

Deviance in Cybercommunities – The Case of Second Life

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Abstract

We consider the prevailing views that cybercommunities have high levels of deviant behaviour due to three fundamental characteristics that they carry: (i) a considerable plurality of values; (ii) a lack of physicality; and (iii) a strong perception of anonymity. We analyse the roles that these three characteristics play in explaining the nature and frequency of deviance by examining the structural relationship between cybercommunities and the modern real world using Giddens' work on modernity. The analysis builds upon empirical investigations of the cybercommunity Second Life. Our research suggests that a cybercommunity like Second Life, far from being an abstract deviant community, is more accurately construed as a world of amplified human possibilities, one where constructed self-identities can find rich interpersonal and social relationships.

Introduction

An understanding of deviance requires an understanding of the social context in which it occurs, such as within a specific community, since actions are given different meanings in different social contexts (Christie, 2004). This is because deviance has come to be understood as a consequence of applying a set of rules with accompanying sanctions to a person; it is not simply some quality of an action that the person commits (Becker, 1963). The Internet is now a firmly established feature in most people's personal and professional lives, through email, internet shopping, social networking, video-conferencing, downloading entertainment ... The Internet can also provide new forms of action and social interaction through three dimensional (3D) virtual worlds, commonly known as cybercommunities, where the software technologies bring to life imaginary worlds inhabited by self-created avatars (cyber-representations of individuals). Our research on deviance focuses on one such cybercommunity, called *Second Life*.

Since its launch by Linden Lab in 2003, Second Life has grown into the largest international cybercommunity; and there is strong evidence for its continuing popularity (e.g. Lacy, 2012). It is a cybercommunity created to replicate, reflect and expand on the real world, and therefore contains features common to many contemporary societies, and cultures, including acts of deviancy. In fact, Second Life constitutes an authentic community, and as such is a fertile ground for sociological research (Wang et al., 2011).

In contrast to the scale and depth of studies of deviance in the physical world, there is, at this moment, only limited empirical research on deviance within cybercommunities.⁴ Mike Presdee's

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⁴ An early example of empirical research is Williams (2003). Research on deviance in cybercommunities tend to situate the topic in the broader and more mature field of cybercrime, and tend to focus on the idea that some fundamental characteristics of the Internet in general, and cybercommunities in particular, are responsible for high levels of crime and deviance, respectively (e.g. Wall, 2007; Wall and Williams, 2007; Williams, 2006, 2007; Yar, 2006). Cybercrime (use of the Internet to conduct crime) is *not* our focus here. Our concern is with deviance (acts which contravene social norms and values in the cybercommunity Second Life).

'carnival of crime' thesis offers an insight into the transformative impacts of the Internet on deviance (cf. Wall, 2007). Presdee (2000) suggests that much crime occurring in modern society, especially that relating to social disorder, is a product of the political invasion of social life by social policies that encourage individuals to live two lives. The *first life* is our 'official' life which is characterised by work and governed by an imposed order, whereas our *second life* is a more authentic existence – "the only true site for the expression of one's true feelings for life" that is "expressed through the world of excess, obscenity and degradation" (Presdee, 2000: 8). Further, he identified the Internet as "fast becoming the safe site of the second life of the people" (Presdee, 2000: 54), where the boundaries of social order are frequently broken (Wall, 2007).

In particular, cybercommunities can be likened to unregulated territories where deviance flourishes as a result of "the relative freedom individuals may feel by being untied from material commitments of the offline world" (Williams, 2003: 185). Indeed, in the public mind, the link between cybercommunities and deviance is strong (Wall, 2011). The 'dark side' of the cybercommunity Second Life has attracted much attention from the media, encouraging the idea that cybercommunities are deviance-ridden (e.g. Lynn, 2007; Rivington, 2008; Warrant and Palmer, 2011). Its reputation has grown into the 'most deviance-ridden' context on the Internet – "the dark side of the Web is Second Life" (Stern, 2008).

The perception that the world of the Internet is "pathologically unsafe and criminogenic" (Wall, 2011: 869) is precisely brought about by dystopic narratives about life online, which heightens public expectations of online risk. Dystopic conceptions and a culture of fear toward life online are often formed on the basis of no direct experience or detailed knowledge and naturally⁵ leads to the view that deviant activities manifest frequently online and those who 'live' online are deviant. In particular, this perception is associated with three characteristics of cybercommunities:

1. a considerable plurality of values;
2. a lack of physicality; and
3. a strong perception of anonymity.

