

# Flimsy Borders And Online Selves: A Philosophical Exploration Of Virtual Rape

**Dr. Claire Stephanie Westman**

*Department of Philosophy, Practical and Systematic Theology, University of South Africa (UNISA), South Africa*

## **Abstract**

Virtual rape came to the fore in the early 1990s when the first widely publicised case of such violence occurred in a virtual space called LambdaMOO. Since then, with the ever-growing and evolving virtual worlds, there has been an increase in the number of rapes and sexual assaults committed within virtual spaces. This has, in turn, led to a developing body of studies into virtual rape, with a particular focus on empirical studies investigating the prevalence of virtual rape and those exploring policy and legislative measures associated with such violence. However, there is little research on the philosophical underpinnings and/or consequences of virtual rape. Consequently, this paper seeks to explore how rape that is committed virtually is linked to a person's identity and sexual imagination, and the ways in which virtual rape, like physical rape, can have profound impacts on a person's sense of self and belonging. This paper aims to argue that while virtual rape may not include the bodily harms typically associated with rape, it does involve many of the same harms to a person's interiority and personhood as does physical rape. In order to develop this argument, the paper will examine the ways in which one's online persona/avatar can be seen as an extension of one's psychic self, the virtual world as a community, and the 'flimsy' borders that separate physical and virtual worlds.

**Keywords:** online sexual violence; personhood; identity; phenomenology; technology