

# Preface

The fusion between virtuality and reality has achieved a new quality of experience by the establishment of metaverses and virtual worlds. With globally registered accounts nearing 800 million and revenues approaching US\$ 1 billion annually (according to the Consulting Company *KZERO*), virtual worlds such as *Second Life*, *Twinty*, *Entropia Universe*, or *Fregger* have experienced rapid growth in recent years and show no signs of slowing down. Not only have countless companies discovered these “virtueal worlds” as marketplaces, but also have fraudsters and other criminals.

The term *metaverse* is used herein to mean a social virtual world such as *Second Life*, *There*, or *Playstation Home*. It describes a permanently existing 3D virtual world close to reality in appearance, created by its participants and constantly evolving through their activities. The users have an “avatar” as the digital representation of their physical selves. They accomplish various goals: meeting and socializing with other avatars, buying and selling virtual items, playing games, and creating and decorating virtual homes and properties. Certain transactions among users result in a circular flow of real-world money, which takes place partly within the virtual world but are linked directly with the outside world via exchange rates.

Various Massively Multiplayer Online-Games (MMOGs) such as *Entropia Universe* and *World of Warcraft* contain elements that bear a resemblance to aspects of the metaverse, although the MMOGs typically focus on a specific gaming activity rather than on general-purpose socializing. These MMOGs are included in the more comprehensive concept of “virtual worlds”.

To meet the new challenges arising from virtual worlds, the *Institute of German, European and International Criminal Law*, supported by the *Institute of Criminology*, both part of the *University of Heidelberg*, organized the symposium “Virtual Worlds and Criminality” at the *Internationales Wissenschaftsforum Heidelberg*, a center for scholarly exchange in all areas of science and academic research. This conference brought together European experts from different academic disciplines, *inter alia* representatives from jurisprudence, social sciences and media sciences, as well as from psychology. They discussed the reasons for and the impacts of these

new forms of criminality as well as the necessities and possibilities for fighting these. Moreover, other fundamental issues were examined, such as the addictive potential of virtual-world use, media violence, and conflict resolution problems arising in the context of virtual worlds.

These proceedings (which were made following the conference) provide insight into much of the results of the discussion. A brief overview of the matters discussed during the symposium, the program, and the abstracts of the various contributions can be found in the annex.

The conference could not have taken place without the generous sponsorship of the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*, Germany's largest research funding organization, and the inclusion of the conference in the symposia program by the curators' board of the *Internationales Wissenschaftsforum Heidelberg*.

The symposium and the publication of its proceedings would not have been possible without the help and cooperation of many members of the Institutes' staff. At the risk of overlooking important contributions of others, special mention should be made of Ms. *Julia Neugebauer* who coordinated administrative tasks and of Ms. *Johanna Nieswandt*, who assured the efficiency of the publication process.

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