Virtual Worlds Get Real About Punishment

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Virtual worlds have often been called the digital equivalent of the Wild West, where animated alter egos can live in a fantasy frontier. But in some of these universes, a sheriff has come to town.

Slipping a four-letter word into an instant message now could land a user in a virtual timeout. Repeated attempts to make friends with an uninterested character could result in a loss of blogging privileges. And if convicted of starting a "flame war," or an exchange of hostile messages, a user may endure the ultimate punishment -- permanent exile.

A virtual world for mobile devices, called Cellufun, has established a courthouse, where rule-breakers are indicted by their peers and tried by a jury of other community members. If found guilty of a charge, such as using profanity, users must carry out varying levels of sentences, from being mute for 20 minutes to being banished.

For the duration of punishment, a user's avatar -- a cartoon version of his or her real-life self -- is pictured behind bars.

At least one user has been convicted of a crime every day since the Cellufun courthouse opened two weeks ago, said chief executive Arthur Goikhman. Every day, dozens of members are indicted.

"It's really affected the tone and tenor of the site," he said. "People are much, much, much more careful now."

Virtual worlds such as Second Life and Cellufun began with few rules and little oversight. Avatars can create their own societies and carry out realistic activities, such as buying land, building houses and forming social groups. But as the worlds' populations grow, some have developed more sophisticated legal codes and justice systems to police members' behavior. Many virtual worlds hope that creating an orderly environment will entice more users -- and prevent the need for real-world legal intervention.

There are scores of virtual worlds, and nearly all make users agree to certain policies when signing up. The companies reserve the right to suspend or delete a user's avatar and seize virtual assets that have been accumulated. Most also allow users to report abusive behavior and provide a tool to let members ignore bothersome avatars.

For example, Lively, a virtual world by Google, prohibits users from spamming others with unwanted messages or displaying racy images. Repeat offenders run the risk of having their Google accounts deleted.
or, in extreme cases, being reported to real-world authorities.

Some worlds have devised their own versions of jail, where boredom is the punishment. In Second Life, the largest virtual world, where about 60,000 residents are logged on at any given time, misbehaving avatars used to find themselves stuck in the Corn Field, an eerie place with nothing but endless rows of corn, a decaying tractor and a black-and-white television. The Corn Field still exists but is no longer used as a penalty box.

Another site, called VZones, created the Void, a dull-colored last-chance holding cell where delinquents are sent before getting a final warning or being removed from the world entirely.

"Very rarely does it get to this point," said Justine Reichman, chief executive of VZones.

But sometimes curiosity about these penalties can cause spikes in petty crime. In Cellufun, some characters started breaking rules just to see how their avatar looked behind bars, Goikhman said.

Many virtual universes leave the law in the hands of their users, allowing each world to develop its own moral code. But a lot of bad behavior is tolerated by residents, said Gartner analyst Stephen Prentice. And often, banished users can simply create new avatars.

"The sanctions that can be taken are pretty minor," he said. "The problem is that the relationship in identity between an avatar and the real person behind it is quite tenuous."

Still, groups of peacekeepers have emerged in some worlds to enforce a sort of common law. In World of Warcraft, a popular online fantasy game, a character who is acting out runs the risk of being attacked by a group of self-appointed sheriffs. While the avatar doesn't face official penalties, the interference from other players can deter future crimes.

"No specific members are appointed, but leaders in the community emerge" to patrol certain areas, said Ben Richardson, vice president of business development for There.com, another virtual world.

Worlds.com, which has created more than 45 virtual worlds, has a "filth filter" to prevent profanity. In one world, a group of users developed an animated bird that drops an unpleasant substance on the heads of outlaws, known as "griefers" in virtual-world lingo.

"I think making someone wear something of a scarlet letter is a good way of doing things," said Thom Kidrin, chief executive of Worlds.com. "People don't put up with nonsense."

The site has also developed its own version of an FBI watch list for moderators who monitor activity in the worlds.

In Second Life, a group of residents called Metaverse Republic is creating a system with three branches of government and a constitution. Only those who join the federation would be subject to its rules.

But virtual laws do not always match those in the real world, and users who think they've been unjustly punished have sought help in human courtrooms.

In 2006, Linden Lab, the creator of Second Life, canceled Marc Bragg's account for violating the world's policies on real estate deals. Bragg sued Linden, saying he legally owned the content he created in Second
Life, including land and businesses. The suit was eventually settled, and Bragg's avatar was restored.

Authorities also have intervened in crimes committed in online worlds. In the Netherlands, for example, a teenager was arrested for stealing more than $5,000 worth of virtual furniture in a world called Habbo.

"This is such a nascent area when it comes to the law," said Sean F. Kane, a partner in the law firm Drakeford & Kane. "If a certain world allows you to be a thief, is it a crime or just an aspect of the game? Should real-world law apply?"

Stephen Balkam, founder and chief executive of the Family Online Safety Institute, said he applauds efforts to reduce abusive behavior in virtual worlds. But he added that the legality of such policies has not yet been explored.

"What recourse does a user have when 12 peers find them guilty?" he said. "Is there an appeals process? We're all making this up as we go along."

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In the online community Cellufun, troublemakers found guilty by other users get their virtual alter egos placed behind bars.

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