

Aware

AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

In this issue

Welcome to issue 21 of ACSSA *Aware*, the quarterly newsletter of the Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault.

In this issue we are pleased to publish a feature article concerning sexual violence in computer generated spaces, *Virtual Violence*, written by our former Research Officer Cameron Boyd. This is accompanied by a complementary article, *Virtual Harm and Attachment*, provided by Jessica Wolfendale. While Boyd asks if the representation of sexual violence in video games and virtual environments results in increased sexual hostility towards women, Wolfendale argues that we need to take the sexual violence, and victim responses to that violence, more seriously.

Haley Clark reviews *Trafficked* by Kathleen Maltzahn, a book about the trafficking of women to Australia.

In Brief provides summaries and reviews of a number of other recent publications relevant to the sexual assault sector and AIFS Librarian Joan Kelleher has compiled a bibliography of recent publications and articles related to sexual assault and violence against women.

All of ACSSA's publications are available online. Visit our website at <www.aifs.gov.au/acssa> where you can also browse our Promising Practice Database, peruse specialised bibliographies, look for upcoming events, or submit your research queries.

ACSSA welcomes contributions from workers and researchers in the sexual assault field. We can assist with the development of your idea for an article to publish in *ACSSA Aware*; please get in touch with a member of the ACSSA team if you feel that you have something to contribute.

On behalf of the ACSSA Team,

Antonia Quadara
ACSSA Co-ordinator

FAREWELL TO CAMERON

The ACSSA team would like to say farewell to Cameron Boyd, our Research Officer for two years. Cameron has returned to sexual assault counselling and will continue to focus on his Master's Thesis at Deakin University under Professor Bob Pease.

Cameron brought considerable practice experience to ACSSA's work program, critical insight into developments in the violence prevention policy sector and a commitment to communicating relevant research to the sector in fresh ways. Under Cameron's management, *ACSSA Aware* has incorporated film reviews, interviews and discussions with key individuals working in the sexual assault sector. Cameron also did a wonderful job of building relationships with diverse stakeholders and contributors to ACSSA's publications. He will be a sorely missed part of the ACSSA team. We'd like to take this opportunity to thank Cameron for his much valued contribution to ACSSA and the Institute. Of course, we look forward to a continued relationship with Cameron in his new role at Northern CASA.



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Family Studies
Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault

The Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault aims to improve access to current information on sexual assault in order to assist policy makers, service providers, and others interested in this area to develop evidence-based strategies to prevent, respond to, and ultimately reduce the incidence of sexual assault.

The Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault is funded by the Office for Women, Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, through the Women's Safety Agenda. The Centre is hosted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

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In brief

Swedish government agency releases action plan to reduce gender-based violence

Action Plan for Sida's Work Against Gender-based Violence 2008–2010

The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) has released a 2-year action plan to combat gender-based violence through its humanitarian and development work in numerous partner countries. The action plan builds on Sweden's policy to prioritise supportive global development and the United Nations Secretary General's (2006) report on violence against women. It identifies several key development sectors where gender-based violence prevention policies, programs and strategies could be incorporated, including: poverty reduction, human rights instruments, HIV/AIDS reduction and sexual and reproductive health promotion.

The three key objectives of the action plan, to be realised by 2010 are that:

- the preventive measures, legal measures and services and care for victim/survivors of gender-based violence in Sida's partner countries have increased and improved;
- the awareness and commitment to reduce gender-based violence in the partner countries have increased; and
- the knowledge about gender-based violence, its causes and its expressions have increased among key Sida staff and implementing partners.

Each objective lists several actions to be undertaken by Sida divisions, the target audience of those actions, and what is to be produced as a result of that undertaking.

Sida is a government agency under the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. It works independently within the framework of the Swedish Parliament and Government which specify the budgets, priorities and countries with which Sweden—and thereby Sida—is to work. For more information about Sida and a copy of the action plan go to www.sida.se/sida/jsp/sida.jsp?d=121&language=en_US.

Australian Institute of Criminology publications on trafficking

David, F. (2008). *Trafficking of women for sexual purposes (Research and public policy series No. 95)*. Canberra, ACT: Australian Institute of Criminology.

In July 2008, the Australian Institute of Criminology released a report on trafficking for sexual purposes as part

of their Research and Public Policy Series. The report draws on literature, trial transcripts and interviews with representatives from non-government organisations and government agencies, with an aim of providing information about key issues, barriers and challenges in identifying and responding to trafficking, particularly in relation to investigation and prosecution.

The report considers a range of areas including: issues associated with current legislative and policy frameworks, including the involvement of state and federal jurisdictions and multi-agency collaboration; the transnational nature of the crime and the implications this has on investigation; issues faced by women in coming forward (such as debt, fear of traffickers and deportation, lack of trust in officials); coercion, control and “choice” constraints faced by trafficked women; the lack of protection and credibility afforded to trafficked women during prosecution, as well as other prosecutorial issues; the implications of visa and immigration restrictions on women and in prosecuting traffickers; and an overall lack of information and knowledge on the nature and extent of trafficking.

The report also provides a range of recommendations, most of which pertain to better accommodating and supporting trafficked women. Examples include: reworking the current visa framework; providing culturally sensitive support to trafficked women; and introducing protocols around interviewing victims. The report also recommends enhancing collaboration across sectors and improving training for the Australian Federal Police, prosecutors and Department of Immigration and Citizenship workers.

The report is available online at <www.aic.gov.au/publications/rpp/95/>

David, F. (2008). *Trafficking in persons: Known issues, emerging responses* (Trends and Issues No. 358). ACT: Australian Institute of Criminology.

