



## Virtual Community Resources

The Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) is working with Drakontas and Drexel University to develop a curriculum and to conduct in-person training sessions for law enforcement leaders that increase their awareness of and capacity to respond to crimes occurring in virtual communities.

For more information about this training program, get in touch with Dr. Brian Regli, CEO, Drakontas, at 215-887-5570 or [brian@drakontas.com](mailto:brian@drakontas.com)

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# VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES FACT SHEET

## What are virtual communities?

Virtual communities are online communities that feature computer simulated environments in which users can interact with one another through various embedded communications methods. Virtual worlds provide opportunities for individuals to experience and interact with various places and people that may be geographically far removed or creatively generated. Examples of virtual communities, many of which have no specific goal or purpose aside from providing a place for people to socialize, include Second Life and Habbo. On the other end of the spectrum, there are interactive, goal-oriented gaming worlds (referred to as massively multiplayer online role playing games, or MMORPGs) including World of Warcraft or Eve Online. There are numerous virtual communities that are tailored to specific audiences. Club Penguin, for example, is a virtual community geared toward children.

## Why should law enforcement care about virtual communities?

As with many new technologies, it is important for law enforcement to understand the functionalities and implications to conduct effective investigations and keep their officers and communities safe and informed. Many virtual communities allow for many methods of interaction and communication including video chat, text chat, voice chat, e-mail, file exchange, and currency exchange. Because of the ease of communication and transaction, people are able to perpetrate criminal activity through virtual communities. Examples of crimes that have been carried out through virtual communities include the following:

- Money laundering
- Crimes against children
- Gang activity
- Criminal communication

Crimes are also being committed in the real world as a result of activity that occurred in virtual communities.

## Information sources in virtual communities

Various sources of information and evidence can be obtained in virtual worlds and gaming communities. Transaction logs, user and character information, chat logs, IP addresses, and other application and network services may be a source of evidence when investigating not only virtual crimes but also real-world crimes. Computer and network hardware and media storage cards may also house information that could be helpful in an investigation.

Modern gaming consoles, like the Nintendo Wii, the Microsoft Xbox 360, and the Sony PlayStation, also have

numerous capabilities that allow users to communicate freely with others across the globe or to commit traditional crimes through newer, unmonitored channels. Many have wireless Internet connectivity and their own online network. With this level of connectivity, users can get access to the Web through a browser and download and save information. Some gaming consoles have a disc drive or hard drive.

## Issues surrounding virtual community investigations

With case law playing catch-up and law enforcement agencies grappling with a shortage of guidance, many investigators are facing serious challenges when dealing with virtual communities, including:

- **Data Collection:** Information may not be stored on an individual's computer or gaming console hard drive; instead, it may reside on memory cards or even on remote servers in another country. Knowing what information is available and how to get access to that information can be complicated and requires investigators to have a working knowledge of various gaming communities and virtual worlds.
- **Jurisdiction:** A perpetrator may be in one country, a victim in another, and the data centers with all the information in yet another. These circumstances raise complicated jurisdictional questions.
- **Legal Implications:** Case law is only beginning to emerge on this complex issue. Law enforcement agencies should consult their legal counsel for answers to specific questions about virtual communities and law enforcement.

## What are the benefits of virtual communities?

Virtual communities may give police departments an innovative forum for training, collaboration, and other services. Virtual communities allow people to enter a space and interact with one another to share information, conduct training, or find entertainment. Many agencies are facing cuts to travel and training budgets; however, with a virtual community, trainees may enter a virtual classroom and interact with a trainer who may be hundreds or thousands of miles away. Trainers can provide information, trainees can ask questions, and all can benefit from the educational setting without leaving their department. Another application is for collaboration. Law enforcement executives from across the nation can log in to a virtual space, sit around a table, discuss issues, and collaborate on projects.