreements (Montola 2009); or as non-existent, since ordinary life always pervades play (Pargman and Jakobsson 2008; Consalvo 2009). Goffman's discussion of "frame analysis", as embraced by sociologist Gary Alan Fine in his classic ethnographic study of tabletop fantasy gaming (Goffman 1974; Fine 1983), has become a popular alternative for the magic circle concept (e.g. Glas et al. 2011). Rather than dealing with a somewhat formalist notion of boundaries between the play world and the real world, frame analysis looks at different levels of engrossment players experience when engaging in a game. Players organize these experiences through frames of meaning. While the types of frame which can form during play are endless, Fine focuses on three main frames: the primary frame of the real world grounding all activities; the game context with its rules and structures; and the fictional world presented within the game in which players are present as characters (1983, 183-6).

The concept of frames is helpful when dealing with gamified media like *Foursquare*, as it leaves more room for games which, like the role-playing games Fine studied, deviate from classic game models. As a location-based social network application, *Foursquare* can be considered a "pervasive game": a type of game with one or more salient features which expand the spatial, temporal, or social boundaries of play (Montola 2009, 12). *Foursquare* exhibits all three forms of boundary expansion. First, it uses the real world as its playground and as such does not feature a fictional game world in which players create characters. While the explicit link with the real world does not prevent players from creating fictional characters[2], in theory, players "play" with themselves. Second, while there are weekly rankings of top users, the game is continual rather than divided into separate play sessions. Third, *Foursquare* features a large amount of nonparticipants among its users, expanding the game beyond the core players.

The argument that *Foursquare* includes nonparticipants among its users might need some elaboration. Playing *Foursquare* does not seem to involve any bystanders, at least not in the way many pervasive games use them as audience, challenge, or obstacle (Montola et al. 2009). There are, however, nonparticipants active within *Foursquare* itself. While it might be considered a pervasive game due to its gamified nature, for many users it is mainly a location-based social network application. As pointed out in the introductory chapter of this book, "a playful affordance is [...] 'virtual' (in the sense of a potentiality) until it is actualized by the playful attitude of the user and experienced as such". Not all *Foursquare* users engage with the service with such an attitude, and for them it might never feel like a game. Due to the fact that these users are aware of the playful affordance of *Foursquare* (they too receive points and badges when checking in), they are not "unaware participants" (Montola 2009, 6), but rather *aware nonparticipants* in play.

The line between being a player and user is, of course, thin. As Deterding et al. point out, it is a boundary that is "empirical, subjective and social: whether you and your friends 'play' or 'use' *Foursquare* depends on your (negotiated) focus, perceptions and enactments", adding that "the addition of one informal rule or shared goal by a group of users may turn a 'merely' 'gamified' application into a 'full' game" (2011, 3). From a frame analysis perspective, however, players and users approach *Foursquare* from a noticeably different frame. As Fine points out, every frame has meanings associated with it, and "these meanings are not necessarily shared with figures (persons, players, characters) operating in other frames" (1983, 187). The regular user's experience of *Foursquare*, for the most part, remains in the primary frame of the real world, which makes them less sensitive to issues which matter for players who are engaged in the game from a ludic frame.

Pervasive cheating

The dual experience of *Foursquare* as a game and as a location-based social app – manifested through the presence or absence of a playful attitude – is usually not thought of as problematic by either players or other users. Players, for instance, benefit from other users' involvement in adding and editing locations to the game when expanding their playground. Conversely, users can see their experience enhanced by players who never miss a check-in anywhere they go, making *Foursquare* feel alive as a social service. The exposure to each other's attitudes and practices mostly remains indirect. Players who cheat, however, do not only potentially break the metaphorical magic circle of other players, they also directly expose non-players to their antics, potentially breaking or at least influencing their user experience as well. Montola states: "[P]ervasive games can take the pleasure of the game to ordinary life" (2009, 21). Cheating in pervasive games, or *pervasive cheating*, can, as I will show below, pull ordinary life into a game – whether non-players want to or not.