This paper is the second in a series that examines the different components of the criminal justice response to trafficking in persons. Specifically, this paper seeks to identify some of the practical issues that may affect trafficking prosecutions, such as unclear legal frameworks, the transnational nature of trafficking, and reliance on often traumatised victims as witnesses who may also be unwilling or unable to participate in prosecutions. Proposed

strategies to support or improve prosecution practice include legal reform, protection of witnesses and specialist training for prosecution units. There has been limited research on trafficking prosecutions. Given the complexities of transnational cases, it seems important that priority is given to building an evidence base that draws on experience and primary data. (Edited abstract)

The paper is available online at <www.aic.gov.au/publications/tandi2/tandi358.html>

See also David, F. (2007). *Law enforcement responses to trafficking in persons: Challenges and emerging good practice* (Trends & Issues No. 347). CanberraACT: Australian Institute of Criminology. Available online at <www.aic.gov.au/publications/tandi2/tandi347.html>

Snapshot 2008: Children and Young People in Queensland.

Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian.

The Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian released the 2008 Snapshot to provide a “composite picture of the safety and wellbeing of Queensland’s children and young people through the presentation of data and relevant research findings from varied sources”. The Snapshot covers a number of issues and areas considered of developmental importance, such as health, housing, drug use, family, population data, child protection, death, education, sexual health, care and crime. Sexual assault is included in the Snapshot, specifically in relation to police victimisation and offending statistics. According to Queensland police statistics during 2006–07,¹ the Snapshot reports that:

- there were 3,120 sexual offence victims aged 0–17 recorded¹ by police;
- there were four times as many female victims as male victims of sexual assault aged 0–17 (651 male and 2,469 females) on police record;
- sexual offence victimisation rates were highest for females in the 10–14 and 15–19 year old groups compared to younger age groups on police records; and

¹ Most sexual assaults are not reported to the police. It is not clear in the snapshot what the victimisation statistics are based on.

- there was a slight reduction in police records of victimisation rates for sexual offence in the 2006–07 period compared to the 2005–2006 period.

On juvenile sexual offending, according to police records during 2006–07:²

- there were 544 sexual offences perpetrated by young people aged 10–16 years;
- sexual offenders comprised approximately 18% of all offenders aged 10–16 years; and
- 48% of sexual offences resulted in a caution, 7.5% in a community conference 9.6% in a notice to appear or summons, and 14% in an arrest.

AIC Research Forum. Understanding the Research on Sexual Assault: Prevention and Future Directions

Dr Natalie Taylor from the Australian Institute of Criminology presented an AIC Research Forum

2 These police statistics are based on reported offences which have been cleared and for which an offender has been identified. Juvenile offenders are those aged 10–16 years and dealt with under the *Juvenile Justice Act 1992*.

“Understanding the Research on Sexual Assault: Prevention and Future Directions” on Thursday 31 July 2008 in partnership with the Victorian Department of Human Services, Department of Justice and Victoria Police. Dr Taylor’s presentation considered research related to re-offending, prevention efforts towards men and women, the nature and extent of beliefs, drink spiking and changing attitudes. A facilitated panel discussion involving Antonia Quadara (ACSSA), Melanie Heenan (VicHealth), Tania Farha (VicPol), Deb Parkinson (Women’s Health Goulburn Northeast) and Jill Astbury (Victoria University) explored the key research carried out to date on sexual assault prevention, current research initiatives panelists’ organisations were undertaking and other sexual assault prevention research. Panelists also identified gaps in the research.

The event was attended by some 60 key representatives working in relevant sexual assault sectors. This event helped to inform both the AIC’s future research agenda and the workplan of the Victorian Statewide Advisory Committee to Prevent Sexual Assault.

Publish in ACSSA *Aware!*

There are so few forums in which those working in the sexual assault field can share information with one another. ACSSA provides one of these forums through the document you are reading—*ACSSA Aware*. We are keen to publish articles written by you within this newsletter on the topic of sexual assault. We are particularly keen on publishing articles that will be of interest to those working in the sector, and to any and all interested in preventing sexual assault.

We accept article contributions of up to 5,000 words. We also accept film and book reviews, and news of conferences, training and research projects of up to 1,500 words.

If you would like to contribute an article or review to ACSSA *Aware*, please email a Microsoft Word document to acssa@aifs.gov.au, or post to ACSSA, Level 20, 485 La Trobe Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3000.

You should also view our “contributor’s guidelines” on the ACSSA website www.aifs.gov.au/acssa/pubs/pubsmenu.html

CONFERENCES

For a full list of upcoming conferences, seminars and events, visit the Conferences and Events page on the Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault website: www.aifs.gov.au/acssa/conferences.html

Virtual violence

CAMERON BOYD

How virtual is virtual violence against women?

With online interaction and gaming now a fact of daily life for a great many people, violence against women in computer games and in virtual (online) environments is becoming a pressing issue for both legal and ethical reasons. This paper summarises two kinds of “virtual” violence.¹ The first, which can be called “video game” violence, occurs in one-player games (such as Grand Theft Auto) where the player is interacting solely with computer-generated objects. In contrast, “virtual environments” (like Second Life) involve player interaction with other users, usually represented graphically by avatars. The two different contexts provoke different concerns and anxieties in relation to questions of violence generally, and sexualised violence against women in particular. The first type (video game violence) prompts questions about the effects on the player and on society: will virtual violence will lead to “actual” violence; does it de-sensitise the player to violence; does it result in (or reflect) a generalised increase in sexualised hostility towards women? In virtual environments, the concern is with the impact upon the victim; is it abusive or harmful when an avatar is assaulted?

Video game violence

It is indisputable that many video games depict extreme violence and highly sexualised images of women (Hayes, 2007; Ivory, 2006). Video games are overwhelmingly orientated to a male audience. Some researchers have identified a negative correlation between self-perception and game play among adolescent girls who play video games (Funk & Buchman, 1996, cited in Ivory, 2006). There is less agreement on the degree to which these aspects of gaming are problematic. Video games (played on either a console or a home computer) such as the Grand Theft Auto (GTA) series, allow the player to interact with a “game world”, with the player usually represented by a character in the game. In GTA, some aspects of this game-world have caused concern, including possibilities such as the player being “able to pick up a prostitute, have sex to replenish health, then kill her to take back the money spent”.² There is also an in-game advertisement for a made-up paedophile website (there is no actual link to a “real” website and no actual child pornography).³

... many video games depict extreme violence and highly sexualised images of women ... There is less agreement on the degree to which these aspects of gaming are problematic.

