

Chapter 70

Legal and Ethical Aspects of Teaching in Selected Social Virtual Worlds: A Review of the Literature

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ABSTRACT

Topics discussed in this chapter include Generations Y and Z and their acceptance of virtual reality, the increase in the number of virtual worlds, gaming virtual worlds, and the social virtual worlds for educators selected for inclusion in this discussion. Open source virtual world platform portability issues are discussed in connection with the acquisition, development, and control of virtual property. The line between “play spaces” and real life is discussed in terms of the application of the “magic circle” test to teaching in virtual worlds with a real-money based virtual currency system, as well as how faculty can reduce student legal and ethical problems. Virtual world law is examined in light of the terms of service (TOS) and end-user license agreements (EULAs), the concept of virtual property, community standards/behavioral guidelines, safety/privacy statements, intellectual property and copyright. Ethical aspects of teaching in virtual worlds include a definition and analysis of griefing/abuse, harassment, false identity, and ways that each world handles these problems. Whyville, SmallWorlds, and Second Life are examined in terms of legal and ethical aspects. Research findings and legal and ethical teaching guidelines are presented for those teaching courses using virtual worlds, with special considerations for teaching in Second Life. These topics are for informational purposes, only. Instructors should seek competent legal counsel.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-2136-7.ch070

THE NETWORKED “iGENERATION” AND VIRTUAL WORLDS

The term “Generation Y” is used to describe those born between 1980-1994 who have grown up using Information Communication Technology (McCrindle, 2006), and “digital natives” is a term describing the recent generations whose development is characterized by immersion in digital media and communications technology (Prensky, 2001, Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). “Generation Z” youth, or the “iGeneration” (Rosen, 2010), are networked and connected. The “i” stands for everything being individualized and customized for them. They were born after the mid-90’s and are connected as a group. They take the internet for granted, and accept social networking and collaboration as norms. This group requires new pedagogical approaches that employ technology as routinely as they do. One of these technologies is virtual worlds. “The virtual world is utterly real to millions of young people and... it will prove an immensely powerful influence on every aspect of life and work.” (Employee Factor, 2009).

Shen and Eder (2009) found through their research that, if used appropriately for the course and task, “virtual worlds have the potential to provide a rich, engaging, collaborative, and enjoyable learning environment for students.” Constructivism (Talab & Botterbusch, 2009), constructionism (Dreher, Reiners, Dreher, & Dreher, 2009), learner-centered teaching and action learning (Wagner & Ip, 2009) pedagogies are well suited to teaching and exploring in virtual worlds.

Increase in Virtual Worlds

According to KZero, a United Kingdom-based consulting company, there were 175 virtual worlds in 2010, either in existence or in beta version (Keegan, 2010). Virtual worlds are being explored for military, civilian, and government inter-agency initiatives, such as by the Information Resource Management College of the National Defense Uni-

versity, which created the Federal Consortium for Virtual Worlds to work among and within federal agencies in 2007 (“Growth Forecasts”, 2009b). “Virtual worlds” is an inclusive term, and there are various definitions, beginning with Biocca & Levy’s first extensive book on virtual reality in 1995. Terms include immersive virtual environments (Blascovich, Loomis, Beall, Swinth, Hoyt, & Bailenson, 2002; Harris, Bailenson, Nielsen & Yee, 2009), synthetic worlds (Castranova, 2005) and virtual worlds (Arakj & Lang, 2008; Duranske, 2008; Virtual Worlds Review, 2009). Duranske (2009) states that the most common elements are visual computer-based simulation environments that are designed for users to interact with each other through avatars (digital (graphical) representations of people), and allow communication between users through various means.

Virtual worlds are volatile. Not all of them are designed for long-term use, and some do not get enough user support to be able to continue to function. Disney’s Virtual Magic Kingdom had 15,000 players that chatted daily from ages 8-14. When it was closed in 2008, it was the subject of a user campaign to save it, and television and newspaper stories (“Thousands Protest”, 2008). Eleven thousand people signed a petition to get Disney to reconsider its closing. When it was closed members had no personal information on those with whom they chatted, so these relationships were lost.

Virtual World Types

Virtual worlds vary by type, purpose, use, and age group (“Artesia Whitepaper”, 2008). There are special interest worlds, such as Kaneva (entertainment), and vSide (music). Other worlds include branded or toys/games worlds, which are based on commercially sold toys and games, such as for Barbie Girls and Webkinz. Mirror worlds have the ability to revisit events and places from the past, and include Wazzamba and Amazing Worlds. Amazing Worlds, a mirror world, uses 3D

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