Designing Games for Hardcore Players

by Adam Stangeby

Player Analysis: Hector Linares aka *Always Viral*

Viral is both a typical and exceptional gamer in the online shooter community for Xbox. He fits the traditional description of a "hardcore" gamer, focusing primarily on violent shooters, fighters and sports games while expressing an attitude that to "try hard" is a sad state of affairs for a player who has high skill. Viral is a self-proclaimed "casual" gamer despite having the skill level, game intelligence, intuition for game mechanics and design, and leadership qualities to be a "pro". Aspiring toward the professional tier (MLG or GB) would be deemed "tryhard" and would reduce his "gaming capital" in the "pub" (for public) scene (for gaming capital see, Consalvo). He would become a player overly-concerned with his kill-death ratio and win-loss statistics. This status of the "tryhard" carries the burden of having to employ play styles that put winning and high k/d above all else. Viral's play style is antithetical to the "tryhard" style and he sooner emphasizes teamwork and countering of "tryhard" ("crossing" or "riding") or "scrub" ("camping" or mindless "rushing") play styles.

Viral's playography is far from a rich tapestry of games spanning genres, platforms and generations. His playography is typical of the traditional "hardcore" gamer. He started with Nintendo's Mario games, focusing on racing (Mario Kart) and fighting

(Smash Bros.) games for the Game Cube. At this time, he also had a SNES available and played Mario games and Donkey Kong Country. Viral has never been a PC gamer, but did go to arcades to play fighters such as Mortal Kombat, Streetfighter and Killer Instinct. He had the handheld, Gameboy, and played the first Pokemon games on it. These were the main games from his childhood – games which he could play with his family and which had an element of competitiveness without reliance on representations of gun violence.

In his teenage years, Viral began playing shooters. Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell was his first major foray into shooters, while Halo 2, COD Black Ops and Battlefield established his interest in those respective game franchises. Viral has been dedicated to Microsoft in the game console industry having owned all three generations of Xbox. In recent years, Viral has revived his interest for sports games that began with Madden 2006 and the "Street" sports games series. He has been livestreaming clips from NBA 2K17, but confesses that the clips are for his own reflection and enjoyment, and are not produced to promote himself within the gaming community for those games.

I have played several games with Viral over the years, mostly for the Xbox 360. We have extensively played GTA V and Resident Evil 5 together. Also, I often note the games that Viral plays when he is online but is refusing to be social and join in party chats – Assassin's Creed, L.A. Noire and Need for Speed, stand out in this regard. These games are personal experiences for Viral which makes sense because they are heavily reliant on their campaign modes. Viral's playography reveals that his interests in games are

traditionally masculine, where there is an emphasis on violence (Gears of War or GTA), sports (Madden o6 or NBA 2K17), frenetic pace (Need for Speed or Mortal Kombat) and identification with traditional heroic characters (Assassin's Creed or Halo). Within the tightly-knit family setting to which Viral is a part, the iconic Nintendo games have also been very important.

For the game sessions that I conducted with Viral, we chose two games that were important to the forging of our online relationship – GTA V and Gears of War 2. I determined that the most useful information about play style would be gleaned through playing games where both of us have a nuanced understanding of the game modes, game mechanics and game goals. These are games where we both have freedom to play the style that is most comfortable for us. It is worth noting that playing a new game can be useful for examining play style and preferences, but play will often be focused on defensive tactics and reckless strategies. Conversely, a game that is not of great interest to the player will reveal play styles that exemplify esoteric modes of exploration or methods of disengagement, disavowal and idleness. For this analysis, I was focused on examining Viral's core play style and dominant preferences.

Gears of War 2, was released in 2008 by Epic Games and is a third-person shooter. The narrative of these games situates a humanoid race that has brought about an apocalyptic state planet-wide from having caused the resurgence of a disavowed species from their Manichean evolution. The abuse of the planet by the humanoids roused the

disavowed species (The Locusts) from catacombs beneath the planet's crust. The Locust Horde has declared war on the humanoids and is forcefully reclaiming the planet's surface. The online component of the game features several game modes, but the most populated is Guardian. Guardian involves two teams of five players going head-to-head. Provided that the "leader" of a team remains alive, then the other four players have infinite respawns. Once the leader has been killed, the other four players are down to their last life. This game mode is intense and is enduringly popular (it takes less time to find a match of Guardian on GOW2 than on any of the sequels in the Gears of War series). Gears of War 2, also has unique mechanics (ie. wall-bouncing) and focuses on a cover system. Finally, Gears of War 2 has been of particular interest to me because it has never had dedicated servers for online multiplayer play. This state produces tremendous lag that crafts unique challenges from match to match while there are an array of exploits available to the player from glitching out of the map to invisible glitching to lefty glitching and dummy glitching. These exploits have a profound effect on the gameplay as well as on the cohesiveness of the gaming community. To be an elite player of Gears of War 2 would seem to say a lot about an individual's ability to adapt, their keen intuition and their determination in the face of adversity.