One way of approaching the question of “wrongness” in violent video games is through traditional philosophical approaches to ethics. For example, from a “utilitarian” ethical perspective, the question of whether any particular act or practice is wrong is assessed from a cost/benefit analysis—whether the overall costs to society outweigh the benefits (Waddington, 2007). Waddington suggested there are difficulties in this approach to video game violence, partly because of the lack of consistent evidence, to date, on either the benefits or costs of such violence. However a meta-analysis by Anderson and Bushman (2001) suggested otherwise. They found that exposure to violent video games, like exposure to violence on television and film, is significantly associated with heightened aggression. Moreover, there is a negative association between playing violent video games and “pro-social” behaviour (e.g., helping others). However, correlation does not prove causation. For example, people who are inclined to play more violent video games might already be more aggressive than others.

1 There are of course many other forms of violence against women involving the internet and computer technology; for example websites containing depictions of rape (Gossett & Byrne, 2002), online sexual harassment (Barak, 2005), and the use of social networking pages to spread malicious, often sexualised, rumours (especially for adolescents) (Chisolm, 2006).

2 It should be noted that GTA is one example of video games that involve sexual violence against women, others include Duke Nukem 3D and Japanese eroge or henti games including RapeLay where the protagonist stalks and rapes a mother and two daughters (Moore, 2009).

3 The developers modified the latest game in the series (GTA IV) for Australian release, removing some of the explicit sexual content.

Studies on “the costs” have almost exclusively focused on the impacts upon the player, specifically whether playing violent games increases the player’s risk of behaving aggressively. One “cost” factor that has not been studied extensively is the symbolic or social-psychological impact of witnessing, or even being aware of, the extent of violence against women in video games. The reaction against games such as GTA suggest that there is some symbolic harm felt in relation to these virtual representations, including among non-players. One might even suggest an analogy with the notorious Sam Newman “mannequin” incident on *The Footy Show*.⁴ Although no “real person” was physically assaulted, Newman’s actions clearly inflicted a kind of harm upon a number of women viewers and women involved in football. This incident demonstrates that harm can be affected symbolically, and that the impacts are real. In relation to “virtual rape”, MacKinnon states, “it is a virtual violation that passes back through the interface and attacks the person where it is real” (1998, p. 166).

Against the costs, in the utilitarian ethical schema, are the benefits. The most obvious “benefit” derived from playing video games is pleasure. A disturbing possibility is that it is precisely the performance of violence against women, and/or the sexual objectification of women, that some players find “pleasurable”; for them this is not a cost but a benefit (but see also Ivory, 2006, who suggested that male game reviewers and players may be less enthused by these depictions of women than game developers and marketers seem to assume). Among the vast array of violent games available for purchase, the degree of sexualisation in GTA may be part of the reason for its astonishing commercial success.⁵ As Hayes noted, video games can allow players to “project their hopes and desires onto the virtual character” (2007, p. 27). This raises a deeper question that a purely evidence-based approach, or for that matter the utilitarian approach to ethics, cannot deal with: Is pleasure itself always a legitimate benefit? Is this like saying, for example, that the “pleasure” a sexual offender gains should be considered seriously as a benefit of rape? This is clearly a conclusion that cannot be taken seriously in real life when assessing the ethics of the act, even if it holds true from the offender’s point of view (i.e., from some offenders’ perspectives, sexual gratification may be part of their motivation). Given that we would not accept this as a legitimate “benefit” of rape, this notion of pleasure cannot be accepted uncritically in relation to virtual violence either. In other words, it is not enough to simply state that playing games is pleasurable for the player as an argument for the “benefits” of gaming. In turn, this indicates that what is experienced as pleasurable about gaming is subjective and influenced by factors such as gender and cultural background (Hayes, 2007).

Beyond these individual-level considerations, video games are not outside culture in general, and they must be understood in their social context. Given the prevalence of sexualised and objectifying images of women in other cultural arenas, it really is not surprising that this should also be the case in video games. This suggests not that such depictions in video games be accepted or excused, but that the problem to be confronted is embedded culturally, structurally and socially. Violence and sexualised images in video games sells, leading some researchers to wonder whether the same kinds of investment in developing and marketing exciting non-violent video games could make them as profitable as violent ones (Anderson & Bushman, 2001). It also points to the possibility that while many games work to reinforce culturally dominant “scripts”, including those related to gender, they can also challenge them (Hayes, 2007).

Given the prevalence of sexualised and objectifying images of women in other cultural arenas, it really is not surprising that this should also be the case in video games.

Another possible cause for concern is that violence in video games devalues the notion of wrongness in itself, in much the same way that counterfeit money devalues real money (Waddington, 2007). While the player knows the difference between game violence and real violence, it is nonetheless a simulation of real violence. As a simulation, it is not perceived as “wrong”, even if the act it simulates is. Thus, suggests Waddington, as technology enables the increasingly real simulation of actual events, and the line between real wrongs and simulated wrongs slowly erodes, so too does the very notion of wrongness itself.

Virtual environments

The first reported rape in “cyberspace”, discussed in a widely cited article by Dibble (1998), occurred in LambdaMOO, a text-based “multiple-user object-oriented” world. (For a detailed account of what occurred see the Dibble article available online). In short, one of the “players” used a sub-program to attribute actions to other characters in the world; some of these “actions” (described in text) were of a sexualised and violent nature, and were experienced as extremely upsetting and a violation by the players whose characters were involved, as well as

4 In the infamous episode, Newman had a female mannequin dressed in lingerie on the set, which he picked and handled in an aggressive manner. The mannequin was meant to represent a well-respected female football writer. Newman went on to denigrate the role of women in leadership positions in the AFL (Australian Football League). The episode sparked widespread public backlash.

