Ethical harm in virtual communities

Bastiaan Vanacker and Don Heider
Loyola University Chicago, USA

Abstract
This article analyzes under which conditions ethical relevant avatar harm occurs in virtual worlds. The authors argue that this is most likely to occur when there are some norms of acceptable behavior in a virtual world and when players see avatars as constitutive to their identity. Other than online environments characterized by a 'caveat emptor' approach, Second Life is governed by certain norms of acceptable behavior. While Second Life inhabitants do not see a need for an additional code of ethics for their community, they do have notions of wrong and right behavior. However what exactly constitutes norm violating behavior and ethically relevant avatar harm is often times contested, as the example of online reactions to an avatar upskirt gallery in Second Life illustrate. Players who see their avatars as extensions of themselves are more at risk of ethical harm when a norm violation occurs than players for whom their avatar constitutes an entity distinct from the self.

Keywords
avatar, digital culture, digital ethics, ethics, griefing, harm, Second Life, upskirt gallery, virtual rape, virtual worlds

Introduction

In this article we will explore the ideas surrounding avatar harm, ethics and virtual worlds. Our specific research site is Second Life, a 3D virtual world created and operated by Linden Lab. However, our discussion also encompasses ideas that can be applied to any virtual world. The creation of these online virtual realms has given birth to a new place where people can meet and interact and engage in novel forms of social relationships based on communication among avatars. As these new worlds allow for social and cultural innovation, they also raise new ethical questions. It is important for the further development of these virtual worlds that ethics keep pace

Corresponding author:
Bastiaan Vanacker, Loyola University Chicago, School of Communication Building, 51 E. Pearson, Chicago, IL 60611, USA
Email: vana0047@umn.edu

with these innovations and do not get lost in the sense of excitement and spirit of experimentation that often surround these spaces.

At its most basic, ethics is the examination of what humans ought to do. Some ethical principles carry over from the real world to a world made up of pixels, others do not. In the real world we cannot kill, in certain virtual worlds this is acceptable. However, we do not argue that a different ethic needs to be developed for virtual worlds. Instead, we propose a traditional approach focusing on harm, and analyzing the conditions that need to be met in order to have ethically relevant avatar harm in virtual communities. As virtual worlds become sites for social and cultural innovation, it is important to consider if and how ethical harm can be prevented.

Avatar harm

Do computer-generated avatars ever have moral standing entitling them to moral consideration? Can avatars be harmed in an ethically relevant way, that is to say, can their legitimate interests be set back? (Plaisance, 2008: 111). Of course, avatars are representations and are not human. However, their ontological status as non-humans should not a-priori exclude them from all moral consideration. Ethicists such as Peter Singer (1975) have argued for non-human entities such as animals to be given moral consideration while the environmentalist movement have argued that the environment should be given moral standing independent of its worth for humans. Can and should avatars be included in the realm of entities worthy of moral consideration, and under what circumstances should this be the case?

Julian Dibbell's (1998) captivating account of avatar violence in 'A Rape in Cyberspace' provides some valuable insights on this issue. In his famous article, Dibbell describes an event that took place in March of 1993 in LambdaMOO,[1] a text-based virtual community he was a member of. The 'rape' occurred when one character, Mr Bungle, used a 'voodoo doll', a sub program that enabled him to attribute 'actions to other characters that their users did not actually write'. Mr Bungle, or more precisely, the person behind the keyboard whose LambdaMOO character was Mr Bungle, used this voodoo doll to make it appear as if other avatars were engaged in very graphic and extreme sexual acts with him. After Mr Bungle had been booted from the room, he continued to direct the action and forced avatars to have sex with each other or to engage in otherwise sexually degrading actions.

Dibbell's primary focus is on the community's reaction to this transgression of its norms, ultimately leading to the deletion (toading) of Mr Bungle's account, but he also addresses the issue of avatar harm: were the people whose avatars were subjected to Mr Bungle's treatment harmed in an ethically meaningful way? The woman behind one of the victimized characters confided to Dibbell that when she made a plea to the rest of the community that his account be toaded, 'post-traumatic tears were streaming down her face'. Somehow, the 'real' Seattle woman felt affected in a direct and personal way by the actions that took place in a virtual world.

For an ethical analysis of harm perpetuated in digital worlds, we cannot abstract from the people who are interacting in them. Even though scholars such as DJ Gunkel (2007: 120–153) have suggested an inclusion of machines into the realm of ethical consideration, we argue here that it is necessary to consider an avatar's connection to a 'real' human being. For the purpose of this article, when referring to an avatar, we only refer to avatars created and directly controlled by a human. Naturally, the fact that a human being in some way identifies with an avatar does not automatically mean that harming an avatar implies that one also harms the person behind this avatar in an ethically relevant way. For this to happen, more conditions need to be met.

