

Chapter 10 summaries

Understanding virtual worlds

- Virtual worlds are computer-generated representations of three-dimensional space. They are commonly graphically rich but some early virtual worlds were text-based.
- Different virtual worlds serve different functions. Some are socially based and users are encouraged to interact with others and to develop their avatar and virtual property, but there is no specified goal. Other virtual worlds are more goal-oriented and similar to traditional computer games.
- Some virtual worlds are known as massively multiplayer online role-playing games (or MMORPGs). These environments can have hundreds or thousands of people playing online at a given time.
- In some MMORPGs players can form teams and collaborations in order to achieve goals.

Types of crimes

- Crimes can be classified as crime against the person or as property crimes.
- Property crimes often involve theft of either online goods or result in the loss of offline goods.
- Crimes against the person can include bullying, assault or even online rape.

Incidence and motivation

- A complete picture of the nature and extent of online crime in virtual worlds is difficult to achieve due to insufficient research, it not being taken seriously by some, and lack of reporting.
- The motivations for online crime in virtual worlds are complex but include greed, ambition to accelerate progress through a game and a sense of empowerment or domination.

Effect on victims

- Online crimes can cause post-victimisation symptoms.
- The greater a person's immersion in a virtual world the more severe post-victimisation symptoms can be.
- Victim blaming is common for online crimes as there is a perception that a victim can easily remove themselves from harm.
- Acute stress disorder has been observed in victims of online crime, this appears to be more common in those who have suffered an offline crime experience.

Victim aid

- In online virtual worlds reporting procedures for criminal activities may be unclear. Some have procedures for reporting misconduct but these are not always found to be satisfactory by victims.
- Online virtual worlds need to be clearer about their complaints procedures, and the possible outcomes of these. They may also need to be clearer about the possible repercussions of reporting crime in online virtual worlds to offline authorities.
- The greatest need for assistance that online victims have is often emotional support. In some cases victims have sought this from other members of the online community, but the evidence of victim-blaming for crimes in online virtual worlds may result in increased upset for victims.
- A restorative justice approach may be suited for crimes in online virtual worlds as it allows the victim to feel that they have been heard. Restorative justice focuses on the harm caused by the crime and, more specifically, the victims of the crime and may involve a mediated meeting between the victim and the offender.

Policing, prevention and punishment

- Online crimes with definite offline applications and risks should be under the remit of the appropriate police force.
- The distinction between an offline crime and an event which is purely virtual is less clear when the damages caused to the victim are emotional or psychological in nature, without any physical or monetary harm being caused.

- It is possible that each virtual world needs separate 'policing' as different worlds have differing social norms and definitions of acceptable and unacceptable behaviours.
- Creators of each virtual world should put in place a strict set of laws or social norms outlining what is and is not acceptable, and ensure that the virtual world is patrolled sufficiently well so that all wrongdoings are observed and punished appropriately.
- It may be that cybersocieties should mirror the offline world, where the police rely greatly on the citizens of the relevant society to report misconduct and that virtual punishment is the appropriate recourse for crimes which occur in an online community.