5 On a more hopeful note, *The Age* newspaper ran a story (June 30, 2008) reporting that a fitness game for the Wii console had outsold GTA IV as the top-selling console game in Australia.

some of the other users in the room. Since this first reported incident, sexualised violence and abuse towards women (or at least, towards female-identified characters and avatars) is commonplace in virtual environments.

The responses to this online violence have been varied. To this author's knowledge no "real-life" legal action, criminal or legal, has been taken against any alleged perpetrators. One of the key questions asked by commentators is about the harm that is caused by virtual violence. Some commentators have been dismissive of the violence, distinguishing sharply between "virtual" and "real" violence, with a general attitude towards victims that they should not take it so seriously (e.g., MacKinnon, 1998). Some have suggested that the ability to commit virtual violence (not necessarily sexualised violence) in online environments can have a positive cathartic effect (De Zwart, 2008). There are links here with debates about whether viewing child pornography is engaging in paedophile behaviour. On this issue, the public has clearly accepted the connections and rejected the notion of "cathartic benefit" or as a way of preventing "real" abuse by a would-be perpetrator. Despite the dismissal and minimisation by some, there is a "real" element to virtual harm (see the following article by Jessica Wolfendale on virtual harm and attachment).

Avatars or characters with even vaguely feminine names experience high levels of unwanted sexualised attention in online environments (Suler & Phillips, 1998), as do women who participate in online chat forums (Döring, 2000). In what Döring (2000) termed the "victimization" account of women's online sexual experiences, "...we are dealing with online harassment, virtual rape, and cyberprostitution, whereby it is not just the women immediately involved who are harmed, but all women as a group are damaged through the reproduction and establishment of a sexist image of women" (p. 869). While it has long been noted that many women experience other online environments, such as discussion forums, as hostile and aggressive (Winter & Huff, 1996), Döring (2000) argued that some aspects of sexuality on the internet can be empowering for women, particularly in relation to exploring transgressive sexual practices. For some women, the internet is relatively safe compared to some "real life" social environments.

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Responding to online sexualised violence and harassment

Probably the most common way of responding to problematic online behaviour is for the moderators to intervene directly. Moderators (or "wizards") of these environments have a range of options available to respond to individual offenders. These options range across a continuum, from supportive to victim-blaming, that mirrors many real life responses of people in authority to victims of sexual violence. For example, John Suler's The Psychology of Cyberspace website <www-usr.rider.edu/~suler/psycyber/badboys.html> has a lengthy discussion guide on what moderators can do to deal with offensive behaviours in online environments.⁶ The guide takes the problem of sexualised harassment seriously and makes a number of suggestions on how to deal with offenders. However, it has difficulty conceptualising the harm that unwanted sexualised interaction may cause, reflecting that the victim "may perceive harm where there really isn't much harm, or create situations in which others tend to mistreat them, perhaps even provoking abuse". This leads to a focus on the verification of harm rather than the harm itself. There is also the suggestion that the best response is for the victim to take self-protection measures. MacKinnon (1998) noted the historical societal reluctance to believe women's accounts of rape, but he appeared to see this as justified on the basis that a victim-centred definition of rape cannot account for "hypersensitive, insane, or mentally incompetent victims" (p. 167). He went on to suggest ways that the veracity of a "virtual" complaint can be checked.

Clearly, virtual environments are not immune to victim-blaming and other minimising responses to sexualised violence and harassment. There are other responses available to moderators which focus on the responsibility of the offender and safety of the victim, such as "muting" the offender so they cannot interact, completely disallowing any further participation from that user. This does have limitations, including the ability of the individual to simply sign in or register with a new username. These responses, however, do send a clear message the behaviour is unacceptable, will be responded to, and that the offender is responsible for the behaviour.

Online offenders

The anonymity afforded to perpetrators has been seen by some as a contributor to online sexualised violence (Barak, 2005; MacKinnon, 1998). While there is some level of anonymity in the virtual environment itself, most contemporary users would be increasingly aware that this is limited; individual users can be tracked by Internet Service Providers in many cases (whether an ISP is willing to do so is another matter, which also

⁶ Suler's website, <www-usr.rider.edu/~suler/psycyber/psycyber.html>, is a very helpful introduction to life online. For a description of Second Life, see his blog <<http://psycyber.blogspot.com/>>

brings up the question of privacy of online users). It is not only the perception that one will not be “caught” that is said to contribute to the occurrence of virtual violence, but the notion that one is, like a tourist, on a kind of “moral holiday” (MacKinnon, 1998) that frees them from normal moral and legal constraints. This is especially so in the case of irregular visitors to a particular site; there is an element of unaccountability. Nonetheless, anonymity itself does not explain why the behaviour is committed, as if the “impulse” to commit this behaviour itself needs no explanation. Barak (2005) discussed the “online disinhibition effect” and argued that this leads offenders to act more “naturally,” but also noted that this may be especially powerful when combined with the overtly “masculine” atmosphere of some online forums. When this analysis is linked back to a broader culture of violence against women, it is not necessary to understand this “natural” tendency as biological or psychological, but rather as a social dynamic. This seems to offer a more satisfactory explanation as to why such behaviour is committed in the first place. Barak opted for a combined approach, suggesting that some environments may “actually elicit them [harassing behaviours] by providing an atmosphere in which harassers receive reinforcement to behave consistently with their SH [sexually harassing] proclivities” (p. 82).⁷ Regardless of the causes or motivations, most commentators agree that there are many aspects of online culture that condone or promote sexualised aggression towards women, and that addressing these cultural aspects are an integral part of prevention.

Summary

While research on sexualised violence against women in gaming and virtual environments has not generally kept up with the extent of its occurrence, there is a broad recognition that many problematic aspects of gendered relations in “real life” are reflected and sometimes intensified in various kinds of “virtual worlds”. The question of how to respond is complex, involving issues that parallel real life as well as problems that are unique to cyberspace and computer technologies. As it becomes increasingly clear that these practices and cultures of violence have symbolic and direct effects for many people, a growing body of research and theory will contribute to our understanding of how to respond to and prevent this distinctly contemporary manifestation of a long-standing problem of gendered injustice.

