

Ethics of Deception in Virtual Communities

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INTRODUCTION

Deception is an infrequent but inevitable part of human social interaction. Deception fulfills important human social needs despite its disadvantages. An obvious question is to what extent deception can be justified in virtual communities, and whether the justification could be different than that for deception in traditional societies. While animals and plants blithely use deception (Mitchell & Thompson, 1986), humans are subject to many social constraints that affect the feasibility and suitability of deception.

BACKGROUND

Deception is a key issue in ethics with many important applications in law, business, politics, and psychology. Deception has several potential negative consequences (Ford, 1996). It damages relationships once discovered since they require trust; it can hurt a community by focusing its attention on false issues and devaluing its communications; it can hurt the deceiver's reputation and make him/her unable to function in a community; and even if not discovered, it supports a deceiver's self-deception and can ultimately hurt him/her (Sztompka, 1999).

Several studies have focused on the ethics of one form of deception, lying. Bok (1978) has been influential in arguing for more discriminate use of lying. This work analyzes a wide range of cases for lying and suggests relatively stringent guidelines, with the main categories being:

- White lies (small lies that are seemingly harmless). These are often unnecessary since carefully chosen truthful statements or silence may easily serve the same purposes.
- False excuses (Snyder, Higgins, & Stucky, 1983). Although these are passive lies, told to prevent something else, they can indirectly cause as much harm as active lies.
- Lies to prevent harm in a crisis. Serious crises do not occur very often, so it is tempting to mislabel non-critical situations as critical.

- Lies to liars in retaliation. However, this lowers the retaliator to the same moral level as the offender.
- Lies to enemies on general principles. However, "enemy" is a fluid and poorly defined concept that is often used to justify bigotry.
- Lies protecting peers and clients. Again, carefully chosen truthful statements or silence is often possible and preferable.
- Lies for the public good (as by politicians) (Levi & Stocker, 2000). These are very difficult to justify since everyone has a different definition of "public good."
- Paternalistic lies (as to children). Guidance and persuasion can often eliminate the need for such lies.
- Lies to the sick and dying. This violates the right of patients to make informed decisions.

As a rule of thumb, Bok suggests that a justifiable lie must satisfy three criteria: (1) that there are no alternative courses of action to lying; (2) that the moral arguments for the lie outweigh the moral arguments against it; and (3) that a "reasonable person" with no personal interest in the outcome would approve of the lie.

Nyberg (1993) takes a more tolerant view of lying, arguing that truth telling is only an instrumental value, not an intrinsic moral value. Most arguments against deception, including Bok's, take a "slippery slope" argument that permitting any deception will encourage more deception. However, in fact, deception is intrinsic to all societies and few societies have collapsed in a cycle of increasing deception. Deception is often necessary in law (including police work), business (including negotiation), politics (including diplomacy), and psychology (as an object of therapy). Deception helps maintain civility of a society by permitting concealment of thoughts in an often more effective way than silence, thereby regulating the information conveyed from one member to another in a judicious way. Deception is an essential tool in maintaining privacy as an alternative to creating ambiguity about one's self. Deception is essential in maintaining friendships as a way of avoiding hurt feelings; contrary to popular belief, friends do not expect truth from friends but expect that that friends serve their best interests. Deception is also essential in crises when confronted with evil forces.

APPLYING ETHICAL PRINCIPLES TO DECEPTION IN VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

A question is to what extent the previous analysis applies to deception in virtual communities. There is both more deception and more opportunities for deception in a virtual society, where visual and aural presence of the members is usually lacking and greater degrees of anonymity are possible (Friedman, Kahn, & Howe, 2000). However, opportunity does not excuse deception.

Identity deception is considered harmless in many virtual communities (Donath, 1998). Does it really matter that someone alleging to be a 21-year-old female model is actually a 40-year-old overweight male? If interaction within a virtual community is all virtual, such impersonation might seem harmless, and even perhaps beneficial, because it permits a form of psychotherapy in its role playing. But usually virtual communities relate in some way to the real world, as when members are looking for other members for dating. And some deception involving serious matters like death can be emotionally devastating (Brundage, 2001). So boundaries must be set for every community as to acceptable identity deception (Katz & Rice, 2002).

Mimicking of data and processes can be dangerous to virtual communities because confirmatory information that often reveals it in the real world can be lacking. For instance, posting a fake memo from a boss can hurt all concerned. As for trolling, it does have benefits to the perpetrator: It provides an outlet for aggression, a problem in civilized societies, and gives the perpetrator the feeling of power, a problem of adolescents everywhere. Nonetheless, trolling and other online insincerity are antisocial behavior and should be treated as such. Virtual communities often need sincerity because of the ease of anonymity, so insincerity can be disruptive, even highly disruptive. Communities need to set “netiquette” guidelines to reduce the problem.

False promises and excuses are another problem of virtual communities because it is hard to monitor promise fulfillment and justifications. For instance, people may promise repeatedly online to meet in person without any intention of doing so. Some of this can be covered by netiquette, and false excuses are usually ignorable. However, other promises in a virtual community can be just as serious as in the real world, such as those of contracts between members. An example would be an agreement between two players of a fantasy game to provide one resource in exchange for another. Many virtual communities provide valuable services, and even those primarily for entertainment are often taken very seriously by their

members. So violation of a contract in a virtual world should be just as serious as in the real world.

DECEPTION IN SERIOUS ATTACKS ON COMPUTER SYSTEMS AND THEIR PERSONNEL

Deception can also occur in serious criminal activities in virtual communities. Such activities may involve fraud (Boni & Kovacich, 1999). They may also involve attacks directly on computer systems (Schneier, 2000), either for entertainment as by “hackers,” or to advance personal agendas as with disgruntled employee retaliation or terrorists. Most of these exploit identity deception.

Many software defenses to attacks on computer systems are available, such as passwords, encryption, and access controls. Most defenses impose some restrictions on the user, and most have flaws that can be exploited by knowledgeable attackers. Many attacks on computers are governed by criminal law (Loader & Thomas, 2000); for instance, damaging of data is generally subject to the laws protecting property. However, laws require time to enforce and prosecute, and that may be insufficient redress for serious damage. For that reason deception has been suggested as a defense method itself. For instance, a law enforcement agent may pretend online to be a 12-year-old child to catch pedophiles, or fake credit card numbers may be distributed in a borderline-legal newsgroup to catch anyone using them. For people trying to attack computer systems, a decoy computer system called a “honeypot” (one not used for any other purpose) can be made easy to attack, and all activity on it can be recorded to obtain clues about attack methods (The Honeynet Project, 2002). Such deceptions may be ruled entrapment by law enforcement, however.

FUTURE TRENDS

Virtual communities are becoming larger and more diverse in their members, and ethical problems, violations of netiquette, and even crime will continue to increase. Forms of deception that are especially common in virtual communities, such as fake identities and false claims, must be anticipated and measures must be taken. We will see increased specification of appropriate behavior in virtual communities by netiquette and other policies. We will also see increased appearance or imposition of moderators and leaders on virtual communities to ensure enforcement of these policies.

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