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# Online Gaming and the Social Construction of Virtual Victimization

STEVEN DOWNING

> Losing any possession in game should have no meaning to you. The only thing that should be hurt when you lose in a game should be your pride that's it. (Online gamer 1)

> Real people are doing real things to real people when they do them in game…The only difference is that when it's done online, there's more space between you and the person you're speaking with. (Online gamer 2)

The preceding quotes and their distinctly different perspectives reflect a discourse central to the social construction of cyber-victimization, particularly within the context of the online game. In this inquiry I explore and seek to explain the nature of this discourse as it plays out in the form of a negotiated social construction process—a process emergent within one of the earliest graphical online role playing games, Ultima Online (herein referred to as UO). UO is a pioneer of what is now a market of many online virtual worlds that are becoming more immersive and encompassing a growing spectrum of opportunities to engage in mimicked "real" behavior. In these virtual worlds the connection of a player with the virtual world is becoming more visceral, and thus exposure to virtual harm has the potential to become more real.

The data I draw upon is from an ethnography conducted in UO, wherein members may be deeply entrenched in game-specific subcultures and are also invested in the "reality" of the game as a meaningful part of their lives. As such, many players find themselves falling victim to virtual thefts, confidence games, and even murders and sexual assaults (Michals 1997). The social and cultural constructs within the game environment negotiate the meaningfulness and nature of these victimization experiences by offering unique perspectives blended with imported offline values and beliefs.

Within the general context of virtual victimization, a number of questions arise, including the extent and nature to which persons are victimized by and commit virtual offenses. Here, however, I will focus on the process by which the meaningfulness and "reality" of victimization are socially constructed within the game. The results of this analysis suggest that not only are there distinct instances of victimization occurring in the context of the online game, but also that the members of the online gaming community serve as the primary agents by which these victimization experiences are defined as harmful, meaningful, or worthy of serious attention.

## From Cybercrime to Cyber Victimization

The cyber victimization literature, such as it is, directs the majority of its focus to the notion that the Internet may be used as a tool or mechanism for remotely harming others (e.g. through cyber stalking, cyber bullying, e-fraud etc.). For example, a great deal of attention has been paid to sex crimes committed against children through or on the Internet (Beech et al. 2008; Wolak et al. 2008; Wolak et al. 2007; Walsh and Wolak 2005; Mitchell et al. 2007; Burke et al. 2002; Craven et al. 2007), and Internet frauds, such as the now well-publicized Nigerian e-mail scams (Chang 2008).

In reality, victimization online is by no means limited to sexual harassment or assault. For example, the Internet serves as a context for non-physical bullying behaviors that were previously limited primarily to face-to-face interactions (Patchin and Hinduja, 2006). There is also evidence that non-sexual victimization is facilitated through Internet protocols such as e-mail or chat (Finn 2004), though these forms are still distinctly meshed with offline interactions and relationships.

Regardless of their context, the aforementioned crimes necessarily involve a victim; however, relatively little research has been conducted regarding other forms of victimization online, especially victimization occurring within the context of online gaming.

Insofar as sociological literature has addressed virtual worlds there has been a tendency to focus on interactions from the perspective of communications scholarship, emphasizing the changing nature of interaction, sharing, and friendships online (Colwell and Kato 2003). The nature of online interaction may indeed encourage or facilitate deviant or criminal behavior that would not otherwise be engaged in offline, and with respect to online deviance there has been some attempt to theoretically explain the nature and extent of this deviance, employing social learning and social control theories (e.g. Durkin 2007; Hodgson 2004; Downing 2009). Ultimately, however, the aforementioned communications-focused and etiological frameworks have dominated the cybercrime literature.