Moral choice and the presence of norms

Mr Bungle would never have been able to wreak his havoc without the help of the notorious voodoo doll sub program. As described by Dibbell, the voodoo doll sub-program allowed users to appropriate others users' voice and actions. Dibbell's account implies that the voodoo doll was not an unknown sub program, since one of the victims acknowledged on a forum that '[m]ostly voodoo dolls are amusing. And mostly I tend to think that restrictive measures around here cause more trouble than they prevent'. Apparently, appropriating someone else's character through the voodoo doll sub program was deemed acceptable as long as it was amusing. When someone used the voodoo doll in a way that violated this acceptable use, community members reacted with a mix of shock and outrage.

In 2011, these reactions seem naive. The potential for abuse of the voodoo doll sub program was obvious; therefore, why the surprise when someone, under the veil of anonymity provided by an avatar, used the program in a malicious way? Should that not have been expected? Should we not assume, especially online, that any *potential* for abuse will lead to *actual* abuse? Members of the LambdaMOO community, it seems, did not have this caveat emptor approach to online communities and shared a trust that no such abuse would occur.

This makes Mr Bungle's transgression more severe as it was enabled by the very norm of trust that he set out to destroy. The LambdaMOO community could very well have been developed so no voodoo dolls existed, but these architectural restraints would have made it a more strictly regulated place with a narrower possible scope of interactions, experimentation and innovation.

Since the very purpose of LambdaMOO is to provide its players with a wide fantasy world and ample freedom within which to create narratives, these kinds of restrictions could be considered to be antithetical to the very purpose of the community. In this sense, loosely governed communities, relying on self-restraint and self-policing rather than on built-in limitations on behavior and policing by administrators are more significant from an ethical perspective as they leave the possibility for unethical behavior open. Coincidentally, these kinds of communities are more likely to generate cultural innovation by making possible new forms of social relationships.

Online communities – or their architects – can protect themselves against norm violators by reducing freedom of choice in online environments. Sicart, drawing on Lessigg's *Code*, argues that:

> [i]n computer games, code upholds the rules, and creates the virtual environment. When a player experiences a game, an architecture determined by the code (rules and design) is created, and its foundations depend on the ethical values embedded in the code. Code creates a virtual world and the rules by which the player(s) engage in a ludic activity. (Sicart, 2005: 4)

Virtual worlds and games in which the code greatly reduces the freedom of the players are less likely to enable unethical behavior. It is hard to act unethically while, for example, playing Pong. Ethical decision making, after all, implies choice. The more opportunity is allowed to players to act with a certain degree of freedom and moral autonomy, the more these virtual worlds become platforms for moral agents and ethical decision making, and consequently, for harm.

Dibbell's article leaves little doubt that Mr Bungle had violated some well-established norms of respect, civility and trust in the LambdaMOO community. But what if Mr Bungle claims that what he did was just in-game experimenting, innocent playful behavior that did not really harm anyone? After all, all that really happened was that certain words describing certain actions briefly appeared on a number of computer screens scattered around the globe. What is the harm in acting out and experimenting with one's dark side in a virtual world?

Logical as this explanation may sound, the type of behavior displayed by Mr Bungle clearly violated agreed-upon norms. While there was no consensus on the punishment that should be doled out to Mr Bungle, according to Dibbell's account, there was no discussion that what he had done was wrong according to the norms and values of the community. While there certainly were (and are) online communities where flaming and anti-social behavior are *de rigueur*, this particular community was not one of them. Mr Bungle was not new to the community and thus must have been aware of the prevailing norms, which he chose to violate.

Powers (2003: 196) argues that the presence of such well-established norms is a condition to attach moral relevance to harm perpetuated on avatars; 'that the moral boundaries set for the controllers by the practices of the virtual communities lay out the basis for a moral judgment'. Powers then uses this criterion to ethically distinguish virtual worlds from role playing games, arguing that role playing games fit within the libertarian philosophy of the internet where one is free to come and go, where one enters upon one's own risk (such as unmoderated discussion boards), and where one can only blame oneself for being harmed when exposed to behavior that is abusive or insulting. This 'caveat emptor' attitude assumes that behavior in many online communities is governed by the lowest common denominator and members of these communities are (or should be) aware of this reality. Ultimately, in these communities, if there are norms governing behavior, nobody seems to be all that invested in them. Because their community had accepted and established certain norms of behavior through praxis, Powers (2003:196) argues that the LambdaMOO members were 'right in condemning, in a moral realist fashion, the acts of Bungle's controller'.

