'Free yourself!'
An inquiry into moral life in Second Life

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This is a draft version of an extended article; comments and suggestions are very welcome!

1. Introduction

The question to what extent computer-mediated virtuality affects our moral condition has preoccupied numerous philosophers (see e.g. Cavalier 2005; van den Hoven & Weckert 2008; Søraker 2011). "A rape in cyberspace" (Dibbell 1993) is a much-cited text on 'virtual morality,' as it was the first article that dealt with the repercussions of virtual harm. Throughout the article Dibbell reports on how Mr. Bungle raped two residents in LambdaMOO. Academic scholars and non-academic authors intensively elaborated on the incident, drawing most attention to the status of virtual rape, virtual harm, and performative language (see e.g. Rheingold 1993; Powers 2003).

Although the crime part is undoubtedly worth the debate and analyses, one must, however, not overlook the punishment part. Many residents condemned Mr. Bungle's actions and argued to decide on what would be a proper punishment for the wrongdoer. As there were no explicit rules against rape, the community gathered together in the form of an in-world public meeting, eventually leading to Mr. Bungle's expulsion from the site. Although community members had deviating views on the severity of the incident, many of them believed that the harm-doer could not escape sanctioning.

This incident was seminal in pointing theorists at the direct implications of in-world harm; it particularly led to the acknowledgement of the reality status of virtual experiences instead of mere representation (Buchanan 2013: 89). The victims' intense reactions namely revealed that virtual space was a real and meaningful environment for them. Contrary to the common belief in the 1990s that virtual actions take place in a magic circle, virtual space has to be understood as an embodied space into which actual life selves and norms are prolonged (see e.g. Ess 2010). Every place where embodied subjects, even though represented by avatars, gather becomes a moral space where people are responsible for others (see e.g. Reynolds 2007; Sicart 2009; see also infra, for further conceptual elaboration).

Nonetheless, virtual worlds like Second Life (SL) have given new ground for moral issues, since these worlds allow so-called 'residents' to, among others, design the world by creating and selling virtual property. In addition, residents can "explore the world as they choose" (Sherman 2011: 34), since there is no programmed 'telos' one's avatar is heading to. Residents are thus free to choose how to assign meaning and purpose to their virtual activities. This freedom has been linked with concerns about immoral behaviour because one can always take an alt for experimentation, exploration, or even exploitation of others. In addition, user-created content not only permits "us to do things we *cannot* do, but also things we *should not* do" in the actual world (Gooskens 2010: 60, emphasis in original).

The question of (moral) freedom is most pertinent in this respect. To this aim, this paper conjoins a strong grounding in moral philosophy with an empirical study on moral practices in SL. Focus lies on *shared* virtual space where every avatar represents an actual human being, and not on bots or non-player characters (NPCs). This paper explores in particular how residents restrict one another's freedom in order to prevent moral transgression in SL (*regulation of the other*) and it furthermore investigates what factors are important for self-control (*regulation of the self*).

Before proceeding to the conceptual architecture and empirical findings, it is preliminary to concisely discuss similarities between social virtual worlds and games (1.1).

1.1 Overlaps between social virtual worlds and games

Although social virtual worlds in general and SL in specific cannot be characterized as synonymous to multi-user games such as MMORPGs, both share important features and structures. Virtual worlds have their origin in both virtual reality and video games, which might explain why virtual games and worlds are often treated as synonyms (Boellstorff 2008: 42). The most significant difference is that virtual worlds do not impose a game-oriented goal (see e.g. Ryan 2009).

Nevertheless, despite their differences, virtual multi-user worlds and games share significant similarities, among others with regard to investment of personal resources, social motivations, avatar identification and attachment, and socialization processes (see e.g. Jakobsson & Taylor 2003; Yee 2006). Players have a wide range of motivations to start engaging and, in the game, they go further than passively applying a predetermined objective, as their behaviour is not strictly controlled by the rules of the game. As multi-user games focus on interacting and engaging with others in real-time (for instance in guilds), players have the freedom to bond socially and emotionally. Hence, forming friendships and love relationships are important parts of the game experience and, analogous to virtual worlds, software tools are provided to stimulate and enhance social interaction. In addition, in worlds like SL, there are also a number of multi-player (role-playing) games on sims.

