

THE LEGAL MODEL OF VIRTUAL REALITY IN THE INTERNET SPACE (using the example of online multiplayer games)

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Article info

Received –
2025 May 14
Accepted –
2026 January 12
Available online –
2026 March 20

Keywords

Virtual reality, virtual property, ownership, virtual reality items, massively multiplayer online game, assignment of rights

The subject of study is the category of "virtual reality," as examined by the authors in the context of multiplayer online games.

The purpose of the article is to analyze modern approaches to defining the concept of virtual reality and the relationships arising from the circulation of virtual reality objects.

The research methodology incorporates general scientific methods, as well as a comparative research method and a formal legal approach.

Results. An analysis of modern approaches to defining the concept of virtual reality and the relationships arising from the circulation of virtual reality objects suggests both the possibility and the necessity of regulating such relationships, particularly in the context of online games.

In identifying the philosophical basis of this study, the authors of the article believe that the ontological principle of virtual reality lies in overcoming the limitations of human nature within a virtual environment. The desire to regulate all aspects of human life is excessive and does not lead to the desired consequences. However, virtual gaming actions will be subject to real law if the participant understands that their actions will have consequences in the real world. To support their position, the authors apply the so-called "magic circle theory": the rules in the game space differ from those in the real world until a violation of the game rules is detected, leading to negative consequences for the copyright holder in reality.

The authors focus on the relationships that develop between participants in multiplayer online games. These relationships are used as an example of virtual reality, which has been insufficiently studied from a legal perspective and lacks qualified legal regulation.

The authors identify three main approaches developed in legal scholarship regarding the description of virtual reality, gameplay, its objects, and relationships: reification of virtual world objects by applying property law to the relevant relationships; consideration of the relationships between players transferring game assets as services for modifying game parameters; and description of the relationships between players as the transfer of a claim (a claim) between the initial and subsequent users of virtual property under a contract for the provision of services for organizing the game process (an agreement between the initial user and the game organizer).

In examining the legal classification of relationships between players regarding the alienation of various in-game items in multiplayer online games, the authors seek to answer the question: are such transactions permissible, do they have legal significance, and which legal institution and branch of law should regulate the actions of players? The article concludes that in these cases, a transfer of rights of claim (right of claim) occurs between the users-players: the right of claim against the game developer, arising from the agreement with the gaming organization, is transferred. Currently, this classification of relationships is considered optimal, but it is temporary. According to the authors, neither property law nor contract law in their traditional forms can serve as a full-fledged regulator of virtual reality; sooner or later, courts and legislators will be forced to recognize virtual property as a special type of social relationship.

1. Introduction. The reality of digital computer space, which can be referred to as "virtual reality" for short, is simply computer code. Within the context of legal research, virtual reality that relates to property and ownership in traditional human relationships can be referred to as virtual property or virtual ownership. The computer code of virtual property is designed to function as land or movable property [1]. The intangible nature of this good, which imitates things and is created in the image and likeness of these things, poses a difficult task for jurisprudence and other sciences to qualify relations regarding virtual reality (or, we could say, relations in virtual reality).

Have adequate legal models of virtual reality been developed by today? Does society need legal regulation of relations regarding virtual reality objects?

As an example, we will use multiplayer online games. It should be noted that the term "virtual property" is often used by experts to refer to the so-called "game property," which includes weapons, artifacts, equipment, in-game money, and other "property." In this context, "other property" also includes the appearance and additional abilities of a player's avatar (character) in a multiplayer online game.

There are three main approaches that have developed in the field of law to describe the virtual reality of gameplay, its objects, and relationships.

Supporters of the first approach "materialize" the objects of the virtual world. Thus, these objects are proposed to be considered objects of property rights as real rights. However, the main problem of granting players property rights lies in the understanding of a thing. After all, one of the main differences between a thing and virtual reality is the lack of actual control of the subject over the object of virtual reality. This idea of the tangible nature of things is not clearly expressed in the Civil Code of the Russian Federation¹ (hereinafter referred to as the CC), but it affects the content of many institutions in civil law. Similarly, in German civil law, only physical

objects are recognized as things. However, there may be opposite legal decisions, where civil law defines a thing as anything that is separate from a person and satisfies people's needs.

Some experts refuse to equate virtual reality objects with things. In this case, acquiring virtual game assets is not a traditional sale and purchase transaction, and there is no transfer of ownership associated with it. Instead, transactions between player users are classified as a service for modifying game parameters. It turns out that by transferring an item of virtual reality, one player of a multiplayer online game provides another player with a service, making changes to the latter's game that are beneficial to them². This approach may cause legal problems: the user's license agreement may prohibit the provision of gaming services.

