

The Loss of Anonymity

By Ben Cotton

The world is becoming increasingly interconnected. Every day more and more things that we take for granted are integrating with the Internet, due to the many advantages of such connectivity. Arguably, one area where this is happening most of all is the world of gaming. Bringing the Internet into gaming has greatly expanded the possibilities of the medium. Virtual worlds and social games have brought otherwise isolated people together and enhanced the entertainment value of the medium.

In parallel to this increasing interconnectedness, is the advance of the surveillance society. CCTV cameras are increasingly being used in the real world to prevent crime across the planet, while governments introduce legislation to give them the power to track people's movements through invasive identification and security measures (such as the proposed Search and Surveillance Bill (Cheng, 2010)), brought on by threats of terrorism and crime, and the paranoia induced by them.

It is inevitable that the aforementioned virtual worlds and other online gaming platforms will become ever larger and more numerous, and the boundaries of the real world and virtual worlds will blend into one another as we put more of our lives online and advances in technology lead to greater immersion. This can already be seen in Facebook. Furthermore, just like security risks are leading to increased surveillance in the real world, there are even more security risks (just not physical threats) and threats to commercial interests on the Internet and within virtual worlds which are gradually leading to increased surveillance of the Internet (such as the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement being pushed by the U.S. (Sayer, 2010)).

One privilege which has been taken for granted on the Internet is the anonymity of it all – the lack of a requirement to identify yourself truthfully and accurately. But just like compulsory identity cards have been introduced in some places in the real world to identify you and CCTV to monitor you, so it seems you will soon – if you haven't already – be required to identify yourself in the virtual worlds. In this case, it is being introduced through Facebook gaming where your virtual network of friends is derived from your physical networks of friends, and through other gaming services which do it for reasons of preventing cheating and offensive behaviour (Online gaming: A Blizzard of protest over privacy, 2010).

As casual gaming and online social networking become more popular it is probable that physical isolation will become less of a barrier to a fulfilling life. In fact, physical isolation could even become desirable a large portion of the time, as people in the real world become paranoid about every new danger (as science and politics progress) to the physical bodies of themselves and loved ones.

In this way, it is foreseeable that virtual worlds will eventually be, for all intents and purposes, extensions to the real world, and provide vital means of escape and of social connection. In other words, the formerly separate worlds of the physical and the virtual will bleed into one another and become one. The question is: do you really want everybody being able to identify you whenever you play a game? For example, do you want your boss to know you play games for 8 hours a day?

Inevitably, online systems will be exploited for nefarious purposes; in that case what's to stop someone using such virtual worlds to effectively stalk people through into the real world? Finally, what happens if someone takes the game too seriously and decides to take their frustrations out on you for defeating them in the game (Video game fanatic hunts down and stabs rival player who killed character online, 2010)?

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