How does this apply to Second Life? Are there certain norms and values that are generally accepted? In order to understand this better, we asked residents of Second Life whether they thought a code of ethics was needed, as this question was likely to elicit open-ended answers on the presence of norms in Second Life. We posed the question online in the forums section of the Second Life website where residents commonly discuss and comment on different ideas and issues that occur within the virtual world (Second Life forums, n.d.). After we posted the question, 45 people responded using their avatars' names over a two week period. As one might imagine, there was a wide range of opinion and not every comment was directly on point. However, after analyzing the responses three specific findings emerged that provide us with some valuable insights regarding the moral universe as perceived by the inhabitants of Second Life.

Second Life, similar to other virtual worlds and online games, has a fairly extensive written set of Terms of Service (or TOS) that residents agree to when entering the world. In addition, there is a set of community standards that set a minimum standard for behavior in Second Life. Both the TOS and Community Standards discuss behavior to an extent, though neither mention ethics explicitly. A common sentiment was that because of the TOS and the community standards, a code of ethics was not needed. Resident Venus Petrov put it this way: 'SL needs no code of ethics. Residents are required to abide by TOS, other guidelines, etc. This is surely enough.' In other words, the players perceived that these TOS and community standards were all that were required in terms of codified rules of behavior. They seemed to fear that more rules would lead to less freedom. Second Life has been successful in striking a balance between providing an environment in which the most egregious forms of misconduct could be dealt with while still maintaining a sufficient degree of freedom for players to make their own decisions.

Similar sentiments expressing a desire for freedom were shared by many players, including Ishtara Rithschild: 'If anything, there are too many guidelines, a lot of which exist for no rational reason. We've long reached the point where we need more creative freedom again, not less.' Once you enter Second Life, residents are free to choose what they would like to do. In other words,

unlike a massive multiplayer online game, there is no goal to achieve, there is no overarching narrative in Second Life. In fact, residents create most of the content. The design and architecture of the virtual world was set up to give residents the ability to make choices and create whatever they wanted, as long as they did not violate TOS or the community standards. This freedom to make (moral) choices is valued by its inhabitants. So, not surprisingly, many residents felt as if this also meant no code of ethics was needed: 'The short answer is No. Our world, our imagination' wrote Clarence Storm. Others were not sure what the point to such a code would be, such as Austin Falodir: 'I don't see what purpose a code of ethics would serve. Those who need it the most would surely not abide by it.'

It was especially the responses that equated a code of ethics with a set of laws that rejected a code of ethics on principle and practical grounds. Itazura Radio wrote: 'I think whether or not you have a code is irrelevant since there is no way to enforce the code. If there are no consequences to an action, there is no incentive to comply. If no one complies, what is the point?' This idea of enforcement was not uncommon in the discussion, Jolene Benoir wanted to know: 'How would anyone *enforce* ethics here? It'd be near impossible.' Both of these comments draw a parallel between a code of ethics and a set of laws or regulations, including having a system of enforcement. As Clarence Storm stated: 'Who the hell wants the ethics police!' A code of ethics to these residents implied a group in charge who might have power over residents: 'Personally I do not want anymore intervention into my Second Life by any governing body!' wrote Magnus Nieuport.

Residents also reported that they believe ethics is a personal, individualistic decision: 'Ethics, yes of course. A code, no. We are each of us our own Ethics Committee' wrote Dillon Levenque. Dillon's comments reflected those of other residents, who felt that a code of ethics was superfluous because people will behave how they behave despite any such written code. Sponge Moorlord wrote: 'Ethics is a very personal thing, with each person having their own code. Some have none, some are very adherent to a strict personal code of conduct.'

Throughout the discussion on the forums people did acknowledge that unethical behavior did occur within Second Life. But they also indicated that they felt a code of ethics would not likely change these incidents, nor did they think that anything else could. Audra Siemens put it this way: 'Everyone has their own code of ethics that they live by – their own rules that they accept for behavior – due to culture, location, upbringing or whatnot.' These expressions of extreme ethical relativism were few and far between, and most players seem to accept a certain level of unethical practices happening in Second Life. Cierra Anatine said she felt that 'A code of ethics will not change people that are unethical to begin with. That is a trait you bring into SL when you join. Liars and cheaters will always lie and cheat.'

These answers indicate that Second Life inhabitants do believe that moral norms exist within Second Life, but that they are not fixed and immutable and that not everyone abides by them. They acknowledge that not everyone follows accepted norms of behavior and seem to accept this as part of (second) life, rather than risk losing the freedom to create and interact through a restrictive code. However, the answers do not reflect a caveat emptor approach or extreme moral relativism, but a belief that a codified ethical system is antithetical to the spirit of freedom that governs Second Life.

