
Chapter VI

Virtual Harms and Real Responsibility*

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ABSTRACT

In traditional communities, some actions are widely regarded as bad and unethical. But in online “communities,” the virtual analog of those actions may not be regarded with the same clarity. Since “virtual” behaviors are distinct from ordinary acts, they require further analysis to determine whether they are right or wrong. In this chapter we consider an incident on the Internet that illustrates this confusion. The incident centered on a virtual act of sexual violence. This “rape in cyberspace,” reported by Julian Dibbell in 1993, has generated questions about the significance of behaviors in virtual reality environments. We use the case to explore the moral nature of actions in virtual environments, emphasizing the themes of harm and responsibility. We then offer some tentative lessons to be learned and, finally, apply the lessons to virtual sex and to first-person shooter computer games.

INTRODUCTION

As people spend more of their time online, it becomes increasingly important to better understand the relationships between people that meet only (or most frequently) in cyberspace. In our traditional communities, some actions are widely regarded as bad or unethical. But in online “communities,” the virtual analog of those actions may not be regarded with the same clarity. Since “virtual” behaviors are distinct from ordinary acts, they require further analysis to determine whether they are right or wrong. In this chapter we consider a relatively early incident on the Internet that illustrates this confusion. The incident centered on a virtual act of sexual violence by a sordid character called Bungle.

The incidence of a “rape in cyberspace” reported by Julian Dibbell in 1993 has generated a good deal of attention and a good many questions about the significance of virtual behavior in virtual reality environments. In this chapter we use the rape in cyberspace case as a focus for exploring the moral nature of actions and interactions in virtual environments. We emphasize, in particular, the themes of harm and responsibility. We conclude with some tentative lessons to be learned from the case and then we extend the analysis to virtual sex and to first-person shooter computer games.

BACKGROUND: THE BUNGLE AFFAIR

It happened in the living room in LambdaMOO. LambdaMOO is a multi-user dimension (MUD) object oriented program, a complex database maintained inside Xerox Corporation in Palo Alto and open to public access via the Internet. The program allows users to create and design the interaction space and context; a user can describe his or her own character any way they like, and can build new objects, including rooms and furniture. While users interact with one another as the characters that they have created, they see a stream of dialogues and stage descriptions.

One night a character, Bungle, entered LambdaMOO. Bungle had designed a subprogram, Voodoo doll, which could attribute actions to other characters. Using the Voodoo doll subprogram, Bungle took control of two other characters Legba (we capitalize this for clarity, although Dibbell used “legba”) and Starsinger, and manipulated these characters to appear to engage in sadistic and sexually explicit actions. These actions were understood to constitute (and we refer to them as) rape. Legba and Starsinger were helpless throughout the entire incident. The episode ended when another character, Zippy, used a subprogram to freeze Bungle’s commands.

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