In spite of the relatively young state of cybercrime literature, some research of online victimization has begun to emerge. This research has emphasized the connectivity between online and offline victim experiences. For example, finding that youth reported high rates of online victimization, Mitchell at al. (2007) suggest that online victimization may be related to offline depression and certain forms of delinquency. Davies and Evans (2007) also offer findings regarding escort management of violent victimization, again suggesting that offline and online harm are also often related. Further connecting cyber victimization to knowledge of more traditional victim-offender relationships, Mitchell et al. (2005) offer findings that suggest, at least in the case of sexual exploitation and abuse, family members and acquaintances are often the offending party or parties. Mitchell et al. suggest that family and acquaintance victimization may take the form of extending offline harm in the form of further harassment, grooming, or the dissemination of explicit images.

In spite of a marked movement toward a more holistic body of cybercrime research, there is clearly a need for a more expansive treatment of cyber victimization, one that includes analysis of not only the nature of victims and victimization, but also the social construction process of defining what is and is not victimization in the context

of online interaction.  To this end, though the media can serve as an important educator about cybercrime and cyber victimization (Alexy et al. 2005), it also necessarily interacts in a process of cultural formation surrounding the viability of the notion that cyber victimization is meaningful.  Indeed, on- and offline attitudes are not mutually exclusive (Downing 2009) and subcultural expressions and memberships transition between online and offline settings (Wilson and Atkinson 2005).

Cyber victimization also occurs within the context of online settings that are often viewed as places of relative liberality with respect to free-speech (Graca and Stader 2007), and in the case of the online game this speech is often associated with actions (Downing 2009).  Therefore, it is important to understand that through social construction, cyber-victimization serves as a catalyst for re-framing definitions of both on- and offline crime, criminal, victim, and victimization experiences (Wykes 2007).

To the extent that social construction occurs specifically in online games, the nature of such environments also facilitates the growth of informal social control (Downing 2009) and in some cases a form of community policing whereby agents seek to enact self-help justice, or at the very least to regulate deviant behavior through normative structures and rule-sets (Downing 2009; Williams 2007).  Therefore the victimization experience as it is defined in this context emerges from a negotiation process whereby normative on and offline behaviors are juxtaposed against behaviors viewed as either deviant or acceptable within the game world (Downing 2009).


## Sample and Methods

To collect data for this study I gained membership in a guild of thieves.  Guilds are common to most massive multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGs) and are essentially groups of like-minded players.  The option to steal from other players is less common to the genre and is one reason I chose to study UO over another MMORPG. Like many other MMORPGS, UO is divided into multiple servers that represent distinct groups of players (though players can participate on all servers with different characters).  The server in which my guild was situated also housed an additional 1,681 guilds, though it is impossible to know how many of these were active at the time of research.  In my guild, there were 189 registered members, of whom I observed many were active on a daily basis.

In order to expand the sample size and simultaneously bolster internal validity, a triangulation of mixed qualitative methods and data sources were employed in addition to collecting and recording in-game text and voice chat.  These additional data sources included some 100 forum threads posted in the official forums for the game, as well as informal text interviews using chat software (ICQ) and in-depth surveys completed by roughly 15 players.  This mixed-methods approach facilitates a domain analysis (Spradley 1979) technique whereby thematic chunks of data have here been organized and coded through an abductive reasoning process (Ezzy 2002).  Similar methods have been used to examine 'cybertalk,' where domains are referred to as instances (Denzin 1999).

Returning to the core component of the methodology I employ here, it is worth noting that though cyber ethnography is in its relatively early stages of development, it has

already been recognized as an appropriate method for obtaining rich data, yielding 'thick' descriptions.  It is also a highly reflexive method of capturing rapidly changing social spaces and interactions online (Ward 1999), though it is important that the researcher have a working knowledge of Internet communication protocols and nuances, which facilitate the gaining and maintaining of an ethnographic presence. Communication in the conventional sense is not always possible online, therefore the research must be able to adapt to and understand the absence of physical and nonverbal, non-written cues.  To this end, the data collection and analysis techniques I use here are designed to acknowledge and confront the reality that some Internet interactions are online-specific, others primarily online, while some are present in both on- and offline spaces (Garcia et al. 2009).