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At the time of writing, **Cameron Boyd** was a Research Officer at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

7 The potential problem here is the notion of a “harasser” who is a “kind” of person, inherently (whether psychologically or biologically) inclined to harass. While I think Barak is right to insist on the importance of the online environment in enabling sexualised harassment, this idea of the “natural” harasser leaves out the offline cultural influences that are conducive to the desire to harass.

Virtual harm and attachment

JESSICA WOLFENDALE

Thousands of women participate in multi-user online worlds such as Second Life. In these online communities, women can use their online personas—their avatars—to chat, fight, make friends and even get married. Yet the freedom that makes multi-user online worlds attractive to so many women can also pose risks. Virtual sexual harassment is, unfortunately, commonplace, ranging from verbal or textual harassment, to being confronted by overtly sexual avatars, to having one's avatar sexually attacked by another avatar.¹ Sometimes attackers are able to use built-in features on the online world to gain control over another person's avatar without their consent. In Second Life, for instance, "collars" which enable an avatar to gain control over another avatar can be built into many online objects without the knowledge of the other user (Durankse, 2007).

Virtual sexual assaults are often traumatic and deeply upsetting for the victims, sometimes to a greater extent than the victims themselves would have anticipated. The victims of the infamous 1992 LambdaMOO rape case,² for instance, were surprised at the strength of their own reactions. One victim told a reporter that, as she wrote about the experience, "posttraumatic tears were streaming down her face". She was a long-time participant in online communities, yet she was "baffled and overwhelmed by the force of her reaction" (Dibbell, 1993). Such reactions to virtual sexual attacks are common, particularly when victims have experienced real-life sexual assaults (Döring, 2000, p. 869).

But how seriously should we take virtual sexual assaults and other forms of interpersonal online attacks? Since no actual physical assault occurs, is virtual sexual assault a genuine moral harm? There is a tendency in the literature on this topic to dismiss victims' distress as evidence that they had too much emotional investment in their avatars; that they should have been less involved in the online world. Victims should just ignore virtual attacks, the argument runs, or just "log off".

I believe that this response is misguided. For a start, this response to virtual sexual assault blames the victims for the distress they feel, claiming that their distress is their fault for being too emotionally involved rather than the attacker's fault. But, as I shall argue, we should give moral legitimacy to people's attachment to their avatars because this attachment expresses their identity and self-conception, and for this reason attacks on avatars count as genuine moral wrongs. To argue otherwise risks undermining the moral status of attachments that we accept as morally significant, such as attachment to possessions, pets, people, communities, and ideals.

There is a tendency ... to dismiss victims' distress as evidence that they had too much emotional investment in their avatars ... Victims should just ignore virtual attacks ... or just "log off".

What is avatar attachment?

In online worlds an avatar is the controller's graphical representation which she uses to communicate with others in the online world through the use of text and image. The combination of a graphical image and textual communication create what psychologists call "presence"—the sense of being physically immersed in an environment. Presence results in avatar behaviour that mimics the ways we use our bodies in offline life. For example, participants in online worlds often report a strong sense of personal space and "body boundaries". Just as we move away if someone comes too close to us, so participants in online worlds will move their avatar away if another person's avatar moves too close. Similarly, participants will move their avatar close to other avatars if they wish to be aggressive or threatening, and such closeness can also be used to signal intimacy and friendship (Taylor, 2002, pp. 42–43).

- 1 As in real life, much online sexual harassment is directed against female users. Those who use female nicknames in chat rooms, and female avatars in virtual worlds (even if they are men) tend to be harassed to a far greater degree than male avatars (Döring, 2000, p. 869).
- 2 In 1992 a character called Mr Bungle used a feature of LambdaMOO (a text-based online community) to describe the two characters (legba and Starsinger) performing brutal and sexually explicit acts, without their consent, which everyone logged in at the time could read.

Avatars are therefore more than simply online objects manipulated by a controller. An avatar, even if it has physical and emotional traits that are very different from the controller's, is expressive of the controller's identity. Indeed, some participants in online worlds feel that their avatar is a truer reflection of their identity

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than their real life persona: "people often say that it was through their avatar that they found a 'better' version of themselves, one that felt even more right than their offline body" (Taylor, 2002, p. 55). This strong connection between controller and avatar is evident in the language that participants use to describe interactions in virtual worlds. An EverQuest player whose online character was shunned by others in the game made no distinction between herself and her avatar when she talked about the incident: "I was ignored ... I was crying too hard to play. My own guild didn't want me" (Yee, 2003). This identification between avatar and controller explains why people become attached to their avatars, and why attacks on an avatar are experienced as attacks on the controller.

But explaining the nature of avatar attachment does not tell us what attitude we should adopt towards it. Some commentators argue that avatar attachment should be discouraged precisely because "the more invested the controller, the more damaging virtual violence can be." (Huff, Johnson, & Miller, 2003, p. 17). Perhaps, as others have argued, victims of online attacks should consider just "stepping back" from their online personas: "perhaps the best defence [against virtual violence] ... is to unravel the psychological investment a bit" (Suler & Phillips, 1997).

These responses to virtual harm assume that avatar attachment is not morally significant, and so they blame the victims for being too invested in their characters. But why should we think avatar attachment is not morally significant? After all, we do not tell someone whose house was robbed that they should just "unravel their psychological investment" in their possessions. What's the difference between avatar attachment and other forms of attachment?

Morally significant forms of attachment

In our everyday lives, there are many forms of attachment that we think of as morally significant. For example, it is considered quite acceptable for people to be at least moderately attached to their possessions. We take it for granted that people will be upset if their stereo or jewellery is taken, even though their distress would certainly be less if they were not so attached. Attachment to other people is even more important—an inability to be attached to other people is considered to be a serious moral and psychological failing. In many cases we also think that attachment to national, cultural or religious identity is morally legitimate, and that actions that cause harm to these attachments, such as racial insults, are genuine moral wrongs.

