

# Playing Darkly: Rescuing Cheating in Online Games

**Daniel Nielsen**

Institute for Communication Studies and Journalism  
Faculty of Social Sciences  
Charles University, Smetanovo nábřeží 6, 110 01, Prague, Czech Republic  
[Daniel.Nielsen@fsv.cuni.cz](mailto:Daniel.Nielsen@fsv.cuni.cz)

## Keywords

Video games, Players, Cheating, Economy, Meritocracy

## ABSTRACT

In and outside of online multiplayer games, players frequently invent economic systems to govern and develop play as a part of the final assemblage (Morris, 2003; Paoli & Kerr, 2010; Taylor, 2009). In World of Warcraft, ‘boosting organizations’ have caused increasing moral outrage amongst players for defeating the purpose of a meritocratic environment, instead players purchase player-to-player (P2P) services to circumvent challenging content and retrieve advantageous rewards, which lies conceptually within the understanding of cheating (Consalvo, 2007). I argue that the phenomenon of boosting is a part of a scholarly field on media participatory culture (Carpentier, 2011; Jenkins, 2008) which can be conceptualized as paratextual industries (Consalvo, 2007) that on the one hand are a form of intense participation, while on the other, with its value contribution become a site of power struggles amongst actors involved in media production and reception.

Sometimes scholars have sought to understand divergent play as ‘dark play’ (Mortensen et al., 2015) or ‘counterplay’ (Meades, 2015), but I argue that they fall into the trap of applying normative value to common social evolutionary processes. As Carpentier et al. warns, it “produces the risk to become an objective ally of those voices that favour more centralised power relations” (2019, p. 31). In fact, in January 2022 these boosting organizations were banned with Blizzard Entertainment updating its terms of use prohibiting this type of activity that would otherwise result in termination of users’ personal accounts. This move was primarily a result of a minority of players voicing their frustration about boosting as a practice becoming increasingly visible in the game and its available communication channels, this form of “power gamers” (Taylor, 2006) risk creating prominence for a serious and commercialized play environment. For players who wish to play more “casually” (Juil, 2010) this poses a threat to their perception of a meritocratic system but is arguable a result of exactly this belief (Paul, 2018).

Paradoxically, organized boosting had been largely made possible when Blizzard introduced the wow-token feature. This feature afforded players the option to purchase a token for USD 20 and sell it on the in-game auction house, buyers of these tokens could in turn deplete the token for additional playtime or Blizzard account balance. In other words, more players now have access to more lucrative P2P traded goods and services in-game, meaning otherwise less sellable goods and services became more sellable. In the context of games affording these types of play or ‘power gamers’ (Taylor, 2006), ‘counterplay’, ‘dark play’, or ‘cheating’ is constantly negotiated between players as well as academics, it resides within a gray area when meritocratic

Proceedings of DiGRA 2023

© 2023 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

norms are borderless and spills over into toxicity and identification of “serious” gamers (Paul, 2018). This raise three questions; (1) is ‘boosting’ categorically cheating? (2) what ethical considerations should be made with this distinction? And, (3) why is it significant for the conceptualization of play?

This study seeks to answer these questions through semi-structured interviews of 7 ex-boosting community members, while exploring this concern for divergent play to push the conceptual limits. Taking inspiration from (McCaffrey, 2022), I intend to do this by adopting Carl Menger’s theory of the origins of money (Menger & French, 2016) which he perceives to be emergent unintentionally and largely a result of social processes, where marketability determines the medium of exchange. This perspective I believe will shed new light on participatory paratextual industries in online multiplayer games and challenge the notion of ‘dark play’ as some practices that fall into this term are not deliberate controversial and subversive, but rather a result of a social evolution when one medium of exchange become insufficient for certain less marketable goods.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Carpentier, N. (2011). *Media and participation: A site of ideological-democratic struggle* (1. publ). Intellect.
- Carpentier, N., Melo, A. D., & Ribeiro, F. (2019). Rescuing participation: A critique on the dark participation concept. *Comunicação e Sociedade*, 36, Article 36.
- Consalvo, M. (2007). *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames*. MIT Press.
- Jenkins, H. (2008). *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (Revised edition). NYU Press.
- Juul, J. (2010). A casual revolution: Reinventing video games and their players. *The MIT Press*, 47(12), 47-6689-47-6689. <https://doi.org/10.5860/CHOICE.47-6689>
- McCaffrey, M. (2022). *The Invisible Hand in Virtual Worlds: The Economic Order of Video Games*. Cambridge University Press.
- Meades, A. F. (2015). *Understanding Counterplay in Video Games* (1st edition). Routledge.
- Menger, C., & French, D. E. (2016). *The Origins of Money*. Ludwig von Mises Institute.
- Morris, S. (2003). WADs, Bots and Mods: Multiplayer FPS Games as Co-creative Media. *International Conference: Level Up*, 2, 10.  
<http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/wads-bots-and-mods-multiplayer-fps-games-as-co-creative-media/>
- Mortensen, T. E., Linderth, J., & Brown, A. M. (Eds.). (2015). *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments* (1st edition). Routledge.
- Paoli, S., & Kerr, A. (2010). The Assemblage of Cheating: How to Study Cheating as Imbroglia in MMORPGs. *Undefined*.  
<https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/The-Assemblage-of-Cheating%3A->

How-to-Study-Cheating-Paoli-

Kerr/fcb2c3f7e331f407c7d89651920e4f17cc01ab7f

Paul, C. (2018). The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games: Why Gaming Culture Is the

Worst. In *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games: Why Gaming Culture Is*

*the Worst*. <https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctt2204rbz>

Taylor, T. L. (2006). *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*. MIT

Press.

Taylor, T. L. (2009). *The Assemblage of Play*.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412009343576>