Would Kitty Genovese Have Been Murdered in Second Life?

Researching the "Bystander Effect" using Online Technologies

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Abstract:
The increasing use of online technologies, including ‘virtual worlds’ such as Second Life, provides sociology with a transformed context within which to ply creative research approaches to ongoing social issues, such as the ‘bystander effect’. While the ‘bystander effect’ was coined following a real-life incident, the concept has been researched primarily through laboratory-based experiments. The relationship between ‘virtual’ and ‘real’ world environments and human behaviours are, however, unclear and warrant careful attention and research.

In this paper we outline existing literature on the applicability of computer-simulated activity to real world contexts. We consider the potential of Second Life as a research environment in which ‘virtual’ and ‘real’ human responses are potentially more blurred than in real-life or a laboratory setting. We describe preliminary research in which unsolicited Second Life participants faced a situation in which they could have intervened. Our findings suggest the existence of a common perception that formal regulators were close at hand, and that this contributed to the hesitation of some people to personally intervene in the fraught situation. In addition to providing another angle on the ‘bystander effect’, this research contributes to our understanding of how new technologies might enable us to conduct social research in creative ways.

Keywords: Second Life, ‘bystander effect’, regulation, social research
Introduction

The ‘bystander effect’, discussed most notably by social psychologists Latané and Darley (1968, 1970), relates to the propensity of an individual to intervene in a public emergency situation depending on the number of other bystanders known or thought to be a co-witness to the event. The concept was coined in response to the 1964 murder of New York woman, Kitty Genovese, who was sexually assaulted and stabbed to death over a half-hour period, reportedly as 38 of her neighbours watched from their apartment windows waiting for someone else to intervene. Subsequent laboratory-based research by Latané and Darley indicates that individuals are less likely to intervene in an emergency situation if many other people are perceived to be present (1970). Research subjects variously felt that they might lose face if they offered ineffective help, that others might be better qualified to help, that their assistance might actually worsen the situation, or that help was not required as others in the group were not responding either. However, recently, the accuracy of the account of the bystander inaction in the Genovese case has been all but debunked, with research showing that none of Kitty’s neighbours could have physically witnessed the entire attack, and that several people claimed to have called the police1 (Manning et al 2007; Takooshian et al 2005). Nonetheless, the vigour of the Genovese parable remains, featuring in the majority of introductory social psychology text books, and in many undergraduate programs in which patterns of social behaviour are studied (Manning et al 2007:557). Without discrediting the work of Latané and Darley, we feel the recent developments in the Genovese case add to the imperative to conduct more research into the relationship between real and simulated social behaviour, so that phenomena such as the ‘bystander effect’ may be studied in an
environment which approximates reality more closely than a laboratory setting. We describe Second Life as a platform for such simulated social behaviour.

First, we will briefly explain Second Life, and describe how, and by whom, this technology is used. Next, we will comment on approaches to the relationship between ‘virtual’ and ‘real’ life violent behaviour. Finally, we will describe an example of some virtual world incidents involving the anti-social, sexualised and disruptive misconduct of a Second Life user, and describe how the simulated people, or ‘avatars’, witnessing this behaviour responded. This research indicates that bystanders are less likely to intervene in instances of disruptive rule-breaking by another person, in part because they are waiting for those with legitimate regulatory jurisdiction to act. The perception of ongoing regulatory surveillance by Second Life administrators acting as a justification for non-intervention by site users has implications for studies of the ‘bystander effect’ and regulation design in both real and virtual world contexts.

**The Second Life Environment**

Second Life is a digital environment created by United States based company, Linden Labs. It is accessible free via the internet to anyone over 18 years of age who has access to a reasonably fast connection. Just over 45 percent of all ‘in-world’ activity involves people located in the United States and the United Kingdom (Second Life 2008). The basic environment created by Linden Labs resembles the Earth. There are hills, trees, oceans, rivers, gardens, volcanos and buildings, which include residences, shops, castles, churches, and community facilities.
Linden Labs provides users with a basic ‘avatar’, or a cyber-representation of a human being, which is a user’s point of perspective when navigating Second Life. Most people represent themselves as a sexually attractive male or female according to Western popular mores. Linden Labs also provides basic tools with which ‘residents’ can create items for sale to other residents, walk, fly and teleport to different places, synchronously communicate with others through speech, written text and simulated interactions, and modify their basic appearance.