Furthermore, there are also games with an open (as opposed to closed) ethical design, which means that the values of the player and the community can be implemented in the virtual environment or are reflected by it (Sicart 2009: 213-214). Open ethical design does not signify that the design itself is ethical but means that the possibility exists to impose the residents' norms in the world, instead of merely applying the rules and norms that the designers created and programmed. Residents can thus implement their moral reasoning in relation to the virtual surroundings, which are open to the results of that moral reflection (Sicart 2009: 214). Virtual worlds like SL are also constructed with an open ethical design.

2. Virtual sociality and virtual morality

Throughout history, humans have regenerated a sense of community with mediated forms of communication, among others with radio and television (see e.g. Jankowski 2002; Wagman 2012). Bringing sociality into computer-mediated virtuality can be looked upon as a logical transition; it thus may not surprise that people have been building 'virtual' communities in all forms and shapes since the 1990s (see e.g. Feenberg & Barney 2004).

From a broader perspective, community is an essential human value since it is the setting "in which a large share of human development occurs" (Feenberg & Bakardjieva 2004: 2). Moral frameworks and judgments structure the sociality of the cultures that one is part of. With regard to life in the everyday community, shared moral sense-making processes and complexes of meaning "can serve as a basis for group solidarity, bringing people together in ways that can lead to collective action and identification" (Hitlin & Vaisey 2010: 10). In face-to-face public space and communities, a set of rules, norms, and codes has been created to be able to live and work together in harmony. Although SL appears to be a space "where, virtually, anything is possible" (Young & Whitty 2012: 7), it nonetheless takes place within a social context because, in virtual space as well, the self has to live with others on a shared location. This raises the question to what extent shared complexes of meaning and sense-making processes extend to virtual space and how life is morally constructed in-world.

Already in 1992, Pavel Curtis, who not only founded LambdaMOO but also conducted research there, pointed at in-world social and moral structures. Contrary to the 1990s, in which virtual communities were still treated as extraordinary, with a focus on strangeness and outcasts (see e.g. Sardar 1995), the present-day view treats them in a more nuanced and everyday perspective, hereby emphasizing that in-world life is in many respects continuous with face-to-face settings and most certainly not opposed to it (see e.g. Cherny 1999; Carter 2005).

Especially during the 1990s this continuity was denied: acts taking place in virtual space were conceived of as not serious forms of play and escapism, which are not rooted in actuality and hence have no moral content (cf. supra, magic circle). It is, of course, true that actions which are considered wrong in actual life are not necessarily wrong when performed in virtual space, for instance virtual murder, which is often included in game-controlled scenarios. However, as noted in this paper's introduction, virtuality must be treated as a reality and not as a representation. In addition, notwithstanding that virtual avatars are interacting, they represent moral agents. This makes in-world conduct subject to moral imperatives and moral evaluation. "[T]here is nothing unreal about the people participating, their interactions with each other or the emotions the experience evokes in them" (Jakobsson & Taylor 2003: 89). In Reynolds's phrase, avatars are "sufficiently attached to the user to justify an ethical link between persons and virtual practices" (2007: 8). Virtual space must hence be understood as a real and embodied space in which actual-world selves are prolonged; the virtual self is thus not a self parallel to the actual self.

Although virtual activities and interactions do not physically occur in the actual world, they are interacting with it (hybridization). Virtual and actual experiences are part of one experienced and ongoing reality. Life in virtual communities is in many respects continuous with face-to-face settings. For instance, residents frequently invest personal resources such as time, energy, money, and so forth. In addition, the time that one spends in the virtual surroundings is time that cannot be spent with an actual partner, friends, or relatives, so it is very likely that there are consequences, costs, and effects.