Identity involvement and avatar attachment

Another criterion to award moral significance to avatars suggested by Powers is the strength of the character-controller identification. If a player is only loosely invested in a character or avatar, then it is unlikely that a negative action taken towards that avatar will bring about any morally

significant harm. At the same time, we cannot attach moral significance to every kind of avatar attachment because attachment by itself is not a sufficient condition to qualify a relationship as morally significant. Wolfendale (2007: 115) argues in this context that attachment is morally significant only if it is constitutive to someone's identity or if it is somehow part of that person's personal history or narrative and well-being. Attachment to family, ideals, ethnic group, religion, friends, college and so on can all be labeled morally significant for this reason. But this excludes attachment to imaginary objects or fictional characters, according to Wolfendale (2007: 116).

For Wolfendale, avatar attachment falls into the category of morally significant attachment because:

> its attachment is expressive of self-identity and is a means of communicating with others – communication that takes place in a setting of shared values and expectations – we cannot dismiss it as morally insignificant without being forced to dismiss as equally insignificant normally acceptable forms of attachment, such as attachment to people, possessions, and communities. (Wolfendale 2007: 117)

Attachment to an avatar then, becomes more morally significant if the avatar is constitutive to someone's identity. While avatars may not be an exact replica of players' offline personalities, avatars, especially those that have been developed over a long period of time will reflect at least some aspects of a person's identity.

The relationship between the real-life self and virtual self has been the topic of much debate. According to Boellstorff (2008: 218–224), two notions are prevalent in the Second Life community regarding this connection. The first one sees the virtual character as totally disconnected from the real-life identity. These residents lead a double life that does not overlap with their actual life. It allows them to define their roles in absolute freedom and to inhabit a world of total inhibition, disconnected from their real-life selves. One could argue that it is psychologically impossible to have a virtual character that is totally separate from one's real-life identity, as a virtual character's actions will always necessarily be a reflection of one's real-life character. Since humans control avatars, every avatar action somehow is connected to something someone thinks or does. This may be true from a psychological point of view, but if a player detaches him- or herself from a virtual character, this character is not constitutive to his identity any more than a role defines the identity of the actor playing that role.

For example, when playing a role-playing game, the challenge is to identify oneself with the character one plays without breaking character. This is a challenge because the character one impersonates is considered to have a life story and identity different from the player's. While Second Life has its share of role-playing communities, 'Second Life was not predominantly a role-playing environment' and role playing became less prevalent as residents did what they do best; being themselves (Boellstorff, 2008: 119). Generally, while there are many role-playing communities in Second Life, people do not take on the role of trolls, magicians or aliens in order to fulfill a quest.

The second notion that is prevalent in Second Life regarding the real self-virtual self relationship sees one's 'real' personality and identity reflected in one's virtual self. In turn, features of one's virtual self can then become represented in one's real self. This cross fertilization can lead to a better sense of self.

> Against views of online technology as inevitably alienating, virtual worlds can provide contexts for self-fashioning-techne in its most basic sense. Some Second Life residents spoke of their virtual-world self as 'closer to' their 'real' self than their actual world self. (Boellstorff, 2008: 121–222)

Boellstorff gives the example of people who are shy and through their interactions in Second Life become more outgoing in real life (2008: 121). We argue that this second category of players identified by Boellstorff (those who see the relationship between virtual world and actual world selves as one of interpenetration and mutual constitution as opposed to those players who do not see any relationship between real world self and Second Life self) needs to be further refined.

Firstly, players can see Second Life as a place to fine tune their social skills in order to be more successful and efficient in real life. For example, shy people can learn how to interact with other people and pick up skills they then can use in real-life settings. Boellstorff mentions examples of people who started conversations in real life that they would have not have engaged if it were not for the skills they picked up in Second Life. Yet, if this is the case, if Second Life is nothing more than a laboratory where people 'train', in order to function better in real life, then the value of Second Life relationships is only instrumental and not intrinsic.

If one were to claim that one engages in an online romantic relationship only to better understand and improve one's real-life marriage, then the value of this relationship is totally dependent on how successful the online relationship is in attaining this goal. In this perspective, online relationships' and virtual communities' value is measured by how they improve and contribute to real-life relationships and communities. The value of these types of relationships and the avatar attachment that they encompass is only measured in terms of how it helps a player's real-life persona.

But Second Life relationships can also be constitutive to one's identity and be intrinsically worthy to players, and not merely because they are instrumental to one's real life. People do engage in relationships in Second Life in which their avatar is not totally disconnected from their identity *and* whose value is not derived from the fact that they are helpful to their real life relationships. For example, people might find that at certain stages in their life, their social networks are too homogenous and limited to a small circle of trusted friends, colleagues, family and neighbors. These relationships might not be adequate for a person to develop all aspects of his or her identity. In the same vein, people who are limited in their social interactions because of a handicap might find the opportunities offered by Second Life enriching. Or, frustrated with their real-life sex lives, people might engage in sexual relationships in Second Life. These interactions then have intrinsic worth. They are interactions that contribute to one's sense of self by relating in meaningful ways to other people who derive the same meaning from those relationships. These relations and the community setting in which they are fostered, and the avatar attachment on which they are based, are intrinsically valuable and not in any ethically meaningful way different from real-life relationships.