Second Life is a social networking site or ‘virtual world’ and not a goal directed game (Duranske 2008). As such, what people ‘do’ in Second Life is socialise with other avatars. Friendships, cliques and even romantic relationships are forged in-world. Users blur the imagined distinction between their real-world selves and project their thoughts, feelings, reactions, tastes and intentions, or some version of them, into their second self, and act accordingly. While there is a degree of pretence, façade and role-playing involved in participation in Second Life, this is so of all realms of life (Goffman 1959), and it is not the case that people leave their entire ‘real’ world values and assumptions offline. Rather, the boundaries between real- and Second Life bleed into one another, with some people experiencing real-life material, sexual and psychological consequences in response to in-world events (Barraket and Henry-Waring 2008; Boellstorff 2008:138). Racism, sexism, violence and other real-life problems do have a presence within Second Life, although they are mediated in ways conventional social sciences are yet to fully comprehend.
Much of the initial socialising takes place at designated group areas, modelled to look like parks, bars, or other public spaces. These spaces have a rating which indicates the type of behaviour permitted in that space, as outlined in the Terms of Service established by Linden Labs. While Second Life is an adult only world, some areas are openly classified ‘M’, for mature, where it is not uncommon to find sexual activity occurring ‘publicly’. Even in regular public spaces much of the interaction between residents has an explicit sexual component. It should hardly be surprising that much academic work on Second Life has concerned gender issues (Balsamo 1996; Boellstorff 2008; Bruckman 1996; Edwards 1990; Kendall 2002; Taylor 2006) though the issue of gendered violence has been less thoroughly explored in the academic context (Dibbell 1993; Duranske 2004; Pasteur 2007; Sartre 2007; Weber 2007 cf. MacKinnon 1997 and 1998). The role of violence, in general, however, has been the topic of considerable investigation by those interested in online technologies and their relationship with real world issues. It is to these studies that we now turn.

Approaches to Mediated Corporeal Harm

A growing body of literature, mostly from the disciplines of social- and neuropsychology, identifies some problematic connections between the immersion in digital technologies, particularly gaming technologies, and real-world behaviours such as violence and aggression (Dill and Dill 1998). Based primarily on controlled laboratory experiments which expose research subjects to video games with a primary objective of using violence to achieve a desired end, then measuring the user’s heart-rate, anxiety levels or
responses to short reaction-time activities (Fleming and Rickwood 2001), findings suggest there is a causal connection between the requirement to act violently when immersed in video game-play and increased levels of aggression when the research subject is confronted with complex real-world tasks.\(^4\) Anderson’s (2004) meta-analysis of experimental and correlational studies suggests the interconnectedness of video-game violence and real-world aggression has probably been underestimated in previous research (Anderson et al, 2003). According to Farrar et al (2006), the effects of violent game-play can be magnified if the technology has more immersive qualities, such as enhanced graphic depictions of blood, or if the player is participating in first- rather than third-person mode. Carnagey et al (2007) take this logic further, indicating a similar link exists between violent video game-play and desensitisation to depictions of real-world violence.

The narrow cause-and-effect findings of violent video-game studies, often generated within a laboratory, do not translate smoothly into the open-access context of Second Life. The vast majority of Second Life users recognise this virtual world experience as mediated (Kerr in press). While ‘parallel’ or ‘inter-real’ environments are viewed by some as ‘more and more closely connected to the physical world’ (de Nood and Attema 2006:14), violence and other forms of potential harm remain mediated through animated characters who do not physically suffer or die when raped and stabbed.

Nonetheless, the potential for harm to be done through these mediated encounters in Second Life is of interest to researchers. Violence, including simulated aggressive sexual
behaviour or harassment, has been reported in one study of Second Life users to be of concern to over 50 percent of respondents (de Nood and Attema 2006:36). Though several real-life studies show that perceived risks tend to exceed what is supported by crime statistics (Johnson 2005), concerns surrounding the fear of crime in virtual worlds warrant further attention, as perceptions of risk or safety can have a profound influence on people’s behavioural choices.

A Case Study of the ‘bystander effect’ ‘in-world’

Part of the challenge of designing and implementing effective regulatory structures in online worlds such as Second Life rests with the need to understand how individuals and groups will respond to such regulation. At this point we will describe some preliminary research carried out within Second Life involving the disruptive behaviour of an avatar named Thomas. At this point we will switch to a singular pronoun to reflect the research process.

