

Chapter 64

The Un/Acceptability of Virtual Moral Practices: An Empirical and Ethical Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

This article conjoins a foundation in moral philosophy with an empirical study on the un/acceptability of moral practices in 'Second Life' (SL). SL-residents were asked to rank morally charged SL-scenarios in a classification from '(most) unacceptable' to '(most) acceptable' and, while doing so, to reason out loud about their ranking. The analysis presented here focuses on their converging and diverging arguments. Regarding converging arguments, there was consensus on the unacceptability of six scenarios. Research participants believed these scenarios transcend the merely virtual and they subsequently grounded their argumentation in actual principles. They further agreed upon seven scenarios as acceptable; these scenarios were considered as typical features of SL and subsequently were not morally problematized. Regarding other scenarios, no consensus was reached. The author discusses these findings in terms of their ethical implications and in light of current approaches in the field of 'computer ethics'.

INTRODUCTION: RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This article focuses on the grounds and meanings of moral values and practices in three-dimensional social virtual worlds. In doing so, we attempt to conjoin a foundation in moral philosophy with an empirical study on the un/acceptability of morally charged scenarios that take place in Second Life (SL) (Linden Lab, 2003), a social virtual world in which residents are free to choose how to

spend their time and how to assign meaning and purpose to their in-world activities. This freedom also implies that residents are free to act and to experiment since they appear anonymous before virtual others.

By means of in-depth face-to-face interviews we explored how experienced SL-residents, who have been frequently in-world since several years, reflect on, judge, and evaluate in-world morally charged scenarios. To this aim, research participants were asked to rank twenty-eight hypothetical

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scenarios in a classification from ‘(most) unacceptable’ to ‘(most) acceptable’ and, while doing so, to reason out loud about their ranking.

Our research objectives are, first, to gain insight in residents’ in-world moral principles, values, and norms. Second, to ask residents which of these scenarios they have already encountered, either as a victim, or as the one causing the situation (the harm-doer), or as the one witnessing the situation. Third, to let residents imagine in-world moral scenarios which they have not yet encountered and evaluate their moral intensity. Fourth, to gain more insight in ‘virtual’ moral practices and to what extent these practices are evaluated as ‘virtual’ or ‘mediated’ and not rooted in actuality, and, related to this, to what extent the technological features of SL shape their moral evaluations and decisions.

In what follows, we firstly expand on the theoretical underpinnings of our study. After defining morality and ethics, we elaborate on the field of ‘computer ethics’. Next, we deal with moral concerns that have been raised about the Internet in general and about SL in specific. Secondly, we elaborate on the methodology, sample, and scenarios of our empirical study. Thirdly, we explore and discuss our findings. In doing so, our focus lies on informants’ converging and diverging arguments with regard to the evaluation of the scenarios’ un/acceptability. We discuss the ethical implications of our findings and we also put them in light of the question to what extent technology might possess a moral dimension in itself.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Morality and Ethics

There is no clear-cut answer to the question how to define morality. Johnson (1993) states that, at its minimum, “morality concerns the kind of lives we ought to lead, given the fact that our actions can help or harm people. However we define ‘help’ and ‘harm’, we notice at once that most of

what we do in our lives affects the well-being of both other people and ourselves” (pp. 251-252). Morality hence comes about whenever a subject is conscious of his or her conduct, namely when personal behavior is reflected in an awareness that is not determined by a supra-personal external normative source such as law or religion. As social animals, morality ties us all to each other and makes it possible to fulfill our strong need to be part of a group (Haidt, 2003). As morality has evolved and as its importance has been “its contribution to survival” (Allott, 1991, p. 2), it is inherently part of human nature and human evolution. Yet, morality goes further than our innate moral sense. To be able to live and work together in harmony, public space and communities have created a consistent set of rules and norms. As a consequence, we are confronted on a daily basis with this set and have to make moral decisions day by day. Moral persons reflect on and evaluate their behavior, principles, judgments, norms, and values (that are given within a specific cultural context, i.e. morals) on an individual level and extrapolate them to personal codes of conduct. Moral reflection or reasoning is essential, as it raises our awareness for the reach, implications, and consequences of our actions (Johnson, 1993, p. 253). However, although we desire moral order and control, we are constantly reminded of moral chaos in ourselves and in other people (Johnson, 1993, p. 30). As human beings, we are also fallible, vulnerable, and morally ambiguous (Gert, 1998). We always have the freedom to do harm and to choose for an immoral option.

Morality becomes an object of scientific research in the academic discipline of ethics, moral philosophy, or moral sciences. Ethics deals with the systematic and critical reflection on morals and morality and refers to a specific field of philosophical study. The way morality is defined is decisive in the formulation of ethical theories. In Western philosophy, ethical reflection leads to normative, i.e. creating or expressing specific rules of behavior, and non-normative ethical theo-

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