As an application heavily dependent on user-generated content and honest behavior when it comes to check-ins, *Foursquare* offers ample opportunity for cheating practices. As a result, cheating practices vary greatly in form and (perceived) severity. Cheating practices are not limited to breaking the boundaries of play that result from the social negotiation processes discussed above. The socially negotiated rules could be called "soft rules". In digital games, however, there are also "hard rules", which are presented through the actual game code (Consalvo 2007, 87). Additionally, everyone using a service like *Foursquare* agrees to obey certain contractual rules put forward in the Terms of Service documents. Cheating in digital games therefore is socio-technical in nature, with the rules and boundaries of play both set and contested at the levels of play, game design, game contracts, and game culture (Kücklich 2008; De Paoli and Kerr 2009; Glas 2010). With pervasive cheating, the act and effect of cheating is further complicated due to the different frames of engrossment through which players and users approach *Foursquare*. While I will forego an effort to categorize cheating practices, I will explore different forms of cheating to show how they affect the various parties involved in creating, playing, and using *Foursquare*, as well as how these parties all have different stakes in pursuing and contesting pervasive cheating.

The stakes of *Foursquare*

All parties with certain interests in a game can be considered stakeholders. In the case of *Foursquare*, these parties include the aforementioned players and users, but also its makers and other companies and businesses associated with the game. Whether their interests are commercial or affective in nature, stakeholders usually strive to achieve what they think is in the game's or their own best interest (cf. Glas 2013). Cheaters are no exception.

While their practices might be deemed deviant or even devious, many of them see their activities as highly pleasurable. They too can be seen as stakeholders. In the following sections, I will seek to describe how *Foursquare*'s stakeholders are affected and subsequently deal with cheating differently, exposing various negotiations between these stakeholders about the rules of play which provide valuable insight in the ways cheating influences the pervasive nature of the play in gamified media.

The players

According to Salen and Zimmerman, there is a hypothetical "standard" and honest game player who plays a game as it was designed to be played. This player type forms the "test case against which all other types of players are contrasted" as he is the most "law-abiding citizen" when it comes to following the (hard) rules (2004, 268-9). The other types they mention (the dedicated player, the unsportsmanlike player, the cheat, and the spoil-sport) all deviate in various ways from the rules of play, by finding ways around them, breaking them, or ignoring them altogether (ibid., 268-9). The standard player, however, is an idealized player, at least from the viewpoint of most game designers. While Salen and Zimmerman rightfully point out that such an ideal player might not exist, the idea itself provides a "backdrop against which less rule-governed styles of play can be understood" (ibid., 269).

And indeed, while most *Foursquare* players would probably consider themselves standard players, many do bend the rules. The idea behind checking in at venues, for instance, is that you only do so when you are actually there. Many players, however, check in beforehand (to show friends they are on their way) and/or retroactively (in case they forgot to check in). One reason is that the app tracks and keeps all your check-in data, making it available on the website for yourself and, if desired, for others. Many players (and regular users) like this list to be as complete as possible. While not complying with the basic check-in rules, these practices are generally considered acceptable behavior, showing that what defines a standard player does not just rely on the way a game is designed, but also on the rules created and negotiated socially. In a blog post on cheating practices, the *Foursquare* design team shows it is well aware of these socially accepted rules: "We're fine with pre-check-ins and post-check-ins [...] (Trust us, we do it too to fill out our history pages!)" (Team Foursquare 2010).

While check-in etiquette might be lenient toward pre- and post-check-in practices, for standard players, honesty about checking in is nevertheless seen as key to the *Foursquare* play experience. According to disgruntled players, the first year after *Foursquare*'s launch in March 2009 saw rampant dishonest check-ins. During this period, it was easy to check in at any location from anywhere. This situation forced *Foursquare* to implement a "cheater code" (discussed below), but also triggered players to vent their dissatisfaction through social media like Twitter and blogs.

The players' ire was particularly provoked by people using dishonest check-ins to become mayor of venues. Becoming mayor through standard play requires consecutive visits to places, and only the person who has visited such places the most is crowned mayor. Places like train stations and coffeehouses are therefore hotspots for *Foursquare* players trying to oust each other as mayor. In terms of time investment, being a mayor of such a hotspot has high value for players and one can imagine the frustration if someone who has never been there suddenly grabs the mayorship.[3] When the stakes are high for players to abide by the rules of play in gamified media, cheating can feel just as destructive as in classic games.

The cheaters

Why players cheat or in other ways deviate from the rules (social and/or coded) is difficult to address. As game scholar Mia Consalvo points out after having conducted countless interviews on why players cheat, "perhaps the only constant is the lack of a constant factor" (2007, 94). In the case of the "I'm on a Boat!" badge, the person responsible might just have wanted the badge without going to the trouble of actually going to a boat. Maybe adding the #boat tag was a joke, as right behind the station area is enough water with enough boats on it. Maybe he or she wanted to annoy (or please) other *Foursquare* users by forcing the badge upon them. Maybe he or she just wanted to show how easy it is to trick the system.