We chose Gears of War 2 as an online, multiplayer experience and then selected GTA V for its "Heist" mode, which although online and multiplayer is focused on a team of players battling NPC forces as well as the hazards of the open world environment. For the interview, I decided on a specific structure for the Gears of War 2 play session that

was based around the maps that are available for the players to choose before the match starts. There are ten maps in the original release of the game and there are three which are chosen disproportionately over others (Security, Blood Drive and Jacinto). My goal was to play at least one match with Viral for every map, looking for the tell-tale signs of his play style and then questioning him about his preferences as we played.

On Blood Drive, Viral will always "rush" down to the neutral area of the map where the Torque Bow (power weapon) is located. He will even do this as leader, which other players might see as reckless or cocky. Viral explains that he is interested in using "skilled" weapons such as the Torque Bow because he feels there is still a learning curve with those weapons through less frequent use overall. He also claims that strategically, he has found that the team which controls the neutral area of maps usually controls the match often leading to victory and overall success. I can't argue with his reasoning, but it is interesting to consider the dichotomy between rushing a neutral zone, potentially exposing oneself to crossfire or double-teaming, but executed in order to attain a long-range weapon. Viral is cautious with the Torque Bow and tends to not rush players with it in an attempt to "tag" them with a dart (torque bow ammunition) at close range. Viral will take risks, but his play style is not about "tanking" (ie. constantly being exposed through aggressive confrontation of opponents).

Viral will never vote for the Jacinto map and will be verbal with his teammates coaxing them to vote the alternative map even if it isn't very desirable overall. Viral claims

that there is "too much power" on Jacinto and that it is a "milk map". The "power" references the placement of the overpowered Hammer of Dawn on the map, every other round. The two spawn points on the map are traps based on the location of grenades which determines where the leader will be holed-up and protected. It is easy to be "spawn trapped" on Jacinto in such a way that the opponent will have high ground advantage, a long range power weapon to dispose of you and a lot of time to do so (the map "River" operates similarly). Usually, Viral is the player to go hard at the power weapons and control them, but in this case the layout of the map for Guardian mode on Jacinto is particularly debilitating if you don't control the power weapons. Viral's map preference indicates that his disengagement with the game is related to a sense of powerlessness and futility. I can't disagree for I am a player notorious for quitting over much less pronounced forms of exploitation and domination.

On Security, I noticed Viral using the "invisible glitch" exploit. What this means is that through a specific process of particular steps a player can become invisible to other players on the map. When "invisible" one can attack other players and get kills. I can perform this exploit and it has a unique set of challenges for targeting opponents (hit boxes don't respond in the standard way based on where your player actually is on the map). The opponent can find your character on the map and kill them as where you are to the opponent is fixed and you are a sitting duck. Viral confessed that he explores the invisible glitch because not every map provides the opportunity (he mentioned Pavillion as another map well-suited to the exploit and this recalls his reasons for using the Torque

Bow as an attempt at total game mastery). When asked why he chose to employ the exploit for the specific match we were in, he declared that he will use it when the opponents are playing the map "bitch style". What he means by this, is that the opponents will play overly-defensive with one player sticking to leader the whole round and the other three opponents being in an area called "button", where they lefty-glitch around walls (hiding with vantage) and use crossfire to overwhelm players that have to cover a decent amount of area to get close to the button. Viral professes that he doesn't like performing exploits, but "doesn't care enough about the game anymore". I believe that this attitude speaks volumes of Consalvo's concept of gaming capital. For Viral, "camping" lowers your gaming capital so significantly that his use of an exploit doesn't mark an appreciable reduction of his own gaming capital and is therefore worth implementing into his game style (ie. surplus of capital).