Despite my efforts to establish and maintain a deeply entrenched and understanding ethnographic presence in the setting, as well as validate these experiences through triangulated sources and methods, the same inherent strengths of online data collection also serve as weaknesses in other regards.  As discussed, while large amounts of text and voice transcriptions are available, they can require extensive cultural and technical knowledge to decipher and interpret from an insider's perspective.  My own prior experience in the current research setting allowed for this knowledge, but the other limitations of non-face-to-face interactions persist. Nevertheless, as the referenced body of cyber research has suggested, online ethnography is a viable and important method for exploring cyber-interaction.

Therefore, while certainly the advantages of an ethnographic approach are numerous, one additional and natural flaw of this method is that the researcher, while often a participant, remains unobtrusive and in this way unable to guide the inquiry to specific topics of interest.  As a result of this reality, the data I analyze here are not drawn directly from questions designed to focus specifically on victimization. However, it is telling that the victim experience was so rarely addressed directly as that: a victim experience, yet so frequently addressed indirectly as simply action, or behavior within the game.  This trend reinforces the thematic core of the discussion herein: that the external social construction of the notion of a virtual victim is a powerful force in shaping the cultural discourse and disposition toward victimization in the online game.

While a large amount of in-game text was recorded and analyzed, the quotes offered below are drawn from posts and their responses in the aforementioned official forums for UO.  Examples of in-game events and occurrences are drawn from ethnographic experiences in "the field" and serve to contextualize the attitudes, opinions and experiences reflected by these player quotes. This method reinforces internal validity through a triangulation of both experiential and empirical data collection and analysis. Where data was drawn from another source (e.g. an emergent relationship between the researcher and a participant through in-game and ICQ chat, these sources will be noted).

## Constructing the 'Cyber Victim'

Studies of offline crime victimization have identified the important link between culturally embedded concepts such as gender and the construction of—or minimizing

of—certain crimes, specifically sexual assault (Yamawaki 2007).  Where this relationship suggests that individual preferences, biases, and beliefs lead to the interpretation of the harm done to a victim (or the deservedness of that victim), I extend this theory to social construction of victimization within an online gaming culture.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) identified social construction as a process central to both the development and institutionalization of not only norms, values, and beliefs, but also constructs of reality itself—both symbolically and practically.  In the context of the findings discussed herein, I operationalize the social construction process into two frameworks: internal and external—though neither is mutually exclusive, but instead should be viewed as interacting with one another.

Essentially, I intend to present internally driven—or negotiated—social construction as a process whereby actors within a specific (sub)culture—in this case, the game—negotiate the meaning and 'reality' of a construct; that construct here being victimization.  Similarly, I examine how players view and use social constructs outside of the game to shape the social construction of victimization both within their game-playing experience and in their lives outside of the game.  The analysis of these processes will serve to not only further examine social construction in virtual social spheres, but also to develop a qualitative understanding of a negotiated definition of virtual victimization.

It will be obvious in the analysis below that this inquiry's definition of both virtual offending and victimization is predominantly focused on "property" offenses, or the theft of in-game items.  It is worth noting the reason for this focus, and acknowledging this focus as both a limitation and opportunity for expanded research in the future.  While virtual violence will be discussed, the nature of the methodological strategy (i.e. joining a thieves' guild) guided the focus of the experiential research.  This portion of the research, or that that has been herein referred to as the ethnographic component, serves to contextualize the analyzed forum dialogue of active and former UO players.  These forum posts are more diverse in nature (which is one reason they have been chosen to represent many of the concepts discussed below).  As such, the reader will find some discussion of virtual violence, but also observe that the analysis moves toward a conclusion that virtual victimization in the game is socially constructed in such a way that, among this gaming community, virtual theft is more impactful and worthy of the term "victimization."  Future research may wish to intentionally over-sample persons experiences with or committing acts of virtual harm not related to theft, but for the purposes of this inquiry this limitation has a minimal impact of the proposed theoretical and practical implications.