While the reasons behind deviant behavior might differ, an overarching concern among players about cheating in games is that it provides an unfair advantage over those who play by the rules (ibid., 87). In a game like *Foursquare*, which hardly has any quantifiable outcomes which could be deemed a winning scenario, this advantage might sound superfluous. With the exception of deviously achieving a mayorship, which might directly affect players striving for this position the standard way, in most cases cheating in *Foursquare* only affects other players indirectly, lessening the impact of cheating considerably. This suggests cheating in a game like *Foursquare* functions mostly to annoy other players. Some cheaters have, however, invested larger stakes in the way they play – and cheat – the game.

An interesting case to illustrate this point is the phenomenon of Indonesian cheaters. In 2010, many player complaints were heard about this group. These users, whose online profile made it clear they were in fact located in Indonesia, managed to amass almost all badges with thousands of check-ins all over the world. The badges include those tied to very specific locations and/or very specific moments in time. Examples are a badge for having voted on US Mid-term election day, having participated in political comedian Stephen Colbert's "March to Keep Fear Alive" event in Washington DC, or a Banksy Badge which could only be achieved by checking in at select movie theaters playing the Banksy documentary *Exit Through the Gift Shop* and, while being there, mentioning Banksy in a "shoutout" (one of the ways *Foursquare* allows you to alert others of your presence). To achieve their large amount of badges and other rewards they managed to check in from one place to another (including locations in different countries) faster than realistically possible, a deviant practice called "jumping". Many of these Indonesian cheaters were to be found at the top of *Foursquare* user lists.

According to one Indonesian blogger, this trend among Indonesian *Foursquare* users can be seen as a continuation of their use of social network sites as a form of popularity contests, where getting as many friends in their network as possible, through whatever means possible and regardless of whether they actually know these people (mia1984 2010). In her eyes – and those of many other players – these users just don't understand how services like Facebook and *Foursquare* work (i.e. what the rules of play are). However, as cultural anthropologist Michiel de Lange points out in his study of mobile media practices in Indonesia, cultural context is important. "Being able to play with, and subvert pre-programmed rules is considered a valuable asset" in Indonesia due to people having lived under the strict rules of Suharto's regime (2010, 193). It is not only seen as fun, but as a source of prestige among peers. In other words, for these cheaters, the stakes are such that they do not consider their behavior as deviant, but as status-enhancing.

Other users

As indicated, the distinction in *Foursquare* between players and other users, or aware nonparticipants, can be difficult to make. When users are the direct or indirect victim of cheating practices, however, one could argue that the effect is different from players. Cheating for players means that the metaphorical magic circle of play becomes unstable, which transports them back from the playworld to the real world. To use Goffmanian terms (1974), the game is temporally downkeyed from the ludic frame to the primary frame. For a user normally not really concerned with the ludic frame, cheating practices can cause a reverse frame switch, where the game is not downkeyed, but instead reality is upkeyed to a ludic level.

To explain this process of frame switching, I will use the "I'm on a Boat!" anecdote as an example. The fact that Amsterdam Central Station was turned into a boat within *Foursquare*'s venue database confronts users with the ludic frame, shattering the service's supposed link to the real world. Furthermore, the unfair advantage gained by the cheater to get the badge was distributed to both players and users without their consent, making them involuntary and potentially unwilling "accomplices". While I consider myself someone who engages *Foursquare* with a playful attitude – engaging it from a ludic frame – many non-players were also affected by the devious action taking place. When they suddenly got the badge that day during their routine check-in, they were turned into cheaters, an identity which is largely linked to the ludic frame of the game, rather than the primary frame of the real world.

Cheaters therefore do not just focus non-players' attention on various deviant uses of *Foursquare*, but can actually pull aware nonparticipants into reluctant (or willing) participation in play. As frames are shifted as a result of cheating practices, we could therefore say that while cheating may break a game for players, it can simultaneously break reality for all others.

While the argument can be made that a playful attitude is always voluntary and can therefore not be forced upon a user by a cheater, the same cannot be said about his or her identity. Even when people using *Foursquare* consider themselves non-players, their user profile still shows the points, badges, and mayorships they have earned by using the service. If maintaining social network profiles function as a way to write one's (virtual) identity into being (Boyd 2007, 13-5), we could say that if we follow the notion of a ludification of culture, we can argue that maintaining profiles like *Foursquare*'s attributes to what can be considered *playing* one's identity into being. If cheaters mess with these profiles, identity construction and/or proliferation of players and users alike can be at stake.