In sum, the following theoretical claims offered the conceptual lenses through which the empirical fields have been entered:

> *1. The virtual is real and not a representation. This means in particular that virtual space is a real and meaningful environment for its residents.*

2. The virtual and the actual are part of one experienced reality and stand in a hybrid relation.
3. Virtual space must be conceptualized as a real, moral, and embodied space into which actual-world selves are prolonged.

3. Empirical study: Overarching methodology

As noted earlier, this paper seeks to conjoin moral philosophy with an empirical study on moral life in SL. The combination of empirical research with philosophical analysis and reflection is characterized as 'empirical ethics' (see e.g. Musschenga 2005). From a broader perspective, the incorporation of "moral fieldwork" (Moody-Adams 1997: 224) in a philosophical study is not unusual and fits within a larger philosophical framework, which trades back to the Socratic engagement with public life that "constructively affirms the link between moral philosophy and everyday moral inquiry" (Moody-Adams 1997: 223).

This paper especially seeks to study SL's existing, lived-in morality in order to hear the different moral voices in context. That is, moral culture is constituted not only by what people do, "but how they explain and justify what they do, the stories they tell, the principles they invoke" (Walzer 1987: 29). By entering into dialogue with residents, this study also seeks to extend the moral philosophical debate on the problematized virtuality-morality relation from an empirical perspective, offering more contextual insight into the research field's main challenges and concerns. In doing so, focus lies on how residents frame and make sense of the existing in-world moral practices and on how they are embedded in this community's everyday social and moral structures.

Although scholars have empirically studied virtual cultures in-depth, no study so far has focused systematically on the question of morality. To fill in this gap, a 'hybrid ethnography' (Jordan 2009) was conducted over a period of one year. The choice for this methodological research framework was not random; on the contrary, it is fully grounded upon the conceptual framework that seeks to break through the dualist approach of the virtual-real relation and that acknowledges that virtuality and actuality stand in a hybrid relation. A hybrid approach furthermore underscores "that when one is examining the behaviour of avatars-as-people in a virtual space, one is also examining the behaviour of the person behind the avatar, if not explicitly, then certainly implicitly" (Jerry 2013: 2).

The hybrid ethnography involved recurrent meetings in virtual (SL) and actual (face-to-face) settings with a core sample of 20 (9 female, 11 male) experienced, adult, and Dutch-speaking residents (born between 1943 and 1985). Apart from this core sample, there were also 'virtual' informants whom I met solely in-world. Specific techniques were formal and informal interviews, participant observation, and a vignette study.

4. Discussion of the findings

In what follows, the most prominent findings in terms of (moral) freedom are discussed. Especially the passage to virtual adulthood (4.1) and investment of personal resources (4.2) are most pertinent in terms of *self*-regulation, whereas social mechanisms (4.3) serve to regulate and constrain the *other*. Moral rules and shared understandings of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour (4.4) are important to regulate both self and other in order to sustain moral order.

4.1 The passage to virtual adulthood and socialization processes

The development that the virtual self undergoes over time in-world is closely connected with moral identity. In the critical passage from newbie to virtual adulthood, the detached newbie gradually moves into an attached, committed, and morally conscious adult. In their stories, informants literally spoke about attaining virtual adulthood and characterized it in terms of growing avatar identification, increasing awareness of the human behind the other avatar, and attachment to the place (including an increased sense of belonging). Attaining an insider position included a more persistent and less explorative form of self-presentation because they became embedded in social groups, which led to social control and group cohesion. Subsequently, there was a gradual decrease of the free-floating exploration and fascination that characterized the newbie phase.

As newbies, informants explored social and moral boundaries, e.g. by showing more loosely or flirtatious behaviour and by telling (white) lies. The ease of openly expressing emotions, flirting, exploring, hence, the appeal of disengaged and uncommitted social interactions clashed at a certain point in time with the socialization process they went through. Undergoing a socialization process is a vital step in community building, as it reinforces one's sense of belonging (to the group). Respondents reported to refrain from exploring (and lying) from the moment they felt more proximal towards the other.