## Internal Construction

In order to explain the social construction process of the concept of victim in the online setting, it is helpful to draw on the subcultural perspective; one that suggests that the presence, use, and exchange of symbolic artifacts, behaviors, and norms are associated with socialization within a subculture (Coleman et al. 1961; Fine and Kleinman 1979).  This perspective will serve as the framework for examining the

nature and extent to which members within the online game setting reflect and utilize these subcultural elements and interactions in order to generate a shared definition of victimization.

The majority of harmful acts I observed or learned about occurring in the context of the game involved the loss of virtual property, whether a rare in-game item or sum of game currency.  The other, less frequently observed type of harm came in the form of either a physical or a verbal assault on another player's character.  Each of these harm-types can perceivably involve a victim and offender, but the validity of the experience as one of victimization is negotiated by actors within the game itself.  The defining frame of reference for internal construction of victimization therefore relates to the perceived relative harm of such actions within the game, but as the following excerpts and examples will illustrate, this relative harm is defined through reference to both in-game and external (offline) examples.

I found that many players define the value of in-game items based on the time spent playing the game to achieve them; one player referencing this time investment in order to construct the seriousness of the victimization:

> So, when someone uses an exploit to steal some stuff that you've spent a considerable PART OF YOUR LIFE to obtain, why on earth would you find it incomprehensible that the person who had the fruit of their labor unfairly taken from them might get angry?

Other players use a dominant moral imperative to construct theft as wrong, regardless of time investment: 'All I can agree with is the stealing from NPCs [non-player characters]. Player characters should be off limits. You still do not have a right to take my stuff.'

Serving to oppose these perspectives are those players who view playing the game as a leisure activity—unlike working to earn wages spent on actual property—thus constructing property victimization in game as non-significant or less significant than offline victimization:

> Comparing losing a bike you paid for doing a job you probably hate but have no choice but doing to a game you play for pure amusement… What's the world coming too?

This player's question—'what's the world coming to?'—also implies that to view in-game theft as true victimization is abnormal, specifically when invoking the offline frame of reference.

Contrarily, some players do view the game as a form of work.  One such player provided a hypothetical question to illustrate the relationship between work, game-playing, and actual wealth (some players in fact sell in game property for large amounts of real currency).

> Yes some people really like their job but how many of them would still quit if they win 10 million dollars? Would someone still quit [the game] if he won that kind of money? Maybe but to do other stuff he enjoys more then the game.

Still other players propose the perspective that because the game is a form of 'play,' virtual loss of items in-game should have no meaning. However, this perspective also suggests that non-tangible components of self may still be harmed by other's actions:

> Losing any possession in game should have no meaning to you. The only thing that should be hurt when you lose in a game should be your pride that's it.

The aforementioned quote illustrates an emotional commodity of sorts—pride—but it also illustrates the second type of harm that I observed in the context of in-game interaction. Since players may attack other players' characters (or avatars) within the game, there arises an opportunity for virtual assault and murder of these avatars that are representative of either a game player or a player's chosen character role.

I observed two typical components of an assault on another player: a physical and a verbal aspect. The verbal aspects (e.g. harassment, taunting) often accompany the physical actions (e.g. attacking another player). One player in particular suggests that:

> Character death is not as severe as player death, and loss of in game items are typically not as severe as loss of physical items... but they still are real things that happen to real people. Speach is something that is equal both online and offline.

Again, the offline world is used as a frame of reference for determining the severity of victimization in-game, but is negotiated with the contextual reality that speech can be harmful within the game—especially when accompanying another form of perceivably harmful action. Indeed, many players expressly acknowledge a preference for causing grief for others in the game.

> I often like to PK [player kill], and its mostly for the fun of it. i often like to torture the lesser victims, like newbies [new players], craftsmen etc by red lining [nearly killing] them and letting a poison finish them. and its all purely for amusement.