The designers

The design team behind *Foursquare* is well aware of cheating practices and the grievances it can cause to both players and non-players. They have implemented barriers against practices they deem cheating. At the level of game contract, for instance, they warn users against taking any action, or contributing any content that "you know is false, misleading, untruthful or inaccurate" (from the Terms of Use, Foursquare 2011). These game contracts, which all users agree to when they create their account, allow the design team to block or even cancel accounts. At the technical level there is the aforementioned "cheater code" to prevent location cheating. While *Foursquare*'s design team keep details about their anti-cheating techniques deliberately sketchy, an investigative study shows that it involves using a phone's GPS for location verification, monitoring check-in frequency at single venues, distance between different check-in venues, and rapid-fire check-ins in multiple venues in one location (He et al. 2011).

While the measures mentioned above sound tough, checking in while not actually being physically at a venue remains possible. The catch is that the potential to unlock rewards (mayorships, points, badges) is blocked during false check-ins. Technical loopholes to reach these rewards still exist, as shown by the Indonesian cheaters who mostly check in through mobile web browsers (an option developed as an alternative for users without GPS-enabled phones). While checking in through mobile web browsers does allow users the chance to earn badges and to use many of *Foursquare*'s other social networking functionalities, it does not count check-ins for mayorships. This design prevents users without access to modern smartphone hardware and data plans from becoming mayor but, at the same time, it does not stop those willing to cheat from exploiting the chance to earn badges deviously.[4]

Foursquare's design team makes no secret of balancing issues like these. Commenting on a well-known cheater's blog post, the company's co-founder Dennis Crowley asks:

> What's more valuable – a system in which everyone can play & participate? Or a system that places emphasis on the validity of each check-in/post at the expense of all-inclusiveness? I think the thing that makes foursquare so interesting – and yet so difficult – is that it wants to be both things at the same time. And if you survey users, just as many use it for finding their friends as they do for trying to get points / badges / mayorships (Crowley in a comment on Krazydad 2010).

What these remarks show is that *Foursquare* is designed to appease both players and users existing on different frames of engrossment. Cheaters, on the other hand, constantly raise the stakes for the designers, prompting them to act against them to keep the playful spirit of *Foursquare* alive, while preventing other users from leaving in frustration due to the overly strict check-in system. Keeping both players and other users on board is important as the service's business model depends on it, which brings us to the final stakeholder group discussed in this chapter.

Businesses

As *Foursquare* is a free-to-use service for users, its business model depends on other means of income. Primary sources of income are marketing partnerships, with brands using the service to reach the social media crowd. The *Foursquare* reward system is comparable to loyalty programs like airlines' frequent flyer systems, rewarding repeat customers in a similar fashion (Bogost 2010). Interested parties can tap into this loyalty by offering promotional, brand-unique badges. For venue owners, a free set of tools is available to set up *Specials* for regular customers or mayors. These types of in-game marketing, in which both *Foursquare* and the participating businesses do not have affective but commercial stakes, can be derailed by cheating practices.

Specials are especially sensitive to exploitation. Promoting a *Special*, e.g. free drinks in a bar for the mayor, invites potentially dishonest check-in behavior. This in turn might put off honest players – potential customers for a business. To protect *their* customers against situations like this, in late 2010, *Foursquare* began offering businesses the possibility to oust mayors from their venues if they have reason to believe the mayorship was not gained through legitimate means.[5] Understandable from a commercial perspective, decisions like these make businesses, rather than game makers or players, into arbiters of the rules of play.

While the experience of players and non-player users, as well as the content they generate, matters greatly to the design team, we should not underestimate external business partners, whether they are big brands buying their own badges or small companies using the free *Specials* tool. They are increasingly becoming key stakeholders, forming a source of (potential) revenue and fuelling growth of gamified media like *Foursquare*, but they are also acting as participants in the realm of play. If and how these commercial parties use (and potentially misuse) their agency over the rules of play, is beyond the scope of this chapter, but unquestionably shines new light on how the boundaries of play are negotiated in gamified media and culture.