In this article, we will (i) question each of these characteristics and whether such "causes" provide a different understanding of deviance in cybercommunities; (ii) examine the structural relationship between cybercommunities and modernity through the exploration of deviance in Second Life; and (iii) argue that cybercommunities are not deviance-ridden alien countries, but very much integral parts of the physical and social world.

Using ideas of modernity, we build a conceptual bridge between the virtual and the real, which enables us to argue that the world of cybercommunities is a natural technological enhancement in response to social needs. Therefore, deviance in cybercommunities can be thought of as a derived feature of modernity. Many characteristics of modern society, such as fragmentation, fluid self-identity, social mobility, anonymous social relations, non-face-to-face social bonding, property ownership, commerce and leisure, are mirrored in cybercommunities – they are common to both the real world and Second Life, but at the same time, differently constituted – the mirroring is not direct but refracted. Whilst 'modernity' is a contested term (e.g. Barker, 2005), Giddens' work is particularly useful in this context because (a) his theory covers the broad aspects of social life; (b) it discusses the relationship between the individual and community which is used in developing analytical constructs; and (c) it emphasises the influential role of technology in shaping modernity. Thus, we draw on Giddens' (1990, 1991) ideas in developing our analysis.

Empirical Research in Second Life

Methodologically, cybercommunities are different from communities in the real world. The most obvious difference is that cybercommunities, such as Second Life, are virtual – they are constructions in cyberspace in which no one physically lives. The term 'community' has mutable definitions that vary widely, such as physical communities (Hillery, 1955), symbolic communities (Cohen, 1985) and imaginary communities (Anderson, 1983; Delanty, 2003). Thus, attitudes to cybercommunities like

⁵ Through fear of the unknown or distrust of 'the other' (Christie, 2004).

Second Life differ. To some a cybercommunity resembles popular Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs), such as the Sims and Warcraft; to others it resembles some popular social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, with their absence of physical presence (e.g. Ridings and Gefen, 2004; Lee, 2005; Mesch and Talmud, 2007; Sangwan et al., 2009).

Second Life consists of thousands of user-defined⁶ sub-communities and groups having an extensive range of themes and purposes (e.g. business, entertainment, education, leisure) with their own local rules and norms (Carr and Pond, 2007), as well as more than one million regular residents of different age groups, genders, nationalities and social backgrounds (Vollmer, 2010)⁷. Technologically, Second Life is software constructed by advanced 3D graphics and communications technologies; its origins lie in the science of physical simulations. For the creator of the Second Life software, Philip Rosedale, Second Life replicates and reflects the real world, but facilitates going beyond it into a world where there is no barrier between thought and action (Guest, 2007). It is a virtual world that offers its participants a set of capabilities which are superior to the real world – including a fantasy world where the boundary between reality and imagination is renegotiated. In the virtual world, a much fuller construction and expression of a person's self-identity can be achieved via the creation of an avatar which is a 3D representation of the person in Second Life as he/she wishes to be – a self-invention without physical or biological limits (Lindberg, 2007). Thus, not treating Second Life as a community would be to fail to recognise the extent to which Second Life provides a genuine, meaningful, alternative second life for participants that goes far beyond the competition and entertainment qualities of MMORPGs and the networking qualities of 'real world' social networking sites.

Empirical social research in cybercommunities (e.g. Markham, 1998; Boellstorff, 2008), especially those of a criminological nature (Williams, 2003), is still relatively rare. This means that there is a general lack of methodological theory specific to research in cybercommunities. Sociological research methodologies for analysing communities and groups in the real world must be modified before they are used to explore a cybercommunity. In our research, a grounded theory approach was used as the basis for empirical work. Grounded theory is commonly used to develop theory that is grounded in data, which is systematically gathered and analysed (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). It embodies the sense that the researcher is reflexively thinking about the data while collecting. When little is known about deviance in cybercommunities, grounded theory allows concepts and hypotheses to emerge early on and to be tested against the research findings in the next stage. This way, knowledge about deviance is inductively revised in the light of new information.

The research in Second Life consisted of three different stages: (i) participant observation; (ii) survey research; and (iii) discussion in a Second Life Residential Forum. Each stage informed the subsequent stage. Participant observation was adopted (a) to obtain a basic picture of Second Life, in terms of its social characteristics, technological infrastructure and methods of communication and interaction; and (b) to identify some fundamental concepts at the very beginning of the empirical research to formulate themes and questions for the subsequent empirical work. After participant observation, a standard list covering 91 different potentially deviant acts and a list of 39 motivations for becoming residents of Second life were constructed, based on data collected during the participant observation, as well as other sources both online and offline, including previous research findings; Second Life community regulations (e.g. the *Big Six*);⁸ and residents' discussions in various Second Life forums and blogs. Based on the list of 91 potentially deviant acts and the 39 motivations, three different questionnaires were designed and emailed to three different samples of participants in Second Life. Each of the questionnaires asked about their perception, experience and performance of deviant activities in Second Life, respectively. In the first questionnaire, the participants were also asked to report on their motivations for spending time in Second Life.