I (Tanya) met Thomas in late 2007, when Ian, Darren and I first began conducting research into Second Life. In the course of undirected conversation, Thomas and I discussed my interest in how limits of propriety, particularly sexual propriety, are established and enforced in Second Life. Thomas told me that he sometimes engaged in behaviour he knew to be very antisocial in order to see how people would react. When I showed interest he offered to let me accompany him on his exploits.
On ten occasions, Thomas and I entered ten different public areas of Second Life and approached a small group of between six and eleven people who were engaged in preliminary small talk, indicating they were not previously known to each other and had limited communal ties. Though it is possible to speak to others using a headset in Second Life, I followed the lead of many residents and communicated through instant text only. Thomas did not type, and did not provide any clear indication of his nationality or age. I did not talk with Thomas, but engaged other people in random conversation.

Thomas behaved in a confrontational, disruptive, sexually aggressive manner. He presented himself physically as male and harassed both male and female avatars. Thomas variously changed his appearance so that he was covered with both male and female genitalia, propositioned other residents using obscene gestures, performed lewd acts on himself in the middle of the group, and repeatedly rammed others with his naked avatar in an attempt to compel them to perform lewd acts with him.

Thomas began by behaving obscenely in a way that did not single out a particular person. However, after around five minutes, he would begin targeting individuals for around two minutes each, before switching to harass other members of the group, sometimes harassing the same person more than once.

While Thomas was acting in this way I asked other avatars what they thought of his behaviour. The responses were surprisingly consistent. While Thomas was performing lewd acts alone, people tended to watch him with little comment, although other public
discussion tended to cease entirely, suggesting Thomas was being closely observed. The few comments made were generally non-confrontational, were directed to others in the group rather than Thomas, and depicted Thomas as an amusing or juvenile anomaly. Some representative comments are as follows:

- I think Thomas is a bit frustrated
- methink hes confused
- teenager?
- I slipped a disk last time I tried that.. lol
- Thomas is on a roll.

In response to my questions about what they thought about this kind of behaviour in a non-mature public space, most dismissed Thomas’ conduct by indicating that Second Life is populated by some strange people and that such behaviour was not unexpected: it was just ‘the way it is in Second Life’. When I asked who was responsible for preventing such behaviour, I was told that Second Life regulators could monitor all in-world activity and evict Thomas; no one suggested that the regulators be contacted. In keeping with the findings of the ‘bystander effect’ research, I sensed that had I suggested contacting the authorities I would have been perceived as overreacting and would have lost face. The overall level of group inaction reinforced the ‘mood’ that intervention was not necessary (Manning et al 2007).
When Thomas began targeting individuals, however, the mood of the group changed and people were more likely to discuss the role of the Second Life regulators in monitoring and censuring such behaviour, as well as the official ‘rules’ for participating in non-mature public spaces. Some representative comments are as follows:

- there are mentors around who watch for this
- scamp is mentor, but I not see him
- so boring, he needs to go back to [a] m[ature] reg[ion of Second Life]
- can report his hairy arse – [press] ‘help’ [then] ‘report abuse’
- kids shouldn’t be here [in Second Life] – go back to teen-grid

In all cases, the targeted person attempted to avoid Thomas by repeatedly moving their avatar away from his advances. However, no one directly told Thomas to stop his behaviour or teleported away. Few comments were directed to Thomas himself, by either the ‘victim’ or a member of the crowd, and none were very confrontational. Some representative comments are as follows:

- you’re not my type dude
- Thomas I don’t think you’re his type
- you’re persistent I’ll give you that
- [that posture is] not pretty
- charming, you’re a real gem.
As Thomas’s behaviour became more offensive and more focussed on an individual the group discussions tended to include more references to a perceived regulatory presence in Second Life. Some representative comments are as follows:

- big brother will evict his arse
- he’ll be evicted soon
- won’t last long
- mentors will can [reprimand] him
- LL [Linden Labs] can bar Thomas

Though unseen, the presence of some kind of Second Life regulatory system was perceived to be tacitly in control of the situation (Foucault 1977), both in the sense that Thomas’s behaviour was being monitored by Second Life officials, and that if it became ‘legitimately’ (Weber 1965) disruptive Thomas would be evicted by someone ‘in charge’. Certainly, by referring to the potential for Thomas to be evicted from Second Life, most written comments in this scenario aimed to censure Thomas directly. However, there was also a sense that the point at which Thomas’s behaviour became unacceptable, was to be determined by people other than those who were privy and prey to Thomas’s disruptive actions.