Conclusion

In their discussion of pervasive games in media culture, game researchers Jaakko Stenros, Markus Montola, and Frans Mäyrä have pointed out that a clear distinction between serious and playful mindsets and contexts is not sufficient to cover all pervasive play forms. They argue that it "omits the constantly growing phenomena of fabrication and pretense, which exist in the gray borders of playfulness" (2009, 271). Both fabrication and pretense result in situations where one party is oblivious of a playful situation while the other is not. This chapter has been an effort to address another such gray area of pervasive games, cheating, where all parties are aware of the presence of a playful situation, but deviant practices challenge the boundaries between play and ordinary life. To be able to do so, I first engaged in a discussion about the status of these boundaries in gamified media and pervasive games, concluding that cheating adds further complexity to the already blurred distinction between play and non-play inherent to these types of games. By exploring various forms of cheating as well as how different stakeholders influence and are influenced by these practices, I have shown that cheating can be much more than just a nuisance. Similarly to fabrication and pretense, where an "asymmetry in information also creates an asymmetry in power and control" (Stenros, Montola, and Mäyrä 2009, 273), cheaters can create situations where another stakeholder's agency over gamified media like *Foursquare* – and, as a consequence, their own identity – is at stake.

Game scholar Julian Kücklich reminds us that the study of cheating "foregrounds the fact that games are embedded into a larger social and cultural context with undeniable links to the world we inhabit" (2008, 69). With the phenomenon of gamification on the rise in our culture, we will most certainly see an increase in the amount and variety of pervasive cheating practices. As such, further research is needed to explore the concept of cheating in relation to the increasingly prominent role of playful identity in our culture.

There are, however, other venues for research that result from the notion of pervasive cheating. Kücklich for instance points out that cheating in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (or MMORPGs) is of special interest:

> as these [games] are novel participatory media forms that are infused with cultural codes from the real world such as the flow of currency and commodities. Insofar as the characters themselves become a commodity in MMORPGs, cheats that address this commodification can be said to possess critical potential (2008, 69).

Like MMORPGs, gamified media such as *Foursquare* are novel participatory media forms also, and here cheating has critical potentials as well. Take, for instance, Bogost's argument that gamification, or "exploitationware" as he prefers to call it, perverts the traditional two-way relationship between institutions and customers. In his view, "organizations ask for loyalty, but they reciprocate that loyalty with shams, counterfeit incentives that neither provide value nor require investment" (2011, 4). From this perspective, we should explore to what extent pervasive cheating practices that highlight the futility of gamification's reward systems have the potential to confront players with this asymmetrical relationship.

The link between cheating and critique is not limited, however, to exposing the business models behind the gamification phenomenon. Players themselves find other creative uses for manipulating the rules of play. I have, for instance, come across a *Foursquare* venue which, translated from Dutch, was named "Hangout for idlers, potential criminals and people who've lost their way" and was tagged with terms like #freeloaders, #homeless, and #dangerous. Additionally, someone used *Foursquare*'s "tips" option (usually reserved for positive feedback about a venue) pointing out how the local government had failed to stop impoverishment of the building in question – as it turned out, an old high school turned squat. Entries like these suggest that bending the rules of a playful platform like *Foursquare* can be used for political activism.

Although it can be argued whether actions like these can still be considered a form of cheating, the link between pervasive cheating and critique is nevertheless intriguing. It again shows that, as a practice pervading the spatial, temporal, and social boundaries of play, pervasive cheating has the potential to affect the real world in unexpected ways.

Notes

1. This chapter was previously published as René Glas. 2013. Breaking Reality: Exploring Pervasive Cheating in Foursquare. *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association Journal*, 1(1). http://todigra.org/index.php/todigra/article/view/4.
2. Some *Foursquare* users do create fictional characters, often meant for humorous purposes. One cheater admitted having created, among others, a fake Martha Stewart checking into dollar stores and pawnshops, a fake Tommy Chong who he made mayor of 120 cannabis clinics and a "random nerd" who likes to check in at large Silicon Valley campuses (Krazydad 2010).
3. As *Foursquare* was one of the first big gamification phenomena in early 2010, the frustration about cheating practices during battles for mayorships even entered pop culture. Popular webcomic *Player vs. Player*, for instance,

dedicated a story arc to it (Kurtz 2010), and it even spawned an online video series called *Foursquare Cops* (Tondorf 2010).

4. This situation has furthermore prompted the design team to implement a system in which players suspected of cheating practices are flagged. When deemed guilty, they will have their accounts blocked from earning any rewards.
5. Additionally, businesses can assign employees and managers for their venues (in effect preventing these users from collecting rewards) and display check-in codes on screens that players need to type in for validation.

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