⁶ The user-created nature of Second Life and many opportunities for user-engagement in it render the cybercommunity a constantly changing landscape (Wallace, 2006).

⁷ On February 6, some 2012, 21,738,464 user accounts were recorded in Second Life (Childs, 2012).

⁸ Linden Lab sets out six kinds of major 'crime' in Second Life, which include 'intolerance', 'harassment', 'assault', 'disclosure', 'adult regions, groups, and listings' and 'disturbing' the peace (see: <http://secondlife.com/corporate/cs.php>; accessed 04/03/2008).

Between April 5 and May 8, 2008, 1500 copies of each of the three questionnaires were sent out in 3 intervals of 500 copies. On June 1, 2008, 83 copies of the first questionnaire were retrieved, yielding a response rate of 6%; 89 copies of the second questionnaire were retrieved, yielding a response rate of 7%; and 73 copies of the third questionnaire were retrieved, yielding a response rate of 5%. On average, the response rate was 6%. The survey research yielded 44 complete questionnaires for each of the three surveys. Such a low response rate was expected for several reasons, such as the unwillingness to participate since Second Life might be seen by some as a way to escape from the real world; the lack of any forms of incentive, e.g. financial; as well as time and human resources constraints. More importantly, the actual number of participants in Second Life had always been a controversial subject – several accounts might belong to the same person; and once registered, an account remained in existence even without any degree of user activity.⁹ It is estimated that only 10% of newly created residents are still signing in weekly, three months later.¹⁰ Thus, possibly, indeed the likelihood was that 90% of the residents who had been sent a questionnaire were no longer active in Second Life.

The low response rate meant that we did not have a representative sample, but only a convenience sample. However, the data did provide a rich information source, as well as suggesting some main themes for subsequent qualitative research. Based on this understanding, 16 questions were drafted and posted in a Second Life residential forum to initiate unstructured discussions and debates among participants in the forum (a sociologically native environment), so as to ground and contextualise the main themes that had emerged from the survey research. During the 86 hours of research, the post containing the questions had been viewed 5,484 times and replied 434 times. These 434 posts translated into 130 A4 pages. The qualitative data collected from this discussion in the residential forum further supported and deepened our understanding of the nature and extent of deviant behaviour in Second Life.

Main Findings

Social life in Second Life is different from social life in the physical world. Notably, Second Life is a community in cyberspace largely created by its users' needs and wants. Thus, it is natural to assume that the normal rules and norms of the real world do not apply in the user-defined world of Second Life. In fact, defining what is deviant in Second Life requires an understanding of complex inter-plays between three different types of rules and norms, belonging to (i) Second Life's communal rules and norms; (ii) the numerous user-defined sub-communities and groups in Second Life; and (iii) the real world rules and norms used to evaluate acts in Second Life. The difficulty in defining deviance was expressed by one of our forum correspondents

It is hard to define deviance in a place where the motto is 'Your World, Your Imagination'.
(Forum correspondence, March 4, 2009)

For analytical purposes, the 91 deviant acts were grouped into eight categories. Each mirrors a criminal category in the real world. Based on our survey data, their ranking in order of perceived severity is as follows:

1. Acts that damage the Second Life community, e.g. "Actions that diminish the Second Life community as a whole" (social disorder);
2. Acts against an avatar's property, e.g. "Using programs to change another avatar's property" (criminal damage);
3. Acts against the avatar, e.g. "Using Programs to take over another avatar" (interpersonal violence);
4. Acts that are performed via text & graphic, e.g. "Writing texts that insult a real world individual on in-world chat boards" (public order offence against the person);

⁹ See: (i) http://many.corante.com/archives/2006/12/12/-second_life_what_are_the_real_numbers.php; accessed 15/03/2008.

¹⁰ See: http://nwn.blogs.com/nwn/2006/11/new_world_numbe.html; accessed 10/03/08.

5. Acts against real world norms (legal frameworks of many jurisdictions), e.g. “Exchanging child related pornographic material” (general public disorder);
6. Acts that are carried out by powerful groups, e.g. “Big corporations taking over Second Life for commercial purposes” (white collar and organised crime);
7. Acts against Second Life community norms, e.g. “Not respecting Group norms that are common to the membership” (anti-social behaviour); and
8. Acts against an avatar’s identity & privacy, e.g. “Revealing the real life identity of another avatar” (harassment).