Naturally, for many Second Life inhabitants, the relationship avatar–player can take many shapes, and in certain instances and interactions one can have a more detached relationship while at other times relationships might be more constitutive to one's identity. This interplay between different degrees of avatar attachment will not be further developed here, but suffice it to say that this is not something that distinguishes Second Life from real life; in some of our interactions we play a role while other interactions are more closely linked to our sense of self.

Norm violations in Second Life

Because of the relative anonymity (or pseudonimity) they provide, the lack of accountability they require and their relative isolation from other communities, virtual communities often do not produce the kind of norm following that real-life communities generate. People belonging to virtual communities can protect themselves and their members from people who do not care about

their norms by accepting the fact that they may encounter norm violators. They develop a certain level of acceptance for this reality and come up with strategies to deal with norm violators. Naturally, there can be many ways to deal with norm violators. Boellstorff points out how laughing at or ignoring (by muting them) 'griefers' in Second Life can be an effective response to this kind of behavior (2008: 195–196). In other instances, virtual communities or their administrators can collectively decide to delete accounts of members who do not behave according to community norms. Such a heavy-handed approach may be effective, but it also reduces the degree of freedom (see earlier in this article) and individual ethical autonomy allowed to residents. The more administrators and moderators become responsible for monitoring deviant behavior, the more ethical responsibility is shifted away from the community. When assessing an alleged harmful action perpetuated against an avatar, we need to assess this action in the context not only of the existing norms, but also in light of existing strategies to deal with harm within this virtual community.

While a 'caveat emptor' regime by no means reigns in Second Life, players have come to accept the fact that certain people, just like in real life, find pleasure and satisfaction in breaking norms or harassing other people. Second Life has private places where players control who can enter, so they get a reprieve from so-called griefers. However, when wandering in the public spaces of Second Life, griefers can strike at any moment. Boellstorff (2008: 187) describes griefing as occurrences '[w]hen residents acted to disrupt the experience of others'. He points out that there does not seem to be agreement in the community about what exactly constituted griefing, but drawing on other research, proposes a three-part definition describing grief as an intentional act that the perpetuator enjoys and that causes the victim to enjoy the virtual world less (2008: 188). However, griefing does not necessarily constitute avatar harm, as most griefing tends to amount to nothing more than mild annoyance.

Boellstorff cites a number of examples of griefing in Second Life: people erecting buildings or constructions in order to irritate their neighbors and then charge them money to tear the constructions down and restore their view, players trying to rob or otherwise extort from other players, harass them, shooting them so far into the stratosphere that they would have to reboot their system (2008: 192). In most instances of griefing, the 'victim' can get away from the griefers by muting them or react with indifference or humor to the griefers' actions. In cases where griefing gets to be more serious, a player can report him or her to the administrators. Players seem to be willing to deal with a certain level of griefing rather than having a very restrictive regime in place. Therefore, most so-called griefing, while certainly annoying, does not really amount to real meaningful harm.

Case study: The upskirt gallery

However, once in a while, an instance of griefing can take place that challenges these traditional notions of what constitutes harm in Second Life. If such an issue is novel, it is unlikely that fixed coping mechanisms are in place. This was the case in 2004 when a Second Life resident, Taco Rubio, created a building in which a screen showed images of so-called upskirt pictures he had taken of other users using the 'Alt-cam'. He was ultimately suspended for three days for violating the TOC/CS standards because the images were deemed offensive, but more important for the purposes of this article is the debate this action sparked on the Second Life discussion forum (Second Life forum archive, n.d.).

Analyzing the debate, and the ethical principles they appeal to, serves as a good example of the role of avatar attachment and community norms in the ethical reasoning of Second Life

inhabitants. The online debate on the upskirt gallery mainly centered around two issues: (1) whether or not taking and displaying virtual upskirt pictures was a violation of Second Life norms and (2) whether or not players and avatars are closely enough associated that one could speak of a real harm in this case.

Issue 1: Is taking and displaying these pictures a violation of Second Life norms?

Players debated whether or not what Taco did amounted to a violation of rules and norms in Second Life. While no one seemed to deny that in real life Taco's behavior would be morally reprehensible, some argued that real-life morality cannot be applied to a virtual world. Others argued that there are certain universal norms that are valid in every social context and that Taco had violated these. 'RL rules do not apply to virtual worlds!'