The map "Hail" is known as the easiest map to glitch out of (and it is true!) Viral claims that he only glitches out of the map on Hail if he is leader and "bored". Viral's play style and preferences with respect to use of exploits almost seems to indicate that "exploitation" is a relative misnomer. The exploitation for Viral is almost a form of disengagement depending on the circumstances of how other players are playing the match. On "Ruins", Viral will virtually never be on the bridge (which makes up a significant portion of the map). He explains that "people usually go there, so I don't need to go there. But I will adjust. If the team can't handle, I'll switch up to bridge". Viral is interested in first-order goals and his play style reflects this. He pushes hard for power

weapons because they increase his k/d ratio and reduce that of his opponents. He endorses preventative measures for the aggressiveness of opponents (on Security he was upset with me for having failed to throw a grenade when the opponents were pushing our leader) which puts a primacy on winning a match of Guardian. He is prudent, but will still take risks in order to control the pace of the match and reveal to his opponents that he does not fear their style of play. He makes adjustments readily for his opponent's play styles and this largely determines his own play style.

Overall, Viral has an aggressive play style in Gears of War and GTA games. He looks for an opening and pushes his opponents to make mistakes. I would compare his play style in games to that of the Runningback in American football (I have also played with leaders in the game that have play styles more like Quarterbacks or Linebackers). Viral will use exploits to maintain control over the play of the match overall. In this respect, I would say that Viral employs a rock-paper-scissors mentality to how he faces opponents. Viral promotes teamwork, but if a "random" teammate is playing carelessly or selfishly, Viral will announce to those he is familiar with that they don't help that random player when that player is downed. He won't endorse anything malicious such as stealing kills from that player even if that player was playing in such a way.

Viral claims to be self-taught in Gears of War 2. He learned wall-bouncing, lefty glitching and other techniques through direct observation. Other exploits he claims that he had to figure out on his own because they were improperly explained to him by other

players. He was reluctant to admit that he required the knowledge of other players to become the dominant player in the game that he is today. For the GTA V play session, we focused on playing through the Heists and their sub-missions. Viral has a play style against NPCs that is quite similar to how he approaches real players. Viral is aggressive but anticipates elements of the programming code, such as pathing and targeting. He pushes hard with openings and then strafes and rolls to evade taking damage once targeted or in the path of the NPC. His play style reveals intuitive play keyed-in on the underlying nature of the technology and mechanics of the game.

Over the years, the most unique element of Viral's play style which he demonstrates in all of the shooters that I have played with him is something I have dubbed "retrograde" style. Retrograde style involves moving forward quickly in a set direction creating a sense that this movement will continue, but then implementing a pause of movement and slight backward, off-kilter strafe (or off-kilter backward roll). This style allows for maintaining a line of sight and steadiness while also moving unpredictably. I have tried using this play style to moderate success, but understand its effectiveness in shooting games with both NPCs and real players. The style itself uses the pause for introspective moments that can reveal aspects of NPC pathing and targeting as well as identifying tendencies or habits of movement and choice for real player opponents. It is a play style geared for intuitive, introspective players and Viral exemplifies this through his liberal use of the style.

Hector Linares aka "Always Viral" –

Technique: Roving (ie. trying out all aspects and elements of the game for mastery)

Tactic: Retrograde (ie. introspective pausing and backward movement)

Strategy: Reactive (ie. aggro assessment of opponents and then logical countering)

Design Response Prototype: Cheat or Elite

When considering a game design that would be well-adapted to Hector Linares (aka "Always Viral") as a gamer, I had to determine the elements that constitute "hardcore" gamer preferences and play styles in shooters, more generally. The first task was to pick a platform for the game and although I have some experience with Construct 2 and Unity, I decided to focus on my scriptwriting interests and passion for narrative. Twine 2.0 (Harlowe) was the platform of choice for my game and the goal was to produce an interactive narrative experience which captured the flow of playing online shooters, especially the third-person shooter, Gears of War 2.