Based on these broad categories, we can observe that the basic structure of rules and norms by which individuals evaluate acts in the real world is mirrored in judgements made by individuals in Second Life. We can identify a continuity between perceptions of deviance in real life and Second Life, and can begin to see Second Life as a part of – an extension of – the real world. This connection provides the first opportunity to question the notion of Second Life as a world of “excess, obscenity and degradation” (contra Presdee, 2000: 8), and, thus, the idea that individuals participate in Second Life primarily for the purpose of carrying out deviant activities. So, why do individuals participate in Second Life?

For analytical purposes, the 39 motivations were grouped into five different categories. From the most motivating to the least motivating, the order is as follows:

1. Modernity related motivations;¹¹
2. Community related motivations;
3. Self-identity related motivations;
4. Commerce related motivations; and
5. Leisure related motivations.

A close examination of the top ten most motivating factors and the bottom ten least motivating factors revealed that (i) nine out of the top ten motivations¹² were in the categories of modernity, community and self-identity related motivations; and (ii) most of the bottom ten motivations could be associated with different degrees of triviality and playfulness¹³ (see: Table 1).

¹¹ The category of modernity related motivations contains certain primary characteristics of modernity, such as instant access and abundance of choices, whereas other elements are designed to illicit individual participants’ perceptions of the reflexive relationship between the cybercommunity Second Life and the modern world.

¹² The exception is the 10th: “I am free to do whatever I want”.

¹³ Perhaps, except the 38th: “I can have a new platform to promote my real world business”.

The Ranking	The Motivation	Percentage
1	I can have instant access to any of my choices of things to do	68%
2	I can meet and be friends with like-minded people	64%
3	I can have many choices of things to do	61%
4	I can enjoy general social interactions	66%
5	I can have a hobby shared with my friends	57%
6	I can be in a place that is free from the physical constraints of the real world	66%
7	I can be known as whom I truly am	55%
8	I can be in a different place	55%
9	I can enjoy social interactions that are different from those of the real world	57%
10	I am free to do whatever I want	57%
30	I can make money with very little investment	27%
31	I can have no responsibilities	27%
32	I can enjoy 'risky' activities	25%
33	I can go to dance halls	27%
34	I can do lots of things without worrying about the consequences	25%
35	I can go to pubs and clubs	25%
36	I can collect freebies	20%
37	I can enjoy vacations	16%
38	I can have a new platform to promote my real world business	23%
39	I can modify Second Life open source	25%

Table 1: The top and bottom 10 motivations ranked on their mean scores. The reported percentage is the sum of participants who are 'very much' or 'quite a lot' motivated by the property.

Individuals, it seems, may be motivated to participate in Second Life by the opportunities it provides for commerce or trivial leisure activities, but this is not typical. They are more motivated by the opportunities it provides for self-expression when forming meaningful social relationships. Again, the link here between real world relations and Second Life is apparent. The cybercommunity, however, provides additional and magnified possibilities for self-expression and social relations. These qualities are far from suggestive of a deviant milieu, either in intent or experience. Our data showed that deviance was certainly not a dominant feature – the overwhelming majority, almost 85%, of respondents never performed, and almost 70% had never experienced, *any* of the 91 potentially deviant acts in the questionnaires.

Contrary to the dominant presentation of cybercommunities and Second Life as deviant 'bandit countries', our findings, at face value, paint a different picture. Second Life is not primarily a place where individuals exit their real lives to carry out deviant acts, nor do they report commonly experiencing deviant victimisation. Instead, individuals take their real life ideas and attitudes with them into Second Life and the cybercommunity is perceived as a place where they can give expression to their true selves through valued social relationships relatively free from interference.

This is not to suggest that Second Life is a social utopia, devoid of deviance or social problems entirely. Its mirroring of real life, good and bad, is key in understanding deviance in Second Life – how it is conceived and the extent of its existence. We suggest that there appears to be a reflective relationship between 'the world of cybercommunities' and the real world, such that, as in the real world, notions of deviance in Second Life need to be reconsidered

Second Life by itself is a blank page ... You could attach a label to Second Life as being a platform for perverts, but much, much worse happens in Real Life. Usually the label is attached by uninformed journalists who have had a bad experience... Second Life, is only as good as its people. First Life is only as good as its people. In this way the two are the same ... (Forum correspondence, March 4, 2009)

Our data indicates that as in real life the behaviours of Second Life residents range over a wide continuum. Thus, a more nuanced picture is required, one which avoids the pitfalls of damning the cybercommunity as deviance-ridden. The reality is one where there is ample potential for the technologically constituted world of Second Life to provide both opportunities and mechanisms that amplify real life behaviours. Indeed, this was a common theme in our forum exchanges, for example