Another player comments:

> Now as for PK's... its just fun… To roleplay a serial killer has its moments. To be able to role play a evil character is fine... and there are surely some evil vilions out there.

While these role preferences suggest a potential importation of values and beliefs external to the game, they may also illustrate a key point at which such importation is blocked by the belief that in-game behavior is wholly separate from offline value-structures (also see Downing 2009). In spite of this perspective, however, I observed that the negotiated normative definition of in-game victimization suggests an acknowledgement and recognition of the player behind the character. This recognition validates both the player as an invested member of the game subculture and the time-investment spent on in-game interaction and relationship development. To illustrate, consider this player comment regarding in-game speech and actions.

> It shows that there is a Real Human being in this little box I am squinting to read these words through, who has thought about his actions and life over the last 10 years, and is certainly in touch with their own humanity.

Therefore, despite the clear visual and physical unreality of the game, the internal reality of interaction and negotiated social constructs results in definition of victimization as contextually meaningful, though perhaps comparatively less valid.

## External Construction

Crosset and Beal (1997) suggest an important point to the understanding of the external influences over the construction of virtual victimization within the game setting: that subcultures are structurally subordinate to dominant cultural components.  This reality is reflected in how what Turkle (2003) suggests is a necessary role-choice required of online game players creates a tension between self and multiple selves.  We may consider the process of victimization construction in a similar way, whereby multiple persons potentially assuming diverse roles must negotiate the definition of victim and offender in the online setting—their frames of reference drawn from in-game behavior and role-status as well as external attitudes and norms regarding victimization.  As I suggest in the aforementioned section, the contextual validity of in-game victimization may be challenged by reference to external cultural structures.

Indeed, oftentimes external comparisons and a juxtaposition of 'game' versus 'real life' serve as the key frame of reference for defining in-game victimization.  Even the game developers invoke reference to external lifestyle when referring to exploitation of the game and other players within the game world.  One developer, when addressing exploiters producing and selling fraudulent items in the game, suggests, 'We WILL find you, so you might as well just stop wasting your time and go find another game to exploit. Or, I have a better idea - how about if you go find something productive to do with your lives? That's the best idea of them all.'

Players often reference the sacrifice of offline activities and relationships as evidence of a clear demarcation between 'real' and 'game.'

> anyone who would pass up sex (& this isnt limited only to sex) with their significant other for a freakin video game has some real issues & the other needs to find someone else thatll put them above a video game (married or not) Ya, I know, I enjoy playing video games too, but RL [real life], especialy a relation ship with another human is far better than anything a video game can possibly provide.

Though the line between the game and 'real life,' as this player puts it, varies among different players (see Downing 2009), during my research I nevertheless observed a generally normative assertion that victimization in the game does involve victimization of an actual person; as one player suggests:

> The problem with people who complain about others who bring IRL [in real life] examples to the game is that they forget that the game is player IRL by real people behind real computers running real programs.

A 'traditional' thief reverberates this position, suggesting that:

> Scamming. Asking for someone's trust and then using that trust to get what you want. I feel that's it's more of an "out of character" attack against the person behind the computer, rather than a good ole' fashioned steal.

The assertion that reality traverses the on- and offline experience is symbolic of a generally observed awareness of a person behind the characters one may encounter in the game, but the significance of this awareness is mediated by the ascription of 'just play,' or 'just a game' to the general experience of all interactions (victimization included) within the game world. This point is illustrated by the continued commentary of the player remarking on "real players" in the game, who goes on to suggest about the game: 'just like tennis is played on a real court with a real ball, a real racket and a real human opponent. No difference.' The evoking of offline references is both symbolically and procedurally important to the construction of victimization within the game, but as with the contextually oriented reference frames, those external to the game world diverge along a typological line (theft and assault).