However, also after undergoing a socialization process there was always a way to escape traceability because virtuality makes it possible to explore multiple virtual selfhoods by having numerous alts that all lead separate in-world lives. Although most informants had at least one alt, the majority did not feel the need to explore being 'somebody else' and their alts subsequently served more instrumental purposes. Yet, it cannot be denied that some respondents made use of it, also to escape moral accountability. These informants always were at the risk of being sanctioned (cf. infra), which frequently occurred.

4.2 Investment of personal resources

Another vital factor in terms of self-regulation was the investment of personal resources (e.g. time, emotions, money, energy) that SL required. Apart from learning the skills, tricks, norms, cultural and technological language, respondents generally spent actual money to buy land, textures, or scripts, among other things. The medium itself required a significant time investment as one had to become acquainted with in-world norms, technological skills (e.g. to build one's avatar), and jargon, among other things.

The investment of personal resources, which implies that the world and the related activities are important to residents, increases the commitment, sense of belonging, and involvement. SL was a meaningful world for the respondents, which entailed investments in social, financial, emotional, psychological, temporal, and sometimes professional terms. Deep investment and commitment in a virtual world lead to a risk of loss and a great vulnerability. Respondents did not want to put their invested resources at stake, for instance by risking to lose the relations in which they have invested so much time, energy, effort, and money, and subsequently tried anything to keep their investment beneficial.

4.3 Social mechanisms

Different forms of social mechanisms, such as trust signals, gossip, social control, and boundary mechanisms, regulated the other. Informants for instance shared understandings of how to obtain more information about someone's trustworthiness; they for instance attributed importance to the ages of other avatars, as newbies could be potential griefers. Interestingly, technological possibilities affected in-world moral behaviour. For instance, informants sometimes took an alt to spy or eavesdrop to attain more information about a person's trustworthiness.

4.3.1 Boundary mechanisms

Although moral selves in principle "refrain from behaving in ways that violate their moral standards because such conduct will bring self-condemnation" (Bandura 2002: 102), they always have the freedom to do harm and to choose for an immoral option, thereby taking the risk of being sanctioned. In virtual space as well, many interpersonal and other conflicts can arise, such as spamming, flaming, griefing, bullying, disputes, espionage, eavesdropping, and so further (Cherny 1999: 280, 282; Botterbusch & Talab 2009). It is possible that residents do not follow the so-called 'netiquette' of the group, as not everyone feels commitment to the community.

The investment of personal resources, the risk to lose what one has acquired in-world, the sense of belonging and commitment, the meaningful character of the virtual community and its emotional and economic reality not only contributed to the impact of virtual moral transgression but also to the feeling that harm-doers must be punished and restricted in their transgressive behaviour. Punishment keeps the order in the group and maintains the strong ties among its members.

With regard to what respondents considered as intolerable behaviour, there were commonalities that point at shared understandings of moral unacceptability. If someone had done serious harm, it felt unjust and, analogous to actual life, the harm-doer had to be punished to restore the harmony. There were several in-world forms of social sanctioning to constrain immoral behaviour. In their stories, respondents talked about the different mechanisms they knew and applied when confronted with morally unacceptable practices. It is important to note that residents, and not Linden Lab, regulated these forms of sanctioning.

The mechanisms used for sanctioning objectionable behaviour were pre-eminently communicative. First, there was sanction through *inflated communication*, which means that the deceived person informed others, often close friends, about what had happened. This form of punishment is closely linked to reputation and gossip, namely to damage the freerider's reputation by means of gossip. Second, punishing also took place through *non-communication*, which means that all contact was broken in a quiet way, for instance, by ignoring the harm-doer. Deceived persons often asked shared friends to do the same; this way, ignoring someone collectively served as a form of group punishment. Chances were likely that the harm-doer eventually became an outcast and disappeared. Finally, victims of serious harm excluded the harm-doer from the community and banished him of her from the communicative sphere, i.e. punishment by *excommunication*. The cheater was pilloried, not only in-world but also on blogs and forums. This way, they made use of out-world systems to restrict or punish immoral behaviour.