Unavoidably Second Life DOES have its darker side. But in this way it reflects real life also... There will always be 'Crime (griefing)' in Second Life just as there will always be crime in First Life. But Second Life still does serve as a catalyst for ordinary people to go way beyond their bounds of reason and try something that would be considered taboo in Real Life. (Forum correspondence, March 6, 2009)

Perhaps, it is this notion of the potential for deviant behaviour, actual or perceived, in Second Life which is critical in understanding deviance in cybercommunities. Thus, our focus turns from 'how much deviance is there in Second Life?' to 'why does Second Life have a deviant image?'. Our findings reveal that the dystopic conceptual linkage between deviance and cybercommunities may not mean any 'real' deviance in these communities. Perceptions of deviance in Second Life mirror perceptions of real life, suggesting that participants in Second Life do not perceive it as a place of/for unregulated behaviour. Our findings also show that the performance and experience of deviant behaviour is much lower than previous accounts and commentators have suggested.

Why does the link between Second Life and deviant behaviour persist? We will consider each of the following three characteristics: (i) a considerable plurality of values; (ii) a lack of physicality; and (iii) a strong perception of anonymity.

A Plurality of Values

Jock Young has argued that a plurality of values – one of the primary characteristics of modern societies – arises from three sources: (i) the diversification of lifestyles; (ii) the closer integration of society; and (iii) the immigration of people from other societies. The plurality has changed deviance. Deviance is no longer perceived as "*inherent* in an item of behaviour, it is a quality that is *bestowed* upon it by human evaluation" (Young, 1999: 39; emphasis in original). Indeed, deviance is socially constructed and culturally embedded (Box, 1971; Christie, 2004).

For Giddens (1990), social structures are created and reproduced in a reciprocal interaction between individuals' actions and societal institutions – an individual's action is both the product and the producer of social structure, and society's institutions and structures are the means and the outcome of individuals' actions. The increasing migration of people produces culturally diverse societies and introduces new cultural perceptions and tastes (Giddens, 2001). Second Life is a world that exemplifies the growing plurality of values in our increasingly globalised societies. Through the diversity of its sub-communities and groups, an amplification of particularisation generates an environment where everyone may be a potential deviant other. This is because the greater the extent of the plurality of values, the greater the likelihood that the perception of deviance will be manifested and magnified (cf. Young, 1999).

In Second Life, the analysis of deviance must be applied to the cybercommunity as a whole, as well as to sub-community and group. This social constructionist view of deviance was illustrated throughout forum discussions, as expressed by one of our correspondents

But if you joined "Deviant Life", you'd therefore be deviant, which would in turn make you not deviant (because you'd be like everyone else there), which would mean you shouldn't be there at all, because you're not deviant. Alternatively, you could join "Deviant

Life” and not be deviant, which would make you deviant... (Forum correspondence, March 5, 2009)

Deviance is, therefore, person and context specific. However, our findings clearly indicated that the use of rules and norms by which individuals evaluate acts in real life is mirrored in Second Life. Definitions and perceptions of deviance, therefore, must be seen in the complex interplay between ‘global’ norms and ‘local’ norms that pertain in a given sub-community. At the same time, specific features of Second Life also have their impact on the participant’s perception of deviance. For example, technology-related acts that can only be carried out by individuals with advanced technical skills were considered highly deviant – possibly because of their potentially destructive power and the relative powerlessness of participants to defend against such acts.

Certainly, notions of deviance are not homogenous. The perception of deviance in Second Life as a whole reflects the norms of the majority – a moral and social consensus that covers most spheres of social life

Deviance is a sloppy word, and can be emotionally overcharged. I live (in real life) in a predominantly gay neighbourhood. My husband and I have sometimes been the only heterosexuals in the room. How do you think deviance is understood in my neighbourhood? (Forum correspondence, March 5, 2009)

The various communities in Second Life express values which shape the forms of behaviour that are acceptable in that community. Thus, although at a global level notions of deviance may remain relatively stable and have longevity, the closer one gets to the local level, or the ‘ground’, the greater the potential for *user-defined notions of deviance* to emerge that differ from those of the users of other communities or the global norms. Moreover, participants in Second Life come from different parts of the world and have various kinds of political, social and cultural perceptions. In this respect, Second Life mirrors multicultural society in real life, but only more so, as one respondent notes

SL is a multi-national, multi-cultural sort of thing. What is welcome in one sim,¹⁴ is unwelcome in another. You will find differences in social rule sets from parcel to parcel, let alone sim to sim. (Forum correspondence, March 5, 2009)