Some inhabitants felt very strongly that what Taco had done simply did not amount to a wrong. They did not deny that significant wrongs can occur in Second Life, but argued that Second Life has its own morality and that transferring real-life morality to the Second Life context did not make sense in this instance. Taco Rubio, the person who had screened the images wrote:

> Honestly, I still don't see any logical argument against this whatsoever. If the Lindens want to take away cameras and also disable screenshots, they can; if they want to make panties and vaginas not visible, they can do that too (now i'm wondering if they'll outlaw skirts on the teen grid . . .) but I don't think it's any more an invasion of privacy than taking a picture of a wooden block somebody made. It's an object, I'm using SL tools to take a picture of it, and then I'm displaying it. What's the part I'm missing?

This argument relies on the ethical responsibility of the Lindens to not make available tools in Second Life that can lead to unethical behavior. In doing so, the player sidesteps ethical responsibility and ignores the fact that it is exactly the availability of tools and resources that make unethical behavior possible, that invites the player to act as an autonomous ethical agent. Most posters arguing that the images did not constitute a violation of Second Life norms somehow relied on this ethics-follows-technology argument: 'In SL you can take pictures of whatever you want, whenever you want. If it's in the world, it's fair game, panties or no panties. I'm certainly not gonna ask if I can take a photo ANYWHERE in SL . . . it's a freely available tool and I'm gonna use it when and where I see fit.'

Real life and Second Life present different physical environments, which generate different ethical landscapes, the posters seem to say:

> I think the line between RL and SL is becoming just a tad bit too blurred. In RL, if someone was going around displaying 'upskirt' photos of people without their permission, I'd agree that would certainly be sexual harassment. In RL, it would take a fair amount of effort and trouble to obtain such photos however. A person would pretty much have to stand under a ladder with a camera and wait until someone wearing a skirt came along and obligingly climbed it . . . In SL, it's extremely simple to obtain such photos. Anyone can get an 'upskirt' view at any time just by using 'Alt' camera view . . . Therefore, I don't see how those sorts of photos can be considered any different than, say, RL photos used in newspapers that show random people doing every day things like walking down the street or shopping in a mall . . . I just think this is one of those cases where RL rules cannot be applied. It simply does not make any sense.

Other players challenged this double morality and claimed that regardless of the question of whether virtual upskirts present the same invasion of privacy as RL upskirt photographs, Taco had broken a social convention. The argument of those supporting this view centered on the fact that no

consent was obtained before displaying the images: 'My only issue was the non-consent and refusal to inform the subjects ... One simple IM to the subjects could add legitimacy to this project, but he refuses.'

Proponents of this viewpoint tended to see moral standards as universal, that do not change because the physical environment changes:

> It doesn't matter whether we, as a group, think that pixilated avatars are real, or have as many rights as a real person. As has been said, if it were RL, this would be illegal. As has been said, the Lindens are against this. As has been said, if the subject of the photograph HAS NOT given her consent, then it's wrong.

One poster made a thought-provoking analogy, equating what Taco did with making a racist statement. Regardless of whether or not someone is really harmed, he argued, certain kinds of actions are always wrong:

> Ok I've been referred to in game as a 'Sand Nigger' (due to the arabic nature of my AV) I am however a white (ok maybe slightly swarthy) Half Russian-Australian. Now although I'm not affected by it – for the obvious reasons – I do find it distasteful ... but the real question is: Is the person saying it free and clear because he's only addressing a 'virtual' arab? Or is [it] still just as hateful and distasteful as it would be if I WERE an Arab? Or, perhaps, does it make it even MORE ignorant and distasteful because they can't contain their hatred to even a virtual representation? And to correlate – does it make this any less disrespectful because it's virtual? Where is the cutoff point? At what point does the criteria change?

This argument marks a shift from a consequentialist ethics to a virtue ethics, that is to say, that even if no one is harmed by these actions, they display a lack of character by the actor.

Other posts also strongly argued for a universal ethic that prescribes standards of decent behavior to Second Life as well as to real life. Rejecting a double morality, this poster argues that the mere context or technology of a social interaction should not govern the standards of decent behavior:

> I feel that people should be treated with respect and erring towards high standards of behavior until I get to know them and know what they're comfortable with ... In SL I do not, in any way, feel that being in a virtual world entitles me to treat other people's avatars with any less respect than I would treat them in person ... no more than I'd feel that talking on the phone carried a lower standard of behavior than talking in person. I don't verbally assault people on the phone just because I can and because the other person is being represented by sound waves from a paper cone instead of directly from their vocal chords.

Another poster echoed the technology-driven rejection of a double morality:

> If I called you on the telephone and called you a douchebag, then by your own logic I could argue that I was calling your 'telephone persona' a douchebag. It just doesn't hold water, no matter how controversial you want to be.

Issue 2: Did real harm occur?

