In Game World, Cheaters Proudly Prosper

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For every video game, there's a Steve Graves.

Graves is a self-described "professional cheater." Today's games are anything but easy, the 24-year-old will tell you. And to get through the intricate, challenging, mind-numbing levels of "City of Heroes" and "The Godfather," two games he's currently stuck on, he needs help.

"I cheat on all the games I play," Graves says proudly.

Here's the ugly, sometimes dirty, often-overlooked truth in games: Everyone cheats. In many instances, cheating is built into the game. It's a multimillion-dollar industry, legally sanctioned. Well, at least most of it.

You can flip through magazines such as Tips & Tricks, which boasts of its "Cheat Code Blowout!" Or buy 150-page strategy guides, the Cliffs Notes of gamers, which last year drew $67 million in sales, according to the NPD Group. Or log on to MyCheats.com, a Wikipedia for the gaming set, the latest in the growing crop of sites that promote cheating in games.

"A thing worth having is a thing worth cheating for," W.C. Fields once said. Never mind Sophocles' approach: "I would prefer even to fail with honor than win by cheating." When it comes to games, all bets are off.

"This is what I tell people all the time, and I'm actually pretty adamant about it: I don't play games to necessarily play the game," Graves says. "I play it for the story line. I play it for the mechanics. I play it for the graphics. I don't want to get stuck coming around the same corner 50 times. I'd rather get past it and see what the next story development is."

Graves is a network engineer by day and a hard-core gamer by night, clocking an average of four hours in front of his PC or his Xbox in his Alexandria home.

Remember "Up, Up, Down, Down, Left, Right, Left, Right, B, A, (Select) Start"? If you grew up playing the shoot-'em-up game "Contra" on your Nintendo Entertainment System, chances are that cheat is forever frozen in your brain. GameFaqs.com, one of the most popular game-cheating sites, recently listed it atop its "top 10 most memorable cheats" in gaming history.

Says Jeff Veasey, an editor at GameFaqs: "I hate to admit it, but cheating is a part of playing games."

But what constitutes cheating? Is cheating less objectionable when you don't have to pay for it? As in,
looking up a code on the Internet, where it's free, versus dropping $16.99 for a copy of the strategy guide for "Madden NFL 2007"? When roaming the online "World of Warcraft," is cheating warranted so long as the only one affected is you? For example, buying weapons on eBay instead of earning them in the game?

Is cheating ever okay?

"It's like lying. We all agree that lying is bad, but we all do it anyway, and there are definitely different degrees in which you should do it. Like lying to hold back a surprise party," says Jason Blake, 23. For tips on "Halo 2," Blake scours the forums on Bungie.net.

You did it from the start, trying to cheat your way in a game. You talked to your friend Freddy and exchanged ways to outsmart "Pac-Man." Years ago, before the PlayStation-Xbox-GameCube generation, games were easier to beat. On "Super Mario Bros. 3," released in 1990, you played the same levels repeatedly until you mastered them.

In "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas," released in 2004, designers created an open-ended, multi-layered gaming experience with more and more levels to explore.

To cheat way back when was to figure out how to keep your character alive and finish the game. To cheat now is to unlock doors and expand the breadth of your game.

"It's not just cheating, really," says Sam Kennedy, the mastermind behind the new MyCheats.com. "It's trying to get more out of the game, kind of like buying a special edition DVD where you get extra stuff."

Kennedy, an editor at 1Up.com, a one-stop site for gamers, was pummeling through the action game "Metal Gear Solid 3" a year ago. As he combed through the game's strategy guide, he realized that he had beaten the game differently than the guide recommended. He wanted to share that knowledge.

On the site, the "M" in MyCheats has horns, as if to say, you're cheating, but go ahead. You can add cheats and edit cheats provided by other users, some of whom provide video tutorials on how to beat games such as "Nintendogs." It's like browsing through the collective intelligence of the gaming brethren.

Neither "The Godfather" nor "City of Heroes" is on MyCheats. Not yet, at least. Though Graves, industrious as he is, has figured out ways to beat the system.

"I'm not sure I should tell you what they are," he says.

Because in the end, all cheating aside, it's every gamer for himself.

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