Technological tools enabled an intensification and stronger coordination of sanctioning. First, there were sanctioning mechanisms offered by Linden Lab, such as muting, banning, or

blocking the cheater, or the possibility to remove him or her from the friendlist. In addition, Linden Lab offered the possibility to file official abuse reports. Most informants had filed at least one abuse report. Reasons were diverse: among others, public humiliation, sexual ageplay, racism, underage residents, plagiarism, and griefing. Second, apart from the mechanisms offered by Linden Lab, they found inventive sanctioning systems by means of the technology. If there were proofs, such as incriminating screenshots or chatlogs, they were distributed by the deceived ones. One respondent, who owned two popular sims, had an inventive communication and warning system with other venue owners: they always put the name of the last griefer in their profiles. This way, other sim owners could see the griefer's name and preventively ban this avatar from their places.

4.3.2 Gossip

Gossip in particular is a decisive factor for community life and establishing norms of appropriate conduct. Findings reveal that gossip was an important means to create social control and group cohesion. For instance, when they noticed something suspicious, such as underage residents, residents alerted one another to collectively keep an eye on this person. When they morally disapproved of someone (e.g. 'slutty' behaviour), they talked about it and distanced themselves from this behaviour by openly condemning it. Group notices were also sent out to set the records straight with regard to rumours. For instance, there were rumours that some people were not welcome anymore at a particular sim; a notice was subsequently sent out to assure that everyone was welcome and that the rumours were false.

4.4 Moral rules

As noted earlier, moral frameworks and judgments structure the sociality of the communities or cultures that one is part of. In doing so, a shared understanding of societal dos and don'ts is important to glue the society together. Informants took the rules that structure in-world morality into account in their everyday engagements. Findings reveal that respondents were aware of their moral and social duties, such as helping inexperienced residents, which was a shared social norm. Obeying the rules was also a way to show that one was socialized and that the world was meaningful (cf. supra).

Results point at the importance of actual moral frameworks for the regulation of in-world morality. Basic moral principles were prolonged into SL, reinforcing claims about embodied moral beings (cf. supra). In this respect, deep-seated taboos, such as paedophilia (an adult avatar having sex with a child avatar) and incest (in-world family role-play in which a virtual brother and sister have sex with one another), invoked moral condemnation.

Findings, however, also reveal separate in-world conventions and norms, relating to practices that did not pre-exist in the actual world. Virtual space allowed residents to realize things that remain purely thinkable in the actual world, such as easily switching between genders or having multiple selves logged on simultaneously. With regard to these practices, separate conventions came to the fore; for instance, it was accepted to have more than one avatar and to gender swap (as long as one avoided distressing others). Overall, findings thus reveal that SL is a space with separate conventions *and* a space into which actual-world moral principles are prolonged.

5. Concluding thoughts

Overall, this study shows that in every place where humans gather, be it virtual or actual, social norms and moral rules emerge. By attaining an insider position and community membership (cf. socialization process and virtual adulthood), the virtual world became more meaningful for residents. As they did not want to put at stake what they already invested in-world (cf. investment of personal resources), they showed stricter self-regulation and they furthermore found and applied (inventive) ways to restrain the other's freedom (cf. importance of social mechanisms).

These findings, which are in line with other empirical studies (see e.g. Reid 1995; Cherny 1999; Suler 2004; Carter 2005; Heider 2009), do not support the deep-seated idea that freedom and anonymity increase disinhibition. On the contrary, informants noted that they did not often encounter negative experiences in-world and sincere moral relations were attainable without having to meet the other face-to-face. Multiple expressions of prosocial tendencies came to the fore, such as compassion, consolation, reciprocity, loyalty, solidarity, respect, generosity, and support. Sense-making processes were built and reinforced throughout recurrent and intense interactions with each other, which further strengthened moral commitment towards one another.

Games / virtual worlds
SECOND LIFE. Linden Lab, 2003.

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