The above-described relationship could be qualified as a transfer of the right of claim (transfer of the right between the initial and subsequent users) under a contract for the provision of services for organizing the gaming process (under a contract between the initial user and the organizer of the gaming process). This conclusion follows from the classification of the relationship between the user and the game developer proposed by the Federal Tax Service of Russia, where the player transfers funds. During the trial in the dispute with Mail.Ru Games LLC in case No. A40-91072/14³ in the Moscow Arbitration Court, the Federal Tax Service of Russia stated that the parties' intention in the license agreements was to provide Mail.Ru Games LLC with the opportunity to organize the gaming process for its clients.

Mail.Ru Games LLC insisted that the gaming equipment is provided to the participants of the gaming process for money in the form of transfer of

² Arkhipov, V.V., Rybalov A.O. Ownership of Virtual Objects // URL:

<https://ifacademy.ru/course/1496348/1496376?autoplay=t> (accessed: 11.05.2025).

³ Judgment of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation dated 30.09.2015 No. 305-KG15-12154 in case No. A40-91072/14 // URL:

<https://www.consultant.ru/cons/cgi/online.cgi?req=doc&base=ARB&n=439231#YHLhukUrx58UwkC8> (accessed: 11.05.2025).

¹ Collection of Laws of the Russian Federation. 1994. No. 32. Art. 3301.

Law Enforcement Review
2026, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 94–103

rights to software under a license. In such a situation, the organizer of the gaming process is exempt from taxes in accordance with subparagraph 26 of paragraph 2 of Article 149 of the Tax Code of the Russian Federation⁴. The Federal Tax Service of Russia and the court interpreted the relationship between the game organizers and the players differently: the sale of gaming assets and services is carried out under a contract for the provision of paid services, which means that it is subject to taxation⁵. From a technical point of view, the player acquires lines of computer code. By activating the code, the player gains an advantage over other players, which is why such purchases can be classified as the provision of services⁶.

Later, the game organizer was able to prove that the described transactions were more like providing access to digital content rather than organizing the game process. Taking into account the new license agreement offered by the game organizer to players, the Federal Tax Service of Russia confirmed that the emerging relationship was a provision of access to inactive game data and commands, which is a license agreement, and therefore subject to the provisions of subparagraph 26 of paragraph 2 of Article 149 of the Tax Code of the Russian Federation⁷.

Let's return to the option of qualifying the relationship between players as a transfer of the right to claim under a service agreement for

organizing the gaming process (under a contract between the original user and the organizer of the gaming process). The assignor transfers its right to the virtual object to the assignee. Does such a transaction violate the user agreement? Not always, but such a transaction may be subject to a contractual prohibition on transfer in the license agreements of some games⁸.

We suggest that we should not look for definitive answers in the realm of traditional legal institutions. Of course, at first, we cannot avoid applying existing norms by analogy: today, we tend to view virtual reality relationships as if they were contractual relationships. Perhaps the best way to describe transactions between players regarding the transfer of game assets is to view them as a transfer of rights in relation to the game company (the game developer). However, in the long run, we should regulate these relationships as fundamentally new to society and the law. We should not look for signs of property rights or obligations in them. Virtual property should be understood as *sui generis*, and the rules of property and things established in the law of property should be applied by analogy.

2. The theoretical basis of the study. It is important and productive to consider virtual reality from the perspective of ontology. In Russian jurisprudence, such a study was conducted by A.M. Astashkin [2]. He prepared a review of philosophical views on virtual reality. Derrida, for example, believes that virtual entities depend on perception and the ability of the perceiving subject to recognize them. According to Derrida, virtual entities arise from the synthesis of thinking and representation. The main qualities of virtual objects are their ghostliness and simulation. On the contrary, Baudrillard questions the very concept of virtual reality: when we use the term "virtual reality," we are not referring to the old philosophical concept of the virtual, which was in a dialectical relationship with the actual and sought to transform into the actual. Instead, the virtual is replacing the real.

According to A.M. Astashkin himself, virtual

⁴ Collection of Laws of the Russian Federation. 2000. No. 32. Art. 3340.

⁵ Virtual reality for real money: how are legal relations between the owner of a computer game and users regulated? // URL: <https://ezybrand.ru/blog/pravovye-otnosheniya-mezhdu-vladelczem-kompyuternoj-igry-i-polzovatelyami/> (accessed: 11.05.2025).