Nevertheless, the exaggeration of multiculturalism and plurality of values does not necessarily lead to deviance

Second Life is designed to reflect the senses we experience in our normal life, with exaggeration. The rules in Second Life are closely related to the laws of crowd control we already have. For those who cannot control their own desires, and need to be forced to keep the deviancy to a government controlled maximum, such as sex with children, obscene nudity in places where it’s not allowed, and common sense including respect to another being. (Forum correspondence, March 6, 2009)

To an outsider, activities that are considered as normal by participants in Second Life may be seen as deviant. For example, Rymaszewski et al. (2007) found that rather than a human ethnic group, a fox-like anthropomorphic animal character – the Furry – is the most well represented group of residents in Second Life. Despite its popularity, to an outsider, being ‘Furry’ may be seen as deviant, or, at least, an odd choice of avatar. This, in turn, may create a general perception of cybercommunities which, in extremis, can be seen as lawless spaces – where every single individual is a deviant other – presenting challenges for research into the concept, constitution and analysis of deviance.

Indeed, the plurality of values in Second Life is greatly extended by its facilitation of imaginary forms of existence. Thus, it is natural to assume that a high level of tolerance of different norms would be found, be they mainstream or alternative. Actually, our data shows that Second Life participants have a more respectful attitude towards alternative norms, such as sub-community norms and group norms. Half (50%) of our correspondents reported that they considered a failure to respect

¹⁴ The smallest unit of community in Second Life.

group norms common to the group as 'very or certainly deviant', whereas only 7% of our correspondents reported that they considered such failure as 'not at all deviant'. Furthermore, in Second Life, participants' respect towards alternative norms is stretched as far as conforming to local and group norms even if these norms are perceived as deviant by individuals outside that group or locale – almost 40% of our correspondents reported that they considered a failure to respect local norms in 'deviant' sub-communities and groups as 'very or certainly deviant', whereas only 9% of the correspondents considered such behaviour as 'not at all deviant'.

Our forum discussions were also indicative of a more tolerant attitude toward activities and lifestyles in Second Life than toward their corresponding real life ones. This, in turn, may result in a more tolerant evaluation of activities in Second Life

In Second Life, people are just more open about what they already do in Real Life. It may seem SL is full of deviants, but not any more than RL is. They are just more visible and readily identifiable, as they do not have to worry about the very real discrimination and backlash people with alternative lifestyles experience in Real Life. Paradoxically that fact may indeed lead to more people with alternative lifestyles to come to SL :-). (Forum correspondence, March 6, 2009)

In short, in Second Life, there is a far more complex interplay among different sets of norms and rules than in most communities in the real world. Inhabitants of Second Life exhibit a significant plurality of values yet, at the same time, display less of an inclination to define the values and behaviours of others as deviant. Differences in values and behaviours may be able to explain the real life perception of cybercommunities as deviant.

A Lack of Physicality

At first sight, a lack of physicality appears to be the most significant difference between the real world and cyberspace – leading to a lack of personal and social bonds in cybercommunities and, thus, resulting in increased levels of deviant activities (cf. Williams, 2003). Though no one is physically present, the lack of physicality in Second Life does not necessarily mean that individuals are not engaged in valued social and personal relationships. The absence of physicality does, however, have implications – although financial damage and penalty are still possible, no one can be physically hurt by deviant activities or directly physically punished for performing most deviant activities in Second Life (of course, with the exceptions of serious crimes, e.g. the distribution of child pornography). Therefore, the lack of physicality may create the space and opportunities for deviance to manifest

My behaviour is less inhibited in SL than RL. There are very few consequences in SL. You can do things that are hindered by RL physical, social, and economic constraints. (Forum correspondence, March 4, 2009)

Being less inhibited, however, does not necessarily mean that the behaviour is deviant, either in form, content, or extent. It could be argued that it is also possible for Second Life to be perceived by some residents as a safe place for the performance of deviance

I do intentionally do things in Second Life that I know are clearly deviant in the physical world, but not out of any desire to push boundaries or test moral perceptions. Usually things are easier because of the less judgmental and physically safer environment. (Forum correspondence, March 4, 2009)

Although the potential for deviance has been directly linked by others to the lack of physicality (Williams, 2003), our data on individuals' performance and experience of deviance hardly presents Second Life as an environment where deviant activities manifest frequently. Previous assumptions about the roles of physicality in creating opportunities for deviance and in reducing inhibitors of deviance do not appear to be supported by our data.