The debate regarding the applicability of real-life norms to Second Life revealed that some saw Second Life as sufficiently different from real life so that real-life norms did not apply to Second Life, while others did not think that these differences were significant enough to justify Taco's

behavior. Ultimately, this was a debate revolving around the nature of Second Life, and the values that are in place in this community. The debate about whether or not real harm occurred by Taco's actions got more heated however, as it struck a more personal cord; it revealed how people saw their relationship to their avatar, and the importance of this relationship to the construction of their identity. Some players argued that since Second Life deals with pixels on a screen, no harm can occur. Others argued that while the pixels are only pixels, the emotions and relationships they represent are all too real.

Quite a few posters argued that there simply were no victims here, and therefore no ethical transgression had occurred: 'Are we really supposed to get upset over some kinkster who likes to look at digital representations of pretend panties? There's no ''there'' there. There's nothing to be violated or taken advantage of.' Not surprisingly, comments of this nature implied that people who condemned Taco's behavior had developed an unhealthy relationship with this game:

> And I thought I got too involved with SL. Jeez people. Taco didn't climb under your desk in RL and take pics of your top-secret panties and vaginas. He took some up the skirt pics of AVs representing females in public areas of SL. Damn ... take some deep breaths and smile. I mean really. Get a grip! As much as some of us would wish otherwise, they are pixels and those panties and vaginas were created by other SL residents.

Another person stressed the triviality of his online relationships: 'I have a good handful of very close personal friends. I don't NEED a half-assed internet relationship or friendship. I don't need to settle for that.' Another poster was even more blunt: 'Firstly, I've always felt that people that get emotionally invested in SL or any other video game DO indeed have emotional problems, whether on the surface they appear well adjusted or not.'

Others showed more sensitivity, but still expressed surprise that people connect so closely with their avatar that they would feel harmed by this:

> The way I view my AV is like putting on a coat, which one should I wear today. So yes – it surprised me that people personified the AV in and of it's self ... But – 'I' am not Rose Karuna. Rose Karuna is a virtual representation of 'me'. No more, no less. I doubt that I am the only person in all of SL that thinks this way because more than one person has said they really did not understand all the hostility that Taco seems to have invoked ... I just could not fathom how a picture of a virtual vagina in a virtual gallery could evoke the reaction that it did ... I still am disconnected from my AV enough that I do not personally share the outrage.

Another commenter pointed out the irony of considering an avatar created with the help of a commercial enterprise as an expression of one's self:

> The fact that so many of you are so emotionally invested in things that can disappear in the flash of a bankruptcy filing is simultaneously pathetic and hilarious. If your SL avatar is truly an extension of your *self*, then you have allowed a part of your soul to be owned and controlled by some company and you are paying them for the privilege.

In summary, players who consented that no real harm occurred also tended to downplay their attachment to their avatar.

A great number of players rejected the arguments that avatars are nothing more than pixels on a screen and in a variety of ways, claimed moral standing for their avatars:

> Yes we're playing with dolls . . . and that's exactly why it matters. Our Avatars have genders, wear normal clothing, and some of them have real genitals. We're playing a sexual game. Saying that just because it's a game and doing something that's blatantly aggressive and intrusive to one of the most private areas of our psyche means ignoring why some of us are attracted to this kind of game. It's social and sexual interaction, and part of that is behavior and boundaries. This is an abuse of all that!

Another player argued that his or her privacy rights should be extended to his or her avatar.

> Actually I think my right to privacy extends to my entire Avie. You take pictures of me, use them in an ad for your store, or photoshop them in a way I find offensive and I'm going to be mad. I have a *greater* expectation of privacy when we're talking about what's under my clothes. An expectation that's supported by the very nature of a world with up and down, day and night and people shaped people who wear skirt shaped skirts. So yeah . . . I guess we disagree. I really hope LL also disagrees.

Some of the more interesting arguments were ontological in nature, challenging the notion that what happened in Second Life somehow is not 'real' because it is computer mediated:

> The money we use here has real life currency value and is traded, as is land. The friendships we make are real. The relationships we develop are real. The items we create, sell and buy have RL value by virtue of the value of the L$. Why then would the pixellated manifestions of ourselves not be afforded the same RL characteristics?

Another poster reacted to the notion that because Second Life is created by a commercial company that could disappear all of a sudden, it somehow is morally irrelevant:

> Thanks for coming in and making fun of what I value and choose to invest in emotionally! . . . Gee, in RL the things I value could also disappear in a flash of a freak accident or sudden bankruptcy . . . so . . . maybe I shouldn't have any friends or family or care about my job!