I began by breaking down how a round of Gears is played with respect to play style and preferences. I relied on game culture vernacular and selected measures that would constitute ranges for preferences. For example, I devised that to be a "cheater" is on the end of a spectrum with being "elite" at the other end. The cheater's reputation of being a high-achiever in the game is unearned, whereas the elite player has earned their status as a high-achiever. There were four additional measures: tryhard vs. legit, exploit vs. skill, camper vs. tank, trash vs. beast. The "tryhard" is a player who performs cheap moves in

order to attain impressive statistics (such as kill/death ratio or win percentage); the "legit" player is one who will not sully their reputation with cheap moves even when they are available to use. The "exploiter" is one who uses tools available to all players in the game that provide an unfair advantage when they cannot be countered or when the opponent is unaware that they are being used; the "skilled" player is one who chooses to not use exploits and maintains an even playing field for competition. The "camper" is a player who will actively evade combat or close combat in order to survive; the "tank" is a player who will run into action at every opportunity. A player is "trash" when they show a lack of know-how in the game or perform in a way that is similar to players that lack know-how; a "beast" is a player who has a bullish desire to meet all challenges head-on and who has a full array of honed skills to draw upon when competing.

The final variable which I used to gauge preference and play style was "leadership". I did not create a range for leadership as the interactive narrative would have had a marked alienating tone if I chose to insult players by identifying them as "cowards" or "sad sacks" through their decision-making choices. There were a few other notable variables that I felt were necessary to standardize the game experience: win, loss, kills, downs, deaths. Finally, I added a "prize" for one particular ending in the game, where the player chooses to expose and denounce the cheating in the game. However, there is only one route to that option.

For most passage choices in the game, the player is awarded points for different "preferences" or choices. To create genuine ethical ambiguity, it was important to combine desirable and undesirable preferences for individual choices. For example, to

decide to throw a grenade into a contested area may lead to "camper" points which would be seen as negative by most hardcore gamers, but it would also lead to being awarded skill points and leader points for taking the best possible action to get kills and protect squadmates. Another example is when exploits are chosen – the player is awarded exploit points (negative) but also elite points (positive) for properly executing a move that most players cannot pull off.

The interpretation of positive or negative for the variables (preferences) is likely contestable. I consider myself to be a "camper" and am often accused of this and it is referred to by some players as a "trash" play style, but my camping habits protect leaders and win matches, not to mention allowing me to get kills on opponents who rush without their squad as back-up. Then again, I am elite at Gears of War 2 and have the skill and knowledge to beast through a map, while rushing opponents aggressively. My play style varies tremendously based on personal mood, who I am playing with and who I am playing against, how long I have been playing and external distractions. I have noted that Kern , Viral and others have a more narrow range of play style and their preferences have the quality of being dominant compared to me as a more "even" player in that respect.

The story for my game uses some characters familiar to Viral. I wrote myself (Lobo) and our clanmate, Kern, into the story as allies for the playable character. I also wrote in two of the opponents as players that Viral is familiar with and who we do not hold a lot of respect for in the game - Hero and Veeate (codenames closely associated to actual gamertags). I wouldn't consider these markers of familiarity as poor game design, but they do add the potential for the game to be played with a degree of confirmation

bias by Viral, in particular. This is why I designed the game's choices for determining the player's preferences through a wide array of variables. I was also interested in testing Viral's own confessions that he isn't thrown off by who his opponents are and his play style is simply a counter to the opponent's own.

The game design has a small set of pre-match options, an extensive first round of play and then a second round. Throughout the first round there are options to "rage quit". The purpose of the rage quit choice was to gauge whether Viral is impacted as a gamer by opponents using exploits or cheating. The first round has two possible overall outcomes – winning or losing the round. The second round begins with the option to "cheat" and there are three possible ways to cheat: weapons mods, glitching-out and feedback tampering or network lag. There is also the option to not cheat. Even once choosing a method of cheating there is always a second chance to not employ the cheat. I decided to increase point awarding for the second round and there is a large ten-point award to the "cheat" category if a cheat is selected (even if not yet used in the match). There are two overall outcomes for the second round of play – being known as a cheater or being known as an elite player. Hence, the name of the game: Cheat or Elite.

I provided Viral with a full range of options to test whether he would vary his play style and preferences from what I noted in my player study game sessions with him. Viral admitted to cheating when his opponents were playing in a "trash" manner. Viral also demonstrated that he favours "beast" and "tank" play style whereby he rushes neutral zones for power weapons and then rushes enemy leaders to win rounds quickly. Viral considers himself a legit and elite player in the game. Worth mentioning, is that I have

written the code for the game and determined which actions correspond with which preferences and therefore I expected that my long-time clanmate would enjoy playing the game for possible shared philosophies on the value of particular actions in video game shooters. The game is one which I would like to have many of my Gears of War 2 colleagues play. My structuralist schema for preferences was guided by Richard Bartle's work and at the end of the Cheat or Elite, the player can calculate their "Gaming Capital" which is my liberal appropriation of Mia Consalvo's work. The rhetoric of the narrative certainly demonstrates my confirmation bias – I do not believe in cheating for online shooters and condemn their use. The Gears of War 2 community is a willful bunch bent on transgressive play, so I don't anticipate my ethical standards would necessarily shake any of them from their foundational values that then determine choices of action, preferences and play style.

