

Virtual reality can yield real legal woes

March 19 2008

What your avatar does in an online fantasy world may very well land you in court. As virtual worlds increasingly generate real-world legal disputes, a cyberlaw scholar at the Rutgers School of Law—Camden is authoring a book that promises to be the first to focus on the complex intersection of law and virtual worlds.

In his forthcoming book “Virtual Law” (Yale University Press, 2009), Greg Lastowka, an associate professor at the Rutgers—Camden law school, will explore how the daily interactions of millions of people who “live” each day in online communities based in such virtual worlds as World of Warcraft or Second Life. In these three-dimensional worlds, individuals relate to one another through avatars, human-like digital depictions that represent real people in a simulated world.

“Virtual worlds are places where new social organizations are formed, new works of art are created, and virtual property is bought and sold for real money,” Lastowka says.

Virtual worlds also raise compelling and new legal questions about such issues as owning virtual assets and preventing virtual crimes. During the last few years alone, numerous federal lawsuits have been filed over disputes in virtual worlds. Real plaintiffs have raised claims involving property rights, criminal activities, contractual duties, copyright and trademark laws, and much more.

Online devotees and the businesses that cater to them aren’t alone in their fascination with virtual realities. Mainstream media attention has

resulted in annual academic conferences and led universities to establish institutes designed to study and create new virtual worlds.

“Twenty years ago, science fiction writers imagined international communities forming within simulated online spaces,” says Lastowka. “That future has arrived. Both law and society will need to adapt to this new environment.”

The Rutgers—Camden legal scholar first started studying the topic of law and virtual worlds in 2003 and co-authored the leading law review article that introduced virtual worlds to the legal academy. He co-founded Terra Nova (<http://terranova.blogs.com>), a blog featuring commentary on virtual worlds from scholars in a variety of academic disciplines.

In addition to his work examining virtual communities, Lastowka has written articles on a range of topics, including laws regulating the Google search engine, authorial attribution rights (meaning the right of an author to be credited), computer trespass and crime, and digital copyright. His research has appeared in such journals as Brooklyn Law Review, Berkeley Technology Law Journal, California Law Review, and Intellectual Property & Technology Law Journal.

Lastowka’s interest in computers started in seventh grade when he wrote and sold a computer game programmed on his Apple II computer. His interest in computers continued through law school, when he built his own web site during the early days of the Web.

At the Rutgers School of Law—Camden, Lastowka teaches a variety of courses, including property, intellectual property, and Internet law. He has a bachelor’s degree from Yale University, where he won the Veech Prize for “the best creative writing by an undergraduate.” Following college, he served in the United States Peace Corps for two years in the

former Soviet republic of Turkmenistan. He then graduated from the University of Virginia Law School, where he was a Hardy Cross Dillard Scholar, an article editor on the Virginia Law Review, and elected to the Order of the Coif. Before joining the Rutgers faculty in 2004, he practiced intellectual property and technology litigation at Dechert LLP.

Source: Rutgers University

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