Chapter 1.17
Web 2.0, Virtual Worlds, and Real Ethical Issues

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ABSTRACT

Social networking sites, enabled by Web 2.0 technologies and embodied in role-playing virtual worlds, are gaining in popularity and use both for recreational and business purposes. Behavioral controls can be regulated through program code restrictions, rules of conduct, and local norms. Most vendor hosts of virtual worlds use code restrictions sparingly, restricting only overtly illegal activities. Otherwise, all worlds publish some form of rules of conduct and rely on the development of in-world local norms to regulate behavior. As a result, many unethical forms of behavior have arisen, including griefing, fragging, and industrial espionage. There is no sure method of solving the unethical forms of behavior unless strong social norms develop; therefore, users must take precautions when acting in virtual worlds to understand how to avoid or deflect virtual attacks of different types.

INTRODUCTION

Web 2.0 technologies enable more complex Internet capabilities than ever before. Sites such as *Second Life* (http://www.secondlife.com), *World of Warcraft* (http://www.worldofwarcraft.com), MySpace (http://www.myspace.com), and Zwinky (http://www.zwinky.com) are all examples of types of massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs or abbreviated RPGs; MMORPGs, 2007). RPGs all have some

common characteristics: a persistent environment that can be shaped by the player who assumes an identity for the game; the player's avatar, that is, his or her identity for the game; and a role that may be self-defined or taken from some book, movie, or other motivator, for example, a fantasy environment.

An avatar is a "graphical image that represents a person as on the Internet" ("Avatar," 2008). Avatars can be human, animal, or fantasy, depending on the game and the player's disposition. Avatars can be gendered or genderless, dressed or nude, representative of the real-life persons they portray or not. In reality, an avatar is a fancy cursor that provides an alter ego for the participant. Individuals in the games are encouraged to take on an avatar that is consistent with the artificial world context and, therefore, different from the real-world person. RPGs present themselves as harmless, fun, interesting, and benign, but all is not perfect in paradise and artificial worlds are no different.

On one hand, RPGs are harmless when the individual player conforms to the environment's rules of conduct (ROCs), that is, behaves morally. On the other hand, there is no requirement for morals or good behavior in most RPGs. Furthermore, the ROCs and therefore the definition of moral behavior differs within each world. The rise of real-world socially and ethically indefensible behavior has skyrocketed in virtual environments. For instance, Linden Lab, the developer of *Second Life*, now has a police blotter to report *Second Life*'s numerous crimes of the day (http://secondlife.com/community/blotter.php).

Web 2.0 technologies, in enabling artificial worlds, also enable problematic behavior. Crimes in RPGs are called "griefing." Griefs such as rape, murder, theft, beatings by gangs, and other activities that are illegal in the real world have all found their way to virtual environments (Holahan, 2006; Lynn, 2007). Some *Second Life* residents call for Linden Lab, the vendor host organization, to monitor the environment more closely or to use

technology to prevent such behaviors. The issues involved in taking no action vs. taking action, and the morality of the parties involved all are developed below. These actions are analyzed through the lens of ethics, the study of moral systems. In this chapter, the moral codes are defined by the codes of conduct within and for each virtual world by its vendor hosts. The ethical analysis uses ethical theories to describe real behaviors in virtual worlds and their defensibility vis-a-vis different systems of ethical thinking. In the next section, Web 2.0 technologies that enable virtual environments are identified. Then, virtual-environment research is summarized to develop characteristics of individuals who participate in RPGs. Next, several taxonomies of virtual behavior are analyzed to develop a model of virtual-world behavior. From the model, we then develop ethical concerns relating to behaviors in virtual worlds. Implications for individual gamers, game creators, companies, and researchers are developed in the last section.

WEB 2.0 TECHNOLOGIES

Web generations usually are identified by specific software standards like HTML (hypertext markup language) that characterized the beginning of Web 1.0. Web 2.0, however, is not identified by a software standard. Rather, Web 2.0 is characterized as the application of technologies that enable specific interactive capabilities such as coproduction, social networking, and unprecedented forms of communication, with user control and syndication of Web content. Examples of these actions are user-controlled communications of wikis, book reviews on Amazon.com, sharing of activities on MySpace, island development in *Second Life*, and syndications via YouTube video, blogs, and RSS (really simple syndication).

Many technologies enable Web 2.0 capabilities such as Flash, XML (extensible markup language), AJAX (asynchronous JavaScript and XML), mashups, RSS, and interactive applications

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