**Would Kitty Genovese Have Been Murdered in Second Life?**

The lack of bystander response to Thomas’s behaviour is hypothesised by the ‘bystander effect’. Furthermore, empirical research on reporting offending behaviour to authorities
in the real world indicates several factors impinge upon the decision to act (Skogan 1984). The first involves the perceived seriousness of the action. The more ‘serious’ the offence the more likely it is to be reported. However, the threshold of perceived seriousness is considerable, with only one-third of real world assaults and sexual assaults being reported to police (Johnson 2005, Rennison 2002:1). Furthermore, in circumstances of repeat victimisation, Agnew (1985) suggests that individuals develop coping techniques of ‘neutralization’, by trivialising the event or adopting a fatalistic acceptance of the behaviour as something that ‘just happens’. The evidence in our case study is indicative of these kinds of de-motivating drivers or cognitive processes influencing responses to misconduct. It should be noted that at no point was Thomas contacted by Second Life authorities or reprimanded formally.

So, would Kitty Genovese have been murdered in Second Life? The pragmatic, logical answer is ‘impossible’. There is no corpus delecti, and while there could be intention to kill, the only damage that could be done, apart from the shock to the user of her avatar, would be a few shards of flashing red light piercing her digital identity, which would otherwise remain totally intact. However, the bystander effect would suggest the stabbing could occur, and persist with impunity, while spectators wait for the sovereign authority of Linden Labs to intervene.

These preliminary findings have two potential regulatory implications. The first relates to the design and function of regulation in Second Life and other virtual worlds. Though governance in these technologies tends to follow a deregulated approach, with loose and
poorly enforced Terms of Service agreements promoting the development and enforcement of social controls by individual user-communities, the perceived presence of higher authority regulators may delay or even deter those in a group from intervening in a situation they understand to breach in-world behavioural codes. The second involves the ongoing issue of the ‘bystander effect’. Analyses of real-life responses to crises such as the Genovese murder will always be warranted, though researchers hardly desire such opportunities. While laboratory testing of group behaviour can yield valuable results (e.g. Latané and Darley 1968, 1970), the potential for encountering spontaneous human interaction is limited in a laboratory setting. Although the relationship between trends in ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ behaviour are far from clear, it is certainly a relationship worthy of serious consideration (Anderson 2004; Anderson et al. 2003; Carnagy et al. 2007; Dill and Dill 1998; Farrar et al. 2006; Fleming and Rickwood 2001). For example, research in this area may enhance our understanding of the impact of new forms of surveillance, such as Closed Circuit Cameras used in public train stations and city parks. Second Life offers sociologists, social psychologists, anthropologists and others, an exciting and fertile domain in which to creatively pursue social research options in an environment that is, perhaps, not quite ‘real’ and yet not a laboratory.
References


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1 The NYPD call centre was, at the time, not centrally coordinated and was reportedly inefficient (Manning et al 2007).

2 Those who do not adhere to this rule tend to present themselves as non-human, such as cats, birds or mythical creatures. Western identities, after all, draw heavily on gendered categories, even if these categories and the relationships to self are contested (Battaglia 1995; Blair 1997; Bordo 1990; de Beauvoir 1972; Haraway 1991b; Herzfeld 1985; Hollway 1998; Jeffries 1990; Klein 1996; Kristeva 1977; Mead 1950; Summers 1975).

3 Certainly, Haraway’s suggestion that people are ‘creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted’ (Haraway 1991a:149) reflects the experience of Second Life.

4 This trend is observed more markedly among young men (Bartholow and Anderson 2002).

5 While we can not claim that research comprising ten encounters in Second Life constitutes firm empirical data, these preliminary findings on trends in crowd intervention when there is a perceived regulatory presence are worthy of further investigation. Of course, there are ethical issues that would prevent researchers from fabricating certain social scenarios such as the ones described in this paper. These ethical
issues present a major challenge to those seeking approval from a University ethics committee. Addressing
the ethics challenge is necessary, however, if sociology is to take up the research opportunities presented by
the increasing use of online technologies such as Second Life.