Cheat or Elite online: http://www.philome.la/theLowBrowsing/cheat-or-elite-video-game-shooter-style

CHEAT OR ELITE (Twine Game): Post-Mortem

A few weeks ago, I bit the bullet and dropped a considerable amount of personal savings on the purchase of a new generation of video game consoles - Microsoft's Xbox One. I have been dedicated to Microsoft's Xbox line for all three generations of its existence, primarily because I prefer the haptic experience through the controller's design to that of Xbox's competitors. When the Xbox 360 released in 2005, I was seduced by the trailers for Epic Games's Gears of War which portrayed an exhilarating gaming experience set in a post-apocalyptic fantasy world. One night in 2006, an old high school friend invited me to a party where I was a total stranger. The living room was packed around the television set and a group of gamers were playing Gears of War. I felt it would be slightly conspicuous to be a noob player in a crowd at the party, so I refrained from asking for a

turn, however, I was indeed sold on getting my own Xbox 360 to enjoy the first-hand experience of playing Gears of War.

I have remained dedicated to Xbox in large part because Gears of War games are exclusive to Microsoft among the limited array of competitive video game consoles. Gears of War 2 released in 2008 and I was playing online a year later through the Xbox Live service. Over a period of a year, I added the maximum number of friends to my Xbox gamertag account (100 "friends") and joined a Gears of War clan. In 2010, I was ready to take a break from gaming and get focused on returning to university, however, before walking away from Gears, I met a young gamer, Hector Linares who I knew online as "Viral". We started an online friendship that became fulfilling and trustworthy enough that two years ago when taking a driving trip to the United States, I made my first stop in northern Virginia to meet Hector in person. It was a unique and mostly uncanny experience to convert a virtual friendship into a real one. Hector and I remain friends and last night we finished-off a week-long mission to complete the Gears of War 4 campaign on the hardest "insane" difficulty. The experience was fun, challenging and honed our skills for the online competitive experience.

I designed a game for Hector to play, but also considered making the game in such a way that it would appeal to Gears of War gamers, fans of shooter games and perhaps even gamers in general. For the purposes of completing the pipelines in the production process on my own, it was important to design away from my weaknesses – mainly, hard coding in C-based programming language, and creation of animation assets or 3D models. Instead, I focused on my strengths, which I consider to be my writing and storytelling abilities. As such, I chose Twine 2.0 as a platform and worked on crafting a fluid interactive narrative game experience that would emulate the experience of playing Gears of War 2. The following items constitute a post-mortem for that project which at its completion provided me with a working game entitled, "Cheat or Elite".

What Went Right?

1. The Platform

Using Twine was a sound choice for the Cheat or Elite game for several reasons. After knowing Hector for close to a decade, I have come to realize that he is an intelligent young man capable of enjoying a text-based game. I didn't believe that he would disengage from the game experience because of the emphasis on reading through options. In addition, Twine 2.0 is a simple platform to learn at a level where one can then complete a proper game. There are some options to incorporate visuals and audio, although there are also serious limitations to their implementation. The branching

options craft a flowchart that is easy to manipulate, track and piece together through the Twine user interface. The UI simplicity and orderliness helped ensure that the game had no logical errors.

2. The Variables

Twine allows for variables to be created for the game and then tracked. The player can find out how they are progressing and the developer can compile results to discern patterns and improve gameplay. For Cheat or Elite, I thought carefully about the plurality of play styles and preferences when playing Gears of War games. I determined roughly a dozen relevant variables that would give an impression of a player's preference and overall play style. Fortunately, the variables plotted well onto specific spectra. For example, a player could favour defensive "camping" or offensive "tanking" and they could choose to cheat or choose to play as an "elite" in the game. I provided most choices for the player with a variety of rewards along these spectra. The choice to throw grenades into the neutral zone may reward a player with "camping" points for being a defensive tactic, but also reward the player with "skill" points or "leader" points for acting quickly, proactively and in the interest of squadmates. The ambiguity of "good" or "bad" choices through the variables brought an authenticity to the Cheat or Elite game experience whereby a player would quickly learn that choices have a variety of consequences. This variety also provided a nuanced set of results for the players' scorecard at the end of the game – something that could be well-served by established methods of statistics analysis.