While there are obvious differences between them, these forms of attachment all play an important role in people's sense of identity and psychological wellbeing. We become attached to possessions not just because of their usefulness or aesthetic value but because they sometimes have deep personal significance. Our attachment to a religious or national identity is even more closely connected to our sense of ourselves. Indeed, there are certain kinds of moral wrongs that only make sense in the light of the importance that we give to this kind of attachment. Attempts to erode Indigenous cultures (for example, by banning the use of Indigenous languages) are considered to be serious moral wrongs in part because they attack the close connection between culture and identity, and we certainly do not think that people should deal with such attacks by being less attached to their culture or religion.

But there are also forms of attachment that we do not consider to be very important, morally speaking. Attachment to imaginary friends or fictional characters is generally not taken very seriously, even if the attachment is sincere. Most people do not consider harm done to an imaginary character to be a genuine moral wrong, even if people who are attached to that character are upset by it. Instead, we tend to think that people who are deeply attached to imaginary characters should try to lessen their attachment and recognise that the object of their attachment is not real, particularly since such attachments can undermine a person's capacity to function in society.

Is avatar attachment morally significant?

At first glance, avatar attachment might seem similar to attachment to imaginary friends or fictional characters. Avatars are, after all, not real. They are creative constructions for use in a fantasy environment. So perhaps avatar attachment should be discouraged for the same reasons we would discourage someone's attachment to a fictional character. However, avatars are very different from imaginary friends or fictional

characters. Avatars are the controller's persona in a virtual world—they are forms of self-expression and personal identity. Avatars are the creation of the controller and unlike imaginary friends or fictional characters, the conduit through which she interacts with others in the online world.

Furthermore, avatars are used among a community of participants who all use avatars to communicate with each other. So unlike other forms of imaginary objects, avatars are used in worlds composed of what one author called a “shared symbolic order” (Riva, 2002, p. 589)—a community of shared values and behavioural expectations. Avatar attachment is expressive of self-identity and gains legitimacy from the shared environment in which it occurs, and so we cannot dismiss avatar attachment as morally insignificant without dismissing other forms of attachment that are similarly connected to identity and occur in a setting of shared social values, such as attachment to religious identity or nationality.

Still, we might think that we should discourage avatar attachment because such attachment makes it more likely that you will be upset if your avatar is attacked. It is true that detachment would reduce someone's distress at an attack on their avatar, but the problem is that attachment is also an important source of enjoyment. A study of Lineage players found that those who were psychologically involved with the game had the highest sense of belonging, trust, and loyalty within the game world (Whang & Chang, 2003, p. 598). Encouraging detachment would therefore undermine one of the reasons that people participate in online communities in the first place.

Furthermore, this objection cannot be limited to avatar attachment. Our attachment to people, to communities, to possessions, and to ideals means that we suffer deeply when these are harmed or threatened. If the reason for discouraging avatar attachment is that it causes distress, then this is a reason for discouraging attachment to people, possessions, and communities. Yet to do so would deny us attachments that are central to who we are and to our ability to live fulfilling human lives. Suffering is the price we pay for the joy and fulfilment that such attachments can give us, and for many of us it is a price worth paying. We recognise the importance of these attachments to our identity and wellbeing, and so we treat harms to these attachments as moral wrongs—and we do not blame victims for being too attached. For the same reasons, we should recognise avatar attachment as morally legitimate, and see attacks on avatars as genuine moral wrongs.

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Trafficked

Kathleen Maltzahn. (2008). Sydney: University of New South Wales Press

REVIEW BY HALEY CLARK

Kathleen Maltzahn is a leading activist on behalf of trafficked women and the founder of Project Respect, an organisation dedicated to ending violence against women in the sex industry.

In *Trafficked*, Kathleen Maltzahn brings together the stories of women who have been trafficked and the work that “put trafficking on the agenda and the subsequent responses by state and federal governments to the problem” (p.16). Delivered in a tone of dedication and optimism Maltzahn explains how the issue of trafficking in Australia progressed from ignorance and a “... general lack of attention to violence against and exploitation of women in the sex industry” to a “remarkable shift in public policy” (p.72), the allocation of government funds to “eradicate trafficking in persons” and the need for further action.

Maltzahn deals swiftly with stereotypes and explains what it really means to be trafficked, to be brought to another country, put on “contract” and forced to repay “debt”:

[Women] were coming to Australia on the promise of decent conditions and good pay. Many knew they might be doing prostitution, or at least, would be connected to the sex industry through karaoke bars or strip clubs. Some, a small minority, had no inkling that they would have anything to do with prostitution. Either way, their experience was similar. Women told us of being lied to, raped, beaten and locked up, of having no control over how or if they had sex with customers, having to have sex when they were sick or menstruating, being deprived of their passports and threatened with violence and deportation. (p.58)

How these circumstances translate into the lives of women who are trafficked is demonstrated through Maltzahn’s constructions of the stories of real women, keeping the reader centred on the central issue: the women. Maltzahn draws on women’s stories to provide parallels to the experiences of women trafficked into Australia and abroad, sex tourism and trafficking, and trafficking into the sex industry and domestic violence. For instance, Maltzahn associates the experiences of violence and enslavement of Filipino women trafficked into brothels with those “trafficked” into domestic relationships—the “mail-order bride” phenomenon—and suggests that the (similar) struggles with political, legislative, organisational and governmental responses to trafficking for marriage and prostitution tourism set the foundations for responding to trafficking for prostitution.