So, why do individuals appear to obey the rules of Second Life? Our data showed that despite the lack of physicality, there remain close personal and social bonds in Second Life – when the 39 motivations are listed in a descending order based on the extent of their motivating power, motivations concerning social bonding (e.g. finding friends and belonging to communities) were amongst the more motivating factors. For example, 65% of the participants are ‘very much’ or ‘quite a lot’ motivated by being able to enjoy general social interactions. On the contrary, less motivating factors can be associated with different degrees of triviality and playfulness, e.g. doing things without worrying about the consequences (25%) and enjoying vacations (16%). We suggest that the relative importance of these personal and social bonds, following Hirschi (1969), may partly explain the low frequency of deviance in Second Life and conformity to group norms.

The extent to which our correspondents emphasised these personal and social bonds demonstrates that a lack of physicality per se, therefore, does not seem to be a critical factor in explaining deviance in a cybercommunity. To understand this, it is necessary to explore the transformation of trust relations from traditional to modern society (Giddens, 1990). In the pre-modern period, social interaction was conducted face-to-face and trust was expressed in, and sustained by, this direct communication with other individuals in close physical proximity. Trust in modern society is increasingly removed from immediate physical contact. Rather, it is built via abstract systems that disembed relations from the local context, whilst reembed these relations in distant locations. Thus, it is not just that individuals in the modern world have to place trust in abstract systems; it is that the act of doing so has become *a normal and normalised feature of modern social life*.

Second Life can be seen as an example where the lack of physicality has reached an extreme and where trust in abstract systems is endemic – where all activities are performed in a non-face-to-face fashion. Various abstract sub-systems, such as Friendship Cards, Partner, Local Chat and Instant Message, enable participants to sustain personal intimacy and communal bond in an environment that is constructed by computer software. Since, it is normal to place trust in abstract systems in real life, this makes our reliance on abstract systems in Second Life less of a problem, indeed, quite normal – at least for some. Moreover, the capacity of Second Life to induce high quality personal bonds is a characteristic which seems to be highly valued by its residents.

However, a word of caution is necessary. In real life, although activities are increasingly dependent on mechanisms of non-face-to-face communication, many social and personal relations are dependent on face-to-face communication. In contrast, in Second Life, all activities – including the most intimate ones – are dependent on mechanisms of non-face-to-face technological systems. Consequently, the extent of penetration of abstract systems may be experienced by new residents and outsiders of Second Life as a kind of culture shock – since “the wholesale penetration of abstract systems into daily life creates risks which the individual is not well placed to confront” (Giddens, 1991: 36). Indeed, the total penetration of abstract technological systems in Second Life and the level of trust in these systems that are required from participants are features alien to most environments in real life. To an insider, trust in abstract systems becomes a source of valued social interaction; to the outsider, Second Life appears inherently risky, dangerous and deviant.

Our analysis suggests that a lack of physicality does not appear to be a critical factor in understanding cybercommunities and deviance in these environments. Evidently, participants in Second Life sought out meaningful social interactions and were able to construct and sustain highly personally valued social bonds despite the lack of physicality. They are at home with abstract systems as members of modern society.

A Strong Perception of Anonymity

A significant amount of research has been directed at the effect of anonymity on behaviour in online environments (e.g. Douglas and McGarty, 2001). Demetious and Silke’s research (2003) demonstrates that in online environments, individuals are more likely to engage in behaviours that are normally subjected to strong social disapproval or sanction. Nevertheless, anonymity is not a product of the Internet. In modern societies, personal and social relationships are increasingly more anonymous and less cordial (e.g. Adams, 2001). Crime rates are high in modern cities, partly because urbanisation and

high residential mobility have undermined community cohesion and generated more anonymous relations in our physical space (e.g. Adler and Laufer, 2000; Braithwaite, 1989; Christie, 2004).

An anonymous social interaction basically means that the real name or identity of, for example, the sender of a message is not shown or known.¹⁵ As we noted with respect to the previous two characteristics, anonymity in personal and social relations in the modern world is, at face value, amplified in Second Life, which can naturally be taken to explain the assumption of a high level of deviance in Second Life. Indeed, it is natural to assume that anonymity (and the supposed freedom of behaviour associated with it) is one of the main attractions of Second Life, since in the cybercommunity all participants are represented via self-created 3D avatars. These 3D avatars are typically given images and names distinct from those of the real world individuals behind them, potentially interchanging sex, age race, class, even species. However, our data shows that anonymity does not necessarily lead to deviance

People are making an assumption that SL was created to be different from RL and yet in so many ways it mimics RL spectacularly (primarily when dealing with the behaviours of people). Yes, the ANONYMITY in SL often encourages most people to censor themselves less. Does that anonymity increase deviant behaviour? No, it only gives it form to take place. (Forum correspondence, March 5, 2009)

Our data demonstrates that, on balance, the evidence is in favour of a greater emphasis on individuals' participation in Second Life as a vehicle to reconstruct and re-embrace their subjective identities rather than a desire for anonymity. Whilst just over 45% of our respondents valued real world personal anonymity, just over half (55%) were 'very much' or 'quite a lot' motivated by being known as whom they truly are. Thus, it may be suggested that Second Life residents are primarily participating in the cybercommunity to 'live' their real identities liberated from the social pressures and restrictions of real life, even if these real identities are 'lived' through the creation of anonymised fantasy images.