These nuances in data-crunching allow Cheat or Elite to show that many players shift among playstyles and have a variety of preferences in their gaming. What I conjecture through testing the game on Hector as well as my other clanmate, Jose, is that playstyles are mostly characterized as either dominantly reactive or proactive. Proactive playstyle in video game shooters is one where a player is relatively unaffected by the actions of opponents and teammates – their strategy and tactics are employed during the game in a fixed manner. I have initially concluded that these types of players are less likely to become elites in a game and more likely to cheat while overall having a limitation of preferences (ie. they will be campers and rarely if ever, tanks, and vice-versa) – they will plot themselves rather statically at one of the extreme ends of the spectra. Reactive playstyle in video game shooters is a playstyle that is dynamic and rife with adaptation. Reactive playstyle allows a player to have a variety of preferences that they shift through depending on the action of opponents and the flow of the game experience.

I find these early conclusions very important to my overall interest in the topic of cheating and video games. If I can follow the thread back to a significant discursive skein, then I may be able to propose how the dominant playstyles of "proactive" and "reactive" determine the types of communities that a game will develop, as well as, the modes of meaning-production within that game community. I would like to suggest that "schizophrenic" modes of meaning-production operate for the proactive playstyle and not the reactive playstyle. This is a tentative proposal for the semiotics of video gaming. Gears

of War is a game that would be particularly well-suited to a closer examination because of its massive emphasis on cheating and exploits. If proactive playstyles lead to schizophrenic modes of meaning-production and thus cause game communities to form irrational value systems, then perhaps there is a pedagogical method for teaching video game players to adopt the reactive playstyle as a dominant one. This could only become liberating for the players who would then experience playing games with a style that opens up the plurality of preferences that can be expressed.

Finally, at some level, I am interested in how the video game industry may be actively exploiting proactive players to produce "whales" in the current economic model of gaming. If a proactive player is one that has a limitation of preferences, does this encourage them to spend money on "mastery" of in-game elements that satisfy those preferences? Do reactive players with their plurality of preferences become more insulated from this exploitation by virtue of having too many interests to realistically satisfy them all through the "extras" of a game? For example, if a proactive player fancies themselves as a "camper" and is always in the back-row corner-sniping, then are they more prone to spending money on owning all the "gear" that goes with being a recognized or renowned sniper in the game? If a reactive player's camping is but one preference, then are they less interested in spending money to have all the trimmings for the sniper class in the game? These are the sorts of questions I would be interested in exploring as they have come up through Cheat or Elite and my experience of playing the game with Hector and Jose.

3. Richard Bartle

Bartle's work on playstyles and preferences in MUDs is an interesting structuralist examination of how gamers game and why gamers game the way they do. I believe that my game, Cheat or Elite, is guided by Bartle's structuralist schema and that this lends credence to my game as a textual object in game studies while allowing me to explore some deeper questions which reflect on the work of one of the founding figures in game studies.

What Went Wrong?

1. Visual and Audio Limitations

My knowledge of html and css is rudimentary, making my ability to maximize the robustness of Twine as a platform impossible. I would need several months (if not years) to dedicate myself to the acquisition of the kind of knowledge of html and css that would allow me to produce a truly impressive Twine game - that didn't happen for Cheat or Elite. I did find a way to render some visuals components into the game, but am still

unclear as to whether they enhance legibility or detract from it. Through online tutorials, I was able to do some rudimentary manipulation of the css style sheet in order to have a unique looking font and a background image that I created to use for the game. I also embedded several Youtube audio-based videos on specific pages of the game in order to create dramatic effect. Unfortunately, Youtube disallows many videos from embedding because of copyright content. I was using the Harlowe version of Twine 2.0, but if I had learned the other version (SugarCube) then it would have been possible to embed an audio track that played throughout the game.

