

Chapter 12

Crime in Virtual Worlds: Should Victims Feel Distressed?

ABSTRACT

The final type of cybercrime to be considered involves crimes that occur in online virtual worlds. While there is considerable literature available on other cybercrimes, as outlined in the previous chapters of this book, relatively little academic literature has been published concerning crime in online virtual worlds (Wall & Williams, 2007). Nevertheless, several cases have come to light concerning specific crimes in these environments, including both property offences (such as theft) and crimes against the person (such as sexual assault). It should be noted that while the term 'crime' will be used in this chapter to describe these events, they may not necessarily be illegal or criminal events, at least so far as the offline world would consider them to be. This chapter aims to describe these types of virtual crimes, and to determine if they could and should be considered criminal events. The effects of the crimes on the victims will also be considered, and the necessity for policing virtual worlds will be discussed. In addition, the online community needs to consider how to deal with virtual offenders – if their offence has real-world consequences, should they be punished offline, or only in the virtual world?

BACKGROUND

A virtual world, for the purposes of this chapter, refers to any computer generated representation of three-dimensional space. This does not necessarily mean that the world includes graphics – early vir-

tual worlds such as LambdaMoo were text-based, but the text used described a three-dimensional world. For example, upon entering LambdaMoo as a guest, you are greeted with the following description of your surroundings.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61350-350-8.ch012

The closet is a dark, cramped space. It appears to be very crowded in here; you keep bumping into what feels like coats, boots, and other people (apparently sleeping). One useful thing that you've discovered in your bumbling about is a metal doorknob set at waist level into what might be a door.

Most modern virtual worlds provide computer generated graphics in order for the user to more easily visualise their surroundings. Different virtual worlds have different functions. Some are socially based, such as 'Second Life' (www.secondlife.com, created by Linden Labs), where users are encouraged to interact with others and to develop their avatar and virtual property, but where there is no overall aim to the world. Second life has become so popular that there have been several published accounts of virtual lives within the world (see for example Guest, 2007 and Meadows, 2008). While Second Life targets adults, other social virtual worlds are aimed at children and adolescents, such as 'Habbo Hotel' (www.habbo.com) and Disney's 'Club Penguin' (www.clubpenguin.com).

Other virtual worlds are more goal-oriented, similar to traditional computer games. Probably the most famous of these is 'World of Warcraft' (or WoW, www.worldofwarcraft.com), a virtual world created by Blizzard Entertainment. World of Warcraft is a fantastical world, where users can choose to be either human, or one of many forms of mythological beings, each with various skills and weaknesses. There are various levels of gameplay in WoW, which players progress through, and new levels are added regularly to keep user interest high. Similarly, in 'The Legend of Mir 3' players can choose to be warriors, wizards, or other mythical beings, and gameplay is again largely directed by the completion of quests. The now defunct 'Matrix Online' was a mission oriented game based on the series of Matrix films, while 'EVE Online' (www.eveonline.com) is a science-fiction based virtual world. EVE Online is a particularly interesting world from the perspective of virtual

crime, as it openly acknowledges the existence of criminal activities between players in the world (Verone, n.d.) and informs players that the games developer and publisher (CCP games) will not intervene in cases of virtual theft (Evelopedia, n.d.)

Many of these virtual worlds are also termed Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (or MMORPGs), referring to the fact that there can be hundreds or thousands of people playing these games online at a given time, and that each player takes on a 'role' or a character. In some games, such as World of Warcraft and EVE Online, players can form teams and collaborations in order to achieve goals. These collaborations can be fairly permanent in nature (such as the 'guilds' in World of Warcraft), or may be temporary in order to obtain a specific goal, after which the users disband.

Within this chapter, attention will be paid to two principal types of crime in virtual worlds – property crime and crimes against the person. Property crime refers to crimes such as larceny, burglary and theft, which normally do not involve violence or significant interaction between the offender and the victim. Crimes against the person, for the purposes of this chapter, involve any crime where there is significant interaction between the offender and victim, such as sexual assault, homicide and violence. Again, it should be noted that in this chapter these terms will be used where the event may be simply a simulation of an offline offence, without actually being a criminal event capable of prosecution in any offline court. As such while terms like 'offender' and 'criminal' will be used throughout, these are utilised in order to easily label the perpetrator of the virtual 'crime', rather than to indicate that they are offline offenders or have committed any actual infringements against offline laws of any country. Indeed, as outlined in the case of EVE Online above, in some cases these actions may be considered part of normal gameplay, and while not actively encouraged, they may not be subject to specific penalty either.

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