In *Trafficked* Maltzahn provides a human face not only of women trafficked into prostitution, but also of those committed to improving the position of trafficked women and reducing opportunities for trafficking. By detailing actual events and the names of those involved, the issues are made real and immediate. Although the book demonstrates how campaigning, lessons from abroad, key events, lobbying and building alliances led to cultural, political and policy change, Maltzahn argues that common decency and dedication is what ultimately made the difference:

There are many ways to explain social change, and no doubt there are many people who can and will look at trafficking in Australia and provide a sophisticated analysis of why policy changed. From where I stood, aside from [reporters] [Elisabeth] Wynhausen and [Natalie] O’Brien making sure readers had the facts, much of it had to do with individual decency. It’s not an analysis I’d usually give a lot of truck to, but it explained what otherwise didn’t make sense. (p.67)

In the final chapter of her book, Maltzahn lobbies governments to do more to address trafficking. Maltzahn provides instructions on how to provide “genuine protection and restitution” for women trafficked to Australia and to progress towards the eradication of trafficking. Maltzahn sends a clear message that we have the capacity to move forward in addressing trafficking, stating, “[b]y changing a few key areas, the government can, without adding another cent, dramatically strengthen its anti-trafficking work” (p.13). Maltzahn identifies seven steps that “would help reinstate Australia as an international leader both in

human rights and in strengthening the status of women” (p.103) and provides the details about who should be involved and how, what models should be adopted in Australia and even nominates the organisations and people that need to be involved. The program suggested includes: declaration of amnesty to all trafficked women; expanded and unconditional support to trafficked women; enhanced government–NGO collaboration; the provision of education on trafficking to broader community; inclusion trafficking and violence in the sex industry in the broader violence against women prevention agenda; improved training for those who come into contact with trafficked women, such as immigration officials, judges, lawyers and community representatives; an investment in research; and commitment to prevention by dealing with demand.

Left with no space for excuses—“it doesn’t seem much to ask” (p.101)—Maltzahn concludes with a demand for action:

Trafficking in this country is still a manageable problem. With some intelligent, considered work by the federal and state governments, we have a real chance of significantly reducing this cruel, corrosive crime. (p.113)

More information on Project Respect can be found at <www.projectrespect.org.au/>

See also Furgus, L. (2005). *Trafficking in women for sexual exploitation* (ACSSA Briefing No.5). Melbourne: ACSSA, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Haley Clark is a Research Officer at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

LITERATURE HIGHLIGHTS

COMPILED BY JOAN KELLEHER, LIBRARIAN

The following are a selection of resources recently received by the Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault (ACSSA) Library. Print resources are available via the interlibrary loan system. Contact your local library for details. Electronic resources are available directly via the web address. The inclusion of a publication in this list does not necessarily mean that it is endorsed by ACSSA.

Adult survivors

Fragments of home: Piecing life together after childhood sexual abuse. (2008). Lisbon, M. Fairfield, Vic: Braidwood Press.

As a child, the author was sexually abused by a trusted caregiver. In this book, she reflects on the experience of sexual abuse and its effects as a way of learning new, healthier patterns of relating to oneself and others. The book and the accompanying CD explore psychological and spiritual themes of self reflection and understanding as a means of recovering from abuse.

Consent

Amaor fati? Gender habitus and young people's negotiation of (hetero)sexual consent. (2008). Powell, A. *Journal of Sociology*, 44(2), 167–184.

In recent years, the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has sparked the interest of some feminist sociologists who, in response to a perceived cultural

determinism of the postmodern turn, are seeking theoretical space to consider women’s and men’s agency within a changeable, albeit constrained, world of gender relations. This article draws upon the voices of young women and men (aged 14–24) talking about their perceptions and experiences of love / sex relationships. It explores the potential for an adaptation of Bourdieu’s central concepts of habitus and symbolic violence, to understand the interplay of structure and agency in young people’s negotiations of heterosexual encounters. Finally, the implications of this analysis for young people’s relationships and for the prevention of sexual coercion will be considered. (Journal abstract)

Homelessness

Sexual violence, trauma and homelessness: Why are our responses disengaged. (2008). Tully, D. *Parity*, 21(3), 61–62.

Without an understanding of the links between childhood sexual abuse and homelessness, service responses may fail to meet the needs of many young

homeless people. SideStreet Counselling Service in Adelaide provides a counselling and consultancy service to young people between the ages of 12 and 25 who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and who have experienced sexual and/or physical abuse. This article relates the findings of research into the connection between becoming homeless, remaining homeless and getting out of homelessness to the principles of SideStreet's approach and its response strategy. It discusses the provision of: counselling, support and resources to young people; consultancy to the SAAP youth sector; and, education and training to the youth sector and wider community about childhood sexual assault and its connection to youth homelessness.

Indigenous issues

Working with Indigenous survivors of sexual assault. (2008). Cox, D.: Melbourne, Vic: Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault, Australian Institute of Family Studies. Online only <www.aifs.gov.au/acssa/pubs/wrap/w5.html>

This paper discusses good practice considerations for culturally appropriate services for Indigenous survivors of sexual assault. It outlines values and power balance, language, alternative service provision, co-location of services, outreach, holistic services, client empowerment, confidentiality, building trust, employing Indigenous personnel, and that "one size doesn't fit all". Professionals working in this area also need to understand the context of kinship systems, intergenerational and historical trauma, and cycles of abuse, which can hinder or harm their clients.

Male victims

Sexual assault against men. (2008). Australian Institute of Criminology: Canberra, ACT: Australian Institute of Criminology. Online only <www.aic.gov.au/publications/cfi/cfi170.html>

Data collected in the Australian Bureau of Statistics Personal Safety Survey 2005 includes statistics on the incidence of sexual assault against men. This fact sheet summarises the information on men's experience of physical and sexual violence in the 12 months prior to the survey.

Mental health issues

Nowhere to be safe: Women's experiences of mixed-sex psychiatric wards. (2008). Clarke, H. Melbourne, Vic: Victorian Women and Mental Health Network.