As with the previous examples of attitudes toward the importance of game events in general, a key factor in negotiating the meaningfulness of property theft victimization in the game relates to the inherent value of virtual property—specifically in the context of a game. I generally observed two perspectives, one suggesting that because games are a form of recreation, the value of items obtained within them is second to the enjoyment one derives from playing the game itself—'The reason to play any game is the fun factor not how many pixels you store in your bank box.'

However, another perspective may be drawn from thieves themselves, who garner enjoyment from a combination of victimizing others, the process of obtaining virtual property, or the property itself. Regarding the first motivation, I found a number of persons discussing the archetypal immaturity of game-offenders, though some thieves directly admitted to such behavior and priding themselves on victimizing players to the point of forcing them to quit the game.

> most of us have griefed people to the point of them almost quitting. as for stealing, yea man...you're a thief. everything is fair game. I got my kicks off being an arse in general and griefing everyone that I could.

Another player remarks that 'I need to get back to ripping people off. It always made me happy.'

These quotes serve to illustrate that in-game thieves recognize a victim, whether perceived as 'real' outside of the game or not. However, I observed that a specific adaptation of the traditional thief model within the game has emerged. This type, known as the 'con thief' often relies on external contact with a victim in order to develop a relationship, which may later be exploited to steal items within the game. One more traditional in-game thief admitted: 'I have always admired the people who would con people in game, but could never bring myself to go there,' suggesting that real moral qualms, while potentially preventing one from engaging in this type of theft, also acknowledge the reality that in-game victims are potentially harmed outside of the game as well.

Over the course of the research I did develop (through the game and external chat via ICQ) a relationship with one such con-thief in particular. This thief relayed

experiences of victimizing persons in the game by deception and building confidence outside of the game, typically through a chat protocol.  He would often assume a role of one perceptibly trustworthy, such as a young mother.  Many times he would relay to his victims in the game that he (posing as a mother) would need to take care of crying babies, thus expediting the fraudulent trade both through creating a sense of urgency and through establishing trust in his assumed character role.  This example illustrates that while some players certainly do draw a distinct line between victimization in the game and effects external to the game, others (the offenders themselves included) acknowledge and even potentially exploit the clear connectivity between offline and online emotional investment.

Interestingly, I found that attitudes toward in-game physical harm were less bifurcated.  Instead, the nature of physical (and to some extent verbal) assault of one's in-game character were viewed as  leading to temporally brief periods of harm, especially when compared to the loss of in-game property, which often required a great deal of time and energy to obtain.  Ultimately, the portrayed severity of physical harm in the game may serve to further distance it from an offline moral imperative. Referring to this distinction, one player remarks that:

> only some [ethics] actually transfer that over to the game, hence for the most part you have an entirely different ethical system with [the game]. RL Ethics do not equal [game] ethics. If that was true, there wouldn't be any killing in [the game], because it would be unethical.

Reference to external ethics illustrates an in-game cognizance of dominant cultural values outside of the game. Reinforcing the presence of this cognizance, players often evoke reference to their own personal offline values (most reflecting dominant cultural values) when discussing in-game actions or negotiating interactive behavior. I observed one such conversation in which two players discussed their dislike of another player.

> Player 1: 'thats the kind of prson id smack the shit out of in rl [real life].

> Player 2: 'but i don't hit women'

> Player 1: 'that's not considered a woman'

By specifically referencing both in-game and external physical harm, these players acknowledge their cognizance of external dominant values while playing the game, specifically regarding gender and interpersonal violence.  This awareness illustrates a larger connection between game (sub)culture and external dominant culture, suggesting that victimization within the game is sensitive to a macro-ethic. Ultimately, as suggested, this sensitivity may actually serve to further distinguish in-game physical and verbal assault from meaningful and valid victimization.

## Implications

### Game Design Implications

Regarding game design, the findings of this inquiry yield some interesting results, many of which designers of MMORPGs are likely already aware:

1. Players invest both time and emotional energy in procuring in-game items, creating an attachment to these items that is not unlike that between a person and "real-world" possessions and property.