2. Exploits and Cheats

Gears of War is a game that divides its campaign into "acts" and "chapters". For Cheat or Elite, I followed this model and started with a first chapter that focused on exploits as opposed to cheating. That chapter was extremely detailed and provided dozens of options. For the next chapter, I focused on introducing the option to cheat, however, the game was so long by this point that I feared Hector would lose interest in playing. I made the second chapter shorter and compensated by having an increase in points for the choices of the player. I do not believe that this was ideal as the increased points skew the points systems from the first chapter. In the end, I resolved that the first chapter was the equivalent of regular play and the second chapter was a "boss" level.

3. Confirmation Bias

I have found that cheating ruins the gaming experience for Gears of War games. Exploits are annoying, but available to all players to learn and use. In that respect, an exploit is something that a player has to become aware of as part of regular gameplay. However, cheating destroys the competition in Gears of War because cheating is not disclosed, nor available to all players. Gears of War 2 players can use malicious feedback cheats to create lag for other players and they can use mods for their weapons. A player that lacks skill can have dominant statistics in the game through cheating. A situation occurs in Gears of War 2 where I will require 6-8 shots from my gun to kill an opponent that is lagging me and that player only needs one shot. Similarly, a player using a weapon mod can down me with half the number of shots that I require. There is no "positives" to cheating in Gears of War 2 because for me to get an "even footing" would require me to spend hundreds to thousands of dollars. In addition, theoretically, if all players cheated then the competition would not be about gameplay and skill in the game anymore but would be about the power of the malicious software and network hacking. The "best" players would be the ones who know best how to DoS attack other IPs on the network. If VPNs were protecting all players, then there is the additional issue of exposing some players by including them in a network realm that may be subject to serious monitoring and surveillance by government agencies (that is to say that it is my personal belief that VPNs mark a network as suspect by DARPA).

Due to my strong prejudice against cheating in online multiplayer shooter games, I crafted Cheat or Elite with options that reveal that cheating and exploits are punished as user choices. As a result, I believe that players of my game will be less likely to freely choose cheating options. I have proscribed through the narrative's rhetoric that cheating is frowned upon by the developer. However, this was consistent with my gaming experience with Hector. Hector does not play with cheaters in Gears of War 2 and we mock their desperation, lack of scruples and arrogance in attempts to attain an unfair advantage over other players who have paid good money to play the game and do not seek to spend considerably more to remain "competitive". In that respect, my condemnation of cheating in Cheat or Elite is appropriate as a game designed specifically for Hector to play. There would have to be alterations to the game if it were to appeal to a wider range of players.

Playtesting

When I completed the game, I uploaded it to the online service, Philomela, which supports Twine games. I sent the link to Hector and Jose, asking that they play through the game. They quickly sent me a screenshot of their results which I am attaching to this document. I realized that despite my full array of variables, that there still wasn't enough information to understand what choices the players were making while playing.

I asked Hector to play through the game with me where I noted his choices for each option. It is unclear how much he made the same choices for the second run given that I didn't ask him to go with different options than the first time. What is clear is that Hector refused to use exploits or cheats even though I have seen him use some of the exploits when playing Gears of War games. This indicated to me that my rhetoric in the narrative wasn't neutral enough. Hector was playing the game knowing that I was the developer and to some degree his choices were made to satisfy what he knew were my values. In the end, Hector's choices made it so that his kill-death ratio was quite low with a low kill count overall. That is not consistent with his style of play overall.

Hector favoured the choices that I rewarded with "skill" points and his final score reflected that he chose the skilled options each time. This wasn't surprising given that Hector is a very skilled player of games. Hector also made choices that were consistent with his Gears of War play style – aggressively reactive. Hector rushed power weapons and went after the enemy leader. He didn't favour defensive strategies and he didn't put squadmates ahead of himself. Overall, Hector's playstyle of Cheat or Elite was very similar to his playstyle of Gears of War. Jose was the other player who tried the game and his playstyle was also similar to Gears of War in that he was aggressively reactive but favoured choices that would get him higher k/d than a skill rating. For me, it was interesting to note that Hector crafts his reputation as a player through skill rather than statistics believing that the high skill will eventually guarantee better stats. I have found this while playing Gears of War 4 with him recently. It took some time for Hector to settle

into the online gameplay, but through focusing on skills, he is now learning how to maximize his performance in the game and excel – in turn, this has led to his stats improving rapidly.

Cheat or Elite has been a success so far, and I hope to have more players try it over time.