Posters made the argument that the relationships developed in Second Life are real and have meaning:

> I truly LOVE my friends in SL. Because I work from SL I spend a great deal of time with them. They're like co-workers to me, and anyone who thinks Launa, Torrid, or myself are half-assed, hasn't seen our asses :) I take no offense to your statements. My relationships online are very meaningful to me, and to them.

They also challenged the notion that the medium of communication somehow modifies the rules for ethical behavior:

> So at what point do you draw the line here? From your language, it seems like this is something you can quantify for us. Clearly, emotional relationships with people you've only known through text are out. What about the telephone? Video? How many times would you have had to meet someone face to face in order to develop an emotional attachment to their words afterwards? Once? Twice?

Conclusion

Second Life is more than a role-playing universe. It is a space where people go to learn, experiment, forge new social relations, play around with notions of identity and gender, live out fantasies or simply entertain themselves for a little while. As reactions to the question on the need for an

ethics code indicated, this relative lack of structure and enforceable rules seems to be one of the main draws for Second Life residents. However, the lack of enthusiasm for a formal code of ethics should not be mistaken for a total absence of social norms. As the discussion regarding the upskirt gallery illustrates, the residents posting messages did not argue that no norms apply to Second Life, but they engaged in a vivid discussion about what these rules should be and whether or not avatar harm had occurred. Just as in real life, norms for acceptable behavior are subject to ongoing public scrutiny. In this sense, the upskirt gallery example presents an interesting contrast with the 'rape in cyberspace' case as described by Dibbell, where the community seemed to agree that Mr Bungle's action constituted a clear violation of community norms. This consensus regarding community norms and a strong avatar attachment made the community agree that the avatars of the players involved (and hence the players themselves) had been harmed. Such agreement was not present in the upskirt gallery example.

This does not mean that in Second Life there are no obvious instances of norm violation. Through game play, players recognize some of the more obvious forms of griefing, actions with the goal to reduce other residents' enjoyment of the game. Mostly, residents can ignore them, accept them as a nuisance or in some instances report them to game administrators. In successful virtual communities, griefers' actions will only marginally affect people's overall enjoyment of the game. The architecture of the game, the enforcement of terms of services and coping mechanisms on behalf of the players can reduce the impact of griefers. The presence of griefers does not indicate the absence of norms. In real life as well, certain people derive pleasure from vandalism or random acts of violence, yet these actions are labeled as deviant by society and therefore are an indicator of the presence, rather than the absence of norms. Griefers willingly and knowingly engage in norm violating behavior and do not claim that their behavior conforms with accepted norms.

However, in the upskirt gallery example, the perpetrator and his defenders denied that his behavior was norm violating. Rightly or wrongly, they claimed that this did not amount to an act of griefing and employed a more relativistic and less stringent moral standard in evaluating behavior than those who deemed this action to be ethically wrong. Those who defended this action also tended to have less of an avatar attachment and therefore did not think any harm was done in this instance. In real life as well, there is debate about what are accepted rules of behavior, as this is basically what ethics as a philosophical discipline is devoted to. Yet, the issue of avatar attachment in relation to ethics is unique to the virtual environment. In real life, we are all very much attached to our own identity and cannot choose not to care about an ethical transgression against our person.

Those residents of Second Life who abide by more stringent moral norms and who are more attached to their avatar are vulnerable as they share a space with participants who abide by a looser moral code and for whom avatars are not extensions of the self but merely a role one assumes. However, virtual communities' potential for social and cultural innovation cannot be realized if they are merely seen as non-consequential playgrounds where moral norms of real life are a priori invalid. Ethical significant harm can occur in virtual communities, and it is most likely to befall those who have a strong avatar attachment because they see their avatars as constitutive to their identity. Designers, administrators and residents should be aware that virtual worlds, as sites for meaningful social interaction, also tend to be sites where meaningful ethical harm can occur.

Note

1. A LambdaMOO is a text based online community/virtual reality to which multiple users can connect at the same time and interact with each other. MOO stands for MUD, object oriented and MUD stands for Multi User Domain. A LambdaMOO consists of a stream of text describing what is going on in the community

across the users' screens. Users can then move around this 'virtual' community and interact with other users by describing actions they perform or by conversing with them

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Biographies

Bastiaan Vanacker is an assistant professor at the School of Communication at Loyola University Chicago, USA. His major area of research comprises media ethics and law. In 2009 he published *Global Medium, Local Laws* in which he analyzed the regulation of hate speech online. He currently serves as the Research Chair for the Media Ethics Division at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication.

Don Heider is Dean of the School of Communication at Loyola University Chicago, USA. He edited a book researching virtual worlds entitled, *Living Virtually: Researching New Worlds* (2009). He has served as an associate editor of *Communication Methods and Measures* and the reviews editor for *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator.* He is the founder of The Center for Digital Ethics and Policy (http://digitalethics.org).