Although the 3D avatar creation technologies in Second Life enable participants to create all kinds of images to represent themselves, a lack of physical resemblance does not necessarily lead to an absence of self-identification. A different self-image does not necessarily mean a different subjective self-identity. Rather, our evidence suggests that participants in Second Life are able to portray their subjective self-identities through their online fantasy images and that they value this facility. Statements such as that below were common in our research

My avatar is very much like me, not physically in this respect, I am not the same size as her and I am a red head, my AV has black hair and no freckles. But she does not involve herself in any activity she would not do or has done in RL. (Forum correspondence, March 5, 2009)

Moreover, even if some of the participants reported that they want to live different lives in Second Life and to create avatars that are totally different from their real world images, the desire to live such lives through these idealised self-images is initiated in real life

People DO things in Second Life because the DESIRE to do it is there. That Desire is real. The illusion of virtual reality often perpetuates this desire to be stirred into action quicker than it would if it were a Real Life scenario. But my opinion is that any desire is a Real Life working of your brain. Justifying it with the use of a virtual world is irrelevant and I often think that these people would probably do the things they do in Real Life if presented with the situation. (Forum correspondence, March 4, 2009)

For Giddens (1991), self-identity is not a given and constant entity, but a process that must be continuously produced and reproduced as a part of the individual's reflexive and routinised activities

¹⁵ In cybercommunities, such as Second Life, one may argue that instead of anonymity, residents have pseudonymity, which is a common variant of anonymity. In any case, another name other than the real name of the person is shown.

in different public and private social worlds. McGuire (2007) suggests that an individual's body is distributed across different connected regions, including different nodes of social interaction online, such as My Space Page, Mobile Phone number, Gaming Persona, Blog and Bank Account. This theme recurred in our forum discussions

Some people argue that their Second Life is COMPLETELEY separate to their first life. And they are different people in real life. I think this is false because whatever you do anywhere and in whatever format or medium you do it in, it reflects on you as a person... (Forum correspondence, March 4, 2009)

There is, it appears, a strong connection between real life and Second Life identities. But in Second Life, there is an amplification of an individual's identity and behaviour – not a sharp distinction or a dichotomy, as argued by Presdee (2000), but a strong relationship. To some participants, Second Life may serve as “a private world in which the individual can express ... elements of subjective identity” (Berger et al. 1974: 38). To assume, however, a natural and causal link here between true expression and deviance is false

My avatar is not deviant at all; it is just a more extrovert version of my real life personality. (Forum correspondence, March 4, 2009)

In brief, our analysis questions any simple causal relationship between anonymity and deviance in Second Life. Our data showed that Second Life provides its participants with an opportunity to truly express their subjective identities, but that these identities are not necessarily, or even normally, deviant.

Conclusion

Our study of deviance in the cybercommunity Second Life challenges the general perception that cybercommunities are fertile grounds for deviant activities. Using the three characteristics (plurality, physicality and anonymity), we have argued that Second Life has a reflexive relationship with the real world and that it is an authentic and genuine extension of the social life of the real world, where social relationships are based upon similar social bonds as the real world. Second Life is a world where people use abstract technological systems to establish, develop and maintain intimate personal and social relationships at a distance. We have observed strong parallels with real world criminology but also important departures from it. When Second Life is seen as a social community, and when deviance in Second Life is analysed in the same way as deviance in real life, the dominant image of Second Life shifts away from deviance to solidarity and to conformity.

Cybercommunities, such as Second Life, are extreme examples of modernity, both technologically and sociologically. The social construction of reality is the purpose of building such communities; wherein creating one's own identity is the main attraction of the community; wherein individualism must be respected; and wherein no single culture can have an unchallenged dominance. Ultimately, far from being a hotbed of deviance, Second Life is a world of amplified human possibilities, where notions of deviance and the tolerance of the behaviour of others is socially constructed in the complex interplay between global and local norms. The perception of deviance in Second Life reflects some broad cultural and social anxieties and pressures stemming from the heart of modernity.

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