

No escape from the bullies

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It happens in school, at work, physically, verbally, even by email and text — now researchers at The University of Nottingham say there's no escape in the virtual world.

Researchers are examining the worrying appearance of bullying in the virtual world. Citizens (avatars) of Second Life say targets are likely to be individuals who are new to the virtual world.

With the permission of Linden Lab, the makers of Second Life, researchers from Nottingham University Business School, The Institute of Work, Health and Organisations and The School of Computer Science and Information Technology, took the extraordinary step of setting up a cyber-based focus group to discuss the problem directly with residents.

One resident described what happened when they first experienced Second Life "When I was newbie, there was group of 4, two girls and 2 boys they would throw me around." They destroyed her first house and fired guns at her.

Other behaviours observed by the researchers which can be seen as bullying (griefing) were people shooting others, hitting them with swords, nudity, annoying noisy objects that followed people around and lots of swearing. In some "safe areas" these behaviours are deemed acceptable, whilst in others they are deemed as abusive.

According to the National Ban Bullying at Work Campaign more than 2 million people are bullied at work in the UK today and workplace bullying is now a major cause of stress related illness. There is evidence that e-bullying at work is on the increase and computer experts say residents of the virtual world will have to develop similar strategies to cope with the problem.

Cyber life is catching on. These are computer-based, three dimensional environments where users, known as residents or citizens, meet, interact, play and conduct business together. Second Life opened to the public in 2003 and now has over 6,800,000 residents. The population is growing at 20 per cent a month and business is booming. Each day sees around 500,000 real American dollars change hands. Large amounts of money can be made through the sale of land or selling animation to improve the way avatars move.

IBM has a significant presence in Second Life and other large companies are looking at carrying out development and training there. Reuters has an all digital bureau in Second Life, the BBC has rented a virtual tropical island to broadcast online music festivals and Sky News is about to establish a permanent presence in this virtual world.

In the future we may well access the internet via 3-D interactive sites like Second Life. Experts believe cyber-bullying could have serious implications not just for the people who already inhabit SL and who do business there, but for us all.

In search of evidence Dr Thomas Chesney and his team set out to identify griefing behaviour in the

virtual world and examine similarities and/or differences with behaviour seen in the real-world work place or school. "We're trying to determine how and why grieving happens and the impact it can have on first life."

Experts initially carried out an observational study during three different time periods over one week.

Then they rented a plot of land in Second Life, set up their own office and ran four cyber based focus groups. Avatar, Cray Cramer, the Second Life face of The University of Nottingham, approached residents and around 50 responded. The residents were asked about their experiences and responses to bullying. The sessions were monitored in the real world of The University of Nottingham by Dr Chesney and Occupational Psychologist, Dr Iain Coyne. The discussions were filmed by one of their PhD researchers and the text was emailed back to the real world.

Dr Chesney said: "Avatars can be edited to appear as whatever the user wants which can lead to some interesting exchanges — no one was expecting a participant to turn up looking like a tiger. That wasn't a problem though — the main difficulty was that almost all communication was by text, typed by everyone in the group at their own PCs. It's a challenge for everyone to get their message across when you have to type everything."

Researchers discovered that grieving in Second Life can have negative consequences in the real as well as the virtual world. They were told the likely targets are those who are new to Second Life.

Dr Iain Coyne, Lecturer in Work and Organisational Psychology said: "Similar to bullying at school and work, power was a key factor in grieving. In Second Life it appears that the power imbalance between a griefer and a target is focused on knowledge and experience. A new resident (newbie) may be targeted because of their naivety and inability to stop the grieving. As one participant put it: 'information is power...experience matters'"

Residents discussed potential coping strategies such as clubbing together with other residents to ban griefers from owned land, use whatever

method the environment has to combat griefers, at the moment that is to file an abuse report, and to use the avatar to shield the user from personal attack. Residents also suggested that Linden could change the gaming culture of Second Life and make the environment less tolerant of griefers. However, Linden would rather the residents themselves deal with the problem - in line with the "your world, your imagination" philosophy, which is their slogan.

The findings will be presented for the first time at The European Conference on Information Systems being held in Switzerland on 6th and 7th June 2007.

Funding for this project has come from the Dean of Business, Law and Social Sciences, Professor Christine Ennew, who describes bullying as a complex issue and one which perhaps hasn't had the research attention it deserves. Professor Ennew said: "When we think of virtual environments, the problem becomes even more complex. Bullying can be extremely damaging and institutions — whether schools, companies or universities have a responsibility to protect their staff or students from this kind of behaviour. Cyber bullying is on the increase and is one example of the many dysfunctional ways in which individuals use the internet. If we are to be in a position to address the problem, we need to be able to understand the nature and extent to which it occurs — that's why I think the research project is an important one."

This research could also give the real world a unique opportunity to view bullying from the prospective of the perpetrator. Researchers hope that by giving avatars the protection of in-world anonymity those reported as perpetrators may be more willing to come forward.

It may be, say researchers, that bullying in the virtual world is more common because the real users are anonymous and therefore less inhibited.

An increasing number of researchers are taking an interest in Second Life and the social implications of computer systems. Three other divisions of the Business School — Marketing, Industrial Economics

and Operations Management — will be collaborating with Dr Chesney and his team in the future. They also plan to work with academics from the field of criminology.

Source: University of Nottingham

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