2. As such, the acquisition, protection, and in some cases theft of these items serves as a central component of the emotional experience of a game-player and their surrounding virtual environment.

3. This relationship suggests that - as many players remarked - a sense of risk and reward can be achieved by creating opportunities for loss of items. However, this risk-reward scenario is not appreciated by all players, leading to 4.

4. Some players perceive the loss of in-game items as true victimization, and indeed the loss of in-game items is constructed as a much more "real" victimization experience than the death of an in-game character that may be resurrected with little or no penalty.

These key points illustrate both a need and opportunity for game designers to consider and implement game systems that acknowledge the emotional and time-investments of players, particular in the acquisition of in-game items.  Game designers often consider story to be a key method for stimulating player emotions, but the findings of this inquiry suggest that (at least in an MMORPG), the degree of player freedom with respect to item-theft can in fact create a player-driven state of emotional-investment.  However, ethical, and perhaps in the future – legal – consideration, should factor into such design decisions.

### Criminological Implications

Criminology has recognized that culture serves as a mechanism for influencing and controlling punitive attitudes and severity of sanctions (Mathews and Young 2003).  Here I suggest that cultural components are also drawn upon as a means by which to assess the validity of a victimization experience as well as to construct the perceived severity of the harm, 'wrongness' of the victimizing act, and responsibility of the offender.  More specifically, four key observations can be drawn from the current study.

1. Both internal and external references suggest a dichotomous structure of the social construction of virtual victimization.  These structural categories include theft of virtual items and assault on one's character (both verbal and physical)

2. The in-game frame of reference results in a negotiated meaning of victimization that acknowledges harm done by both theft and assault.

3. However, comparison of in-game events to external cultural components leads to a delineation between in-game theft and assault, resulting in a disposition toward in-game theft as being more harmful than in-game assault.

4. Emotional and time investments in acquisition of in-game property are viewed as significant factors in determining the seriousness of victimization. The perceived brief duration of harm caused by assault is used to evidence its relative invalidity as a true victimization experience.

Implications of these key findings suggest that external cultural references (norms, values and beliefs) may help construct validation of a victimization experience—or its meaningfulness—in a number of contexts, reaching beyond just the online game. However, as online interaction becomes increasingly common and visceral in nature, it is with added urgency that social scientists should examine the nature and extent of online victimization (whether 'virtual' or not). Likewise, the anonymity of the Internet—as well as its broad reach and accessibility—may also be used to facilitate positive environments through which victim-healing, sharing and expert consultation can occur (Mawby 2004).

Future research in this area will benefit from a more directed approach to victimization, drawing on instruments with specific items designed to probe for insight into the virtual victimization phenomenon. Cyber ethnography can continue to be a useful method for extracting rich qualitative accounts from the field—in this case online game worlds—but should continue to be triangulated with other methodological strategies that may more effectively tap into aggregate measures of extent and severity. A combination of methods will benefit from capturing micro-level (sub)cultural nuances as well as macro-level descriptive information about the persons, institutions, and policies involved in the virtual victimization issue.

Regarding policy specifically, I am reluctant to offer any firm recommendations. Though it is apparent that virtual victimization ranges in its severity and impact on the victim, the legal precedence and framework for protecting virtual property and persons is currently underdeveloped. Future scholarship may benefit from exploring virtual victimization from a socio-legal perspective. However, I do contend that the findings presented here are indicative of a clear need for policy makers to at least prepare to address a distinct shift in the nature of interaction—both from off- to online and from contemporary online to one more immersive and visceral. A 2010 survey of 5,000 European and North American gamers found that 60% of respondents had purchased in-game items (DFC Intelligence 2009). Coupled with the large worldwide online game player base (see, e.g. Woodcock 2006), the defining of and protection of virtual property is likely to become an important policy and criminal justice issue.

Criminology and the social sciences in general have an important opportunity to become empirically informed about this ongoing evolution of virtual property and victimization, as well as to educate the public and drive informed, rational policy.

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