The Listening to Women Consumers survey in 2006 and five Listening Events in 2007 gave the Victorian Women and Mental Health Network (VWMHN) the opportunity to gather data about the experiences of women mental health consumers in mixed sex

psychiatric wards. These experiences have raised concerns for women's safety, and have prompted VWMHN to campaign for gender sensitive facilities in psychiatric wards. This booklet has been produced to raise awareness and help bring about change for women inpatients in mixed sex psychiatric facilities by reporting the results of the survey and the Listening Events. The booklet discusses VWMHN's concerns about: lack of privacy and safety; harassment and violence by male patients; how the use of space in wards affects women's safety; the impact of staff responses; distressing experiences in high dependency units; and the needs of women with past experience of abuse.

Outrage becomes determination: Advocating to raise awareness of women's experience in mixed-sex psychiatric wards. (2008). Clarke, H., & Dempsey, J. *Health Issues*, 94, 14-16.

Over the past two decades, the Victorian Women and Mental Health Network (VWMHN) has heard stories from many women mental health consumers about their experience of being in mixed sex psychiatric wards. The concerns these stories raise for women's safety has prompted VWMHN to campaign for gender sensitive facilities in psychiatric wards. This article describes this ongoing campaign and illustrates how supporting women to tell their stories and work towards positive change in the mental health system brings both challenges and rewards. VWMHN's main concerns about women's experiences of mixed sex psychiatric facilities include: lack of privacy and safety for women inpatients resulting in negative impacts on women's mental health; the potential for women with past experience of abuse to be re-traumatised; and the inappropriateness of a mixed sex environment given that sexual disinhibition is a common feature. (Journal abstract, edited)

Rape investigation

Practical aspects of rape investigation: A multidisciplinary approach. (2008). Hazelwood, R. R., & Burgess, A. W. (4th ed.). Boca Raton, FL: Taylor & Francis.

This book presents new research findings and forensic techniques which may enable agencies to overcome past impediments to successful intervention and prosecution of sex offences. A discussion of forensics and how this science relates to court procedures includes information on the collection of evidence, medical examinations and treatment, and trial preparation issues.

Rape victims

Rape crisis: Responding to sexual violence. (2008). Jones, H., & Cook, K. Lyme Regis [England]: Russell House Publishing.

This book documents the history and work of rape crisis centres in England and Wales. It draws

comparisons with similar centres and networks in Scotland and Ireland. A flavour of the original rape crisis work is presented and practical ideas for ways forward are suggested.

Sex offenders

Sex offending: Causal theories to inform research, prevention, and treatment. (2008). Stinson, J. D., Sales, B. D., Becker, J. V., et al. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

This book reviews and critiques existing theories and the supporting literature addressing the reasons adolescent and adult males commit such acts as child molestation, rape, indecent exposure, and other violent offenses against adults and children. The authors then present their original integrative theory of sex offending. They describe how it may influence future research endeavours as well as prevention and treatment efforts with these populations.

Sexual harassment

Fighting back: Workplace sexual harassment and the case of "North Country". (2008). McDonald, P., & Backstrom, S. *Australian Bulletin of Labour*, 34(1), 47–63.

Sexual harassment in the workplace has been documented as a widespread and damaging phenomenon. Less well examined, however are the tactics used by perpetrators to inhibit outrage about

the harassment or the counter-strategies which can be used by women to oppose these tactics. This study, using the framework of backfire theory (Scott and Martin 2006), explores how a victim opposed sexual harassment in the film *North Country* (2005). In the course of her employment, the main character in the film, Josie Aimes, and her female co-workers, were subjected to systematic and brutal sexual harassment ranging from name-calling to physical sexual assault. Consistent with backfire theory, the analysis revealed five specific strategies used by the perpetrators to inhibit outrage: cover-up, devaluation, reinterpretation, intimidation and use of official channels, as well as anti-harassment strategies that attempted to make these tactics backfire. The findings have implications for educating and empowering women to actively stand up to and oppose sexual harassment in the workplace. (Journal abstract)

Survivors

Serial survivors: Women's narratives of surviving rape. (2008). Jordan, J. Leichhardt, NSW: Federation Press.

The survival stories in this book were told to the author by 15 women who were sexually assaulted by the same serial rapist in Auckland. Common themes emerge from the narratives in the women's experiences of the attack, the police processes, the trial, the responses of family and friends, and strategies for surviving and moving on.



We welcome your feedback

Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault

Help to shape the work of the Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault. We are interested in hearing your views on the best way to meet the needs of our stakeholders. If you have any comments on services that could be offered, possible topics for publications or areas of research, please fill in the section below and return it to the Institute. Comments can also be provided on-line via the ACSSA website, or email us at: acssa@aifs.gov.au

What other services would you find useful for your work?

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Membership form overleaf ➤

ACSSA services

The Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault is funded by the Office for Women, Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, through the National Initiative to Combat Sexual Assault in Australia. ACSSA provides stakeholders with a variety of services (see below) and is located at the Australian Institute of Family Studies in Melbourne.

Resources

ACSSA is building a collection of publications and best practice literature, reports, and training resources to inform initiatives and programs directed at improving the understanding of, and response to, sexual assault. These materials are available for browsing at the Australian Institute of Family Studies Information Centre, or may be borrowed through the interlibrary loan system. Bibliographic information on these resources may be searched online via the Institute's catalogue.

Research and advisory service

ACSSA's research staff can provide specialist advice and information on current issues that impact on the response to sexual assault. Email research queries to acssa@aifs.gov.au

Policy advice

ACSSA offers policy advice to the Australian Government and other government agencies on matters relating to sexual assault, intervention and pathways to prevention.

Publications

ACSSA produces *Issues* papers, the *ACSSA Wrap* (short resource papers) and newsletters, which are mailed free of charge to members of the mailing list. Publications can also be received electronically.

Promising Practice database

ACSSA is continuing to build its Promising Practice database, to document and publicise best practice projects and activities being undertaken in relation to sexual assault.

Research

ACSSA staff undertake primary and secondary research projects, commissioned by government and non-government agencies.

Email alert list

ACSSA-Alert keeps members posted on what's new at the Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault and in the sexual assault field generally.

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