

NOT PLAYING AROUND: SEXUAL ASSAULT IN MULTIPLAYER ONLINE GAMES

On August 10, 2014, a Reddit user with the handle “mreikmattila” posted a comment describing how his avatar was raped by another user while playing *Grand Theft Auto V* (GTA). The online multiplayer mode available with this version of the game—intended to allow players to cooperate and compete—enabled the on screen sexual assault, wherein the virtual rapist modifies the game’s code to create a pantless avatar who locks onto another user. Mreikmattila described how his attacker “slowly and sensually” sodomized him, and then forced him to strip on an invisible pole.

Videos of similar incidents have appeared on YouTube, with naked avatars (both male and female) taunting, kidnapping, and sexually assaulting GTA players. Although Rockstar Games, the developer of *GTA*, is accustomed to accusations of exhibiting and trivializing rape, this is the first time that users have been the targets of sexual violence. When video game characters suffer sexual abuse, it is generally thought of as merely fantasy or “entertainment.” Now, through the player-avatar connection, real people and real emotions are involved.

Virtual rape is not a recent development, but up until now, the crime has been primarily verbal. In earlier forms of online multiplayer video games, most interactions between players were limited to scrolling text. In his famous 1993 article, “A Rape in Cyberspace,” Julian Dibbell writes about the sexual assault of several players in a seemingly peaceful virtual world. The virtual rapist typed graphic and violent descriptions of sexual acts, as other users were forced to participate by way of a “voodoo” subprogram.

Kim Correa, a female video game writer, was threatened with sexual assault at gunpoint earlier this year while playing



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the video game *DayZ*. One of her attackers said via microphone that “he was into necrophilia” and made sexual noises after her screen faded to black. “I definitely don’t want to say what happened to me verbally is as important as if it had happened in real life,” said Correa during a radio interview, “but it means something.”

The posttraumatic consequences of virtual rape will become increasingly severe as video game graphics improve and the practice of manipulating code becomes more common. Yet Rockstar Games refuses to even comment on the issue. Reports made in game chat rooms are often met with disrespectful—sometimes gruesome—comments. Even mreikmattila seemed to make light of the incident. However, the feelings of

frustration and powerlessness he expressed align with the experiences of other targets of virtual rape and should not be ignored.

Laws regarding rape in the physical world are ineffective because they rely on gendered assumptions instead of facts. Similarly, the public’s understanding of sexual assault in video games fails to keep up with developments in virtual reality. Cases of virtual rape, as well as new games such as *Venus Rising*, a massive multiplayer online game in which users can have sex with each other, highlight the need for consent and accountability in the virtual world. Moving forward, it will be difficult for anyone to argue that sexual violence in video games is just harmless entertainment.

—*Lucie Brown*