⁶ Kukhno M. In-game User Property in Online Games: Features of Legal Regulation. URL: https://stopgame.ru/blogs/topic/109695/vnutriigrovoe_imuschestvo_polzovateley_v_onlayn_igrah_osobennosti_pravovogo_regulirovaniya (accessed дата обращения: 11.05.2025).

⁷ Letter from the Federal Tax Service of Russia dated January 23, 2017, No. SD-4-3/988. URL: <https://www.garant.ru/products/ipo/prime/doc/71493826/> (accessed: 11.05.2025).

⁸ Arkhipov, V.V., Rybalov A.O. Ownership of Virtual Objects // URL: <https://ifacademy.ru/course/1496348/1496376?autoplay=t> (accessed: 11.05.2025).

objects generated by digital technologies are not present in the technologies themselves, but are born in the human mind.

Anthropologist N. Yee studied the amount of time people spent in the fictional world of Norrath, as well as the motives behind their presence in that world. It turned out that subscribers of the game spend an average of 22.71 hours a week in this fictional world, but approximately 10% of users spend more than 40 hours a week in this game, and 2% spend up to 60 hours a week [3]. There are also other studies that show that 22% of players consider Norrath to be their primary residence, and even stated that they would be willing to spend all their time there [4].

Every day, users of virtual worlds spend huge amounts of money on virtual reality items. The most expensive purchase is the planet Calipso, which cost the owner \$6,000,000⁹.

B. Pollitzer explained the reason for the acquisition of real value by virtual objects. "Economists will tell you that the value of a particular item is related to its scarcity. In order for players to assign value to a virtual item in the real world, there must be a scarce item in the real world that is necessary for its creation. This item is time..." [5, p. 13]. What kind of time is we talking about? For example, the world has already been created, but a "potion with a spell" is required to defeat the "red dragon." To do this, you need to reach level 10, which takes approximately 1,000 hours of gameplay. As a result, users are willing to purchase the necessary advantages in the game from those who already have them. Alternatively, you can simply purchase an account.

Users think that virtual objects are their property. G. Lastowka & D. Hunter note that "behavioral economists have found that people tend to personally invest in objects that they believe to be their own. The 'investment effect' is a persistent cognitive bias in which people overestimate the value

of assets that they have acquired compared to those that belong to others. In other words, people tend to overestimate the value of objects that they believe to be their own" [6, p. 46].

There are other interesting reasons for the popularity of virtual realities. A.A. Trofimova notes that the awareness and fear of death organize and direct a person's activities towards creating conditions for a comfortable and safe existence. Thus, a desire for an immortal existence in other, more specific areas is formed... this is a game reality, a space of artistic meaning, where a person explores various possible situations, and death is merely a convention in this regard [7].

We believe that law cannot ignore virtual reality as an object of regulation. However, it is important to find an institution in the legal system that corresponds to virtual reality. Along with general legal principles, there are also sectoral and sub-sectoral principles, and even at the level of individual legal institutions, there are important ideas specific to each institution that give it its unique characteristics. It is possible that the same area of social life may be subject to different branches and institutions of law at different times. However, the choice of regulator will affect the quality of regulation, the degree of protection of rights, and the quality of life for people involved in public relations.

3. The main results of the study. Today, a person can communicate with people they have never met before, "get married" in the virtual world, and do so from the comfort of their own room. A Japanese woman was arrested for "killing" her virtual husband after he divorced her¹⁰. Another example: in 2003, the South Korean police received more than 22,000 reports of cybercrimes related to virtual property, and 10,187 teenagers were arrested for stealing virtual property [1]. Another example: in 2005, Qui Chengwei, a user of the online game Legends of Mir III, lent a unique sword to a friend, who did not return it but

⁹ Planet Calypso Sold for \$6 Million USD // URL: <https://www.mmorpg.com/entropia-universe/news/planet-calypso-sold-for-6-million-usd-1000019414#0me41127qBmfQXZ5.99> (accessed: 11.05.2025).

¹⁰ Japanese woman arrested after 'murdering' virtual husband in online computer game. (2008). URL: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/japan/3248106/Japanese-woman-arrested-after-murdering-virtual-husband-in-online-computer-game.html> // (accessed: 11.05.2025).

instead resold it on eBay for an amount equivalent to 820 euros. Since the police refused to intervene, Qui Chengwei took justice into his own hands and killed his former friend¹¹. There are cases when in practice there were thefts of virtual objects or blocked servers [8].

Professor A. Lakhani believes that virtual worlds have three main characteristics. First, they are interactive – although a virtual world can exist on one computer or one server, a large number of people can access it remotely. Second, virtual worlds simulate the real world, its level of “physicality”. The third characteristic of virtual worlds is their permanence, that is, the ability of a virtual program to continue working regardless of whether there are people or objects in the location [9].

V.V. Arkhipov also identifies three characteristics of virtual reality, but he formulates them differently: to contain a simulated world (environment), to allow multiple users who can be identified, and to provide the ability for users to interact [10].

Virtual worlds are most often represented by massive multiplayer online games. These are complex pieces of software that create a three-dimensional world and allow users to create an identity (or “avatar”) that can move and interact with that world. A distinctive feature of virtual worlds is the complexity of behavior that is possible in games.

Virtual items (virtual property) include non-tangible objects that have economic value but are only useful or can be used in virtual space. The list of virtual property is quite extensive and open-ended.

Relations regarding accounts, avatars, and other virtual property are regulated by law for the purpose of effectively implementing and protecting rights to virtual property. Even if a country’s national legislation does not have specific regulations governing virtual reality, this area of public life is still recognized by international law. For example, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has developed the concept of property, which is often mistakenly referred to as “ownership” in Russian

publications [11].

This concept implies a very broad interpretation of the concept of “property” used in Article 1 of Protocol No. 1 to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. The broad interpretation of the concept of “property” allows the ECHR judges to extend the provisions of this article, which guarantees the protection of property, not only to property in its classic sense (things, securities, intellectual property, etc.), but also to objects that may not be explicitly mentioned as property in national legislation, but have a well-defined economic value.

The concept of “virtual property” encompasses a wide variety of objects, the rights to which are undoubtedly included in the category of property rights, despite the “unreality” (immateriality, intangibility) of the objects themselves. The absence of information about these objects in the civil legislation list of objects of civil rights does not affect the recognition of their quality as objects of civil rights. For example, Article 128 of the CC does not define what falls under the concept of “property”, and the list of objects of civil rights contained therein is open. Therefore, the following conclusion can be drawn: the concept of “property” covers everything that has economic value for participants in civil turnover and allows transfer (transfer) from one person to another.

An analysis of scientific publications on the topic of this study has led us to doubt the fundamental need to identify virtual objects in order to regulate relations about them using legal norms designed for the real world. To regulate relations between game participants, it is reasonable to refer to the “magic circle” theory, which is often mentioned in legal works on this subject. The idea of the “magic circle” is that any game contains a separate ethical space that is disconnected from the real world. Within the game space, different rules apply than in the real world. Therefore, for example, the practice of killing other players is not perceived as negative [12].

According to the “magic circle” theory, the behavior of players will not be subject to legal norms until there is a violation of the game rules and negative consequences for legal entities in reality.

Of course, the conclusion that virtual reality is

¹¹ Li C. Death sentence for on-line gamer // URL: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-06/08/content_449494.htm. (accessed: 11.05.2025).

subject to legal regulation in principle, as well as the conclusion that rights to virtual reality objects can be protected as property rights, does not allow us to choose specific legal norms applicable to virtual reality.

Considering the relationship between virtual reality objects solely from the perspective of obligation law would significantly reduce the level of legal protection for the interests of virtual reality participants. If the international legal and constitutional basis of these relations does not give cause for great concern, then when passing to special legislation, for example, civil, the obligatory-legal characterization of relations over the subjects of virtual reality significantly weakens the legal positions of the players. This circumstance makes us look towards the law of property in general, and, in particular, towards the right of ownership. But it is unlikely that the right of ownership in its traditional form is ready to open its arms to such a new and mysterious sphere of social life. On the contrary, it seeks to escape from virtual reality by focusing on ordinary things that can be touched, have weight, and occupy some space in the real world. This is evidenced by attempts to reform Russian property law, which would explicitly state that ownership is only a right to things. In modern Russian jurisprudence, things are commonly understood as objects in the real world.

This is why it is appropriate to consider virtual property as a special type of property that does not fall under the categories of property law, copyright law, or contract law. If it is proven that virtual reality is a special kind of relationship, why should the legal regulation of these relationships be limited to traditional legal institutions?

For example, Fairfield proposes three characteristics to determine whether something is virtual property or not: competition, permanence, and interconnectedness [1].

To help identify these protected virtual property interests, Fairfield draws