Regulation & Online Environments

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Introduction
The Internet has given rise to several new forms of communication and interaction between people. It is now possible for people to meet and interact with other people in different online environments, regardless of their geographical/physical location. With this new technology it is much easier for people to gather round a shared interest instead of just sharing a geographical neighbourhood.

Democracy or dictatorship
The problem with these new environments, where people can socialize with each other, is that these environments can be created and developed by “anyone” who has enough knowledge about the technology involved.

The people who develop these environments also have the power to settle the rules of these environments. This means that one or a few people’s values and norms can be trend setting within these environments. Often their values and norms also control the rules in the same environment.

Is it reasonable to expect that people who develop online environments automatically consider the moral and social aspects and consequences? People who have the knowledge to develop technology, i.e. online environments, often lack knowledge of the social aspects of what they develop. Who has, and should have, the responsibility for the moral aspects in online environments?

In offline environments, legislation exists that regulates how people are allowed to behave toward each other. This approach is necessary for online environments as well. People are still people, regardless of the environment.

Online environments are not by their nature democratic. These environments are developed and maintained with a profit motive. Democratic ideals are secondary or non-existent.

Technical design is social design
Development of technology always entails both technical and social consequences. It is impossible to implement a new technology, which does not affect its context in some way. People with technical skill do not automatically have the knowledge of the moral and social aspects of the technology that they develop.
It is not reasonable to place all the moral and social responsibility on the people who develop technology, but it is reasonable to demand that they gain a deeper awareness about the social consequences of what they develop. Today there is a tendency among designers to overlook the social consequences and think that the responsibility belongs to someone else.

**Enter Asheron’s Call**

Asheron’s Call is an example of a massively multiplayer role-playing game (MMORPG), which is a virtual environment that allows thousands of players to be online together simultaneously. Studies have shown that the users of this environment consider the social interaction to be more important than the actual playing. Furthermore, the studies show that the majority of the respondents experience the environment to be a form of reality and not to be dismissed as a second-rate version of offline life. The studies also show that the majority of the users feel that their activities in online environments have significant influence and relevance to their offline lives.

When considering norms and values, online environments should not be treated different than offline environments. People are still people even when they meet and interact in online environments. There are social structures and conventions in online environments as there are in offline environments. Sometimes people keep their norms and values when they enter the online environment and sometimes they reshape them or create new norms and values that fit into the new context.

**A tale of two rapes**

In a recent judgement with great relevance to online environments the United States Supreme Court found that freedom of expression protected computer-generated images. The case concerned computer-generated child pornography and the argument turned on the issue as to whether or not there was a victim. Lacking an actual victim, the Supreme Court decided that the images were protected by freedom of expression.

An older example of online sexual abuse can be found in Dibbell’s (1998) description of a rape, and its after effects, which occurred in the text-based MUD of LambdaMOO. In this case the online community unsuccessfully attempted to create law, which could punish the offender.

Activities and interaction in online environments are too often considered to be just information exchange. This statement stands in strong contrast to the fact that people who spend time in these online environments are in them with their minds, senses and emotions. Even though they are not there physically they can still feel and think. People can be hurt even despite the lack of physical presence.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper is to argue that online activity should not only be degraded to a basic information exchange. The online environments are populated by real people and the general totalitarian development and control of these environments is not acceptable in an age of human rights and should be made to conform to social and moral guidelines.
The question, which the law must address, is who is to take responsibility to ensure that these environments conform to some sort of basic ethical norms acceptable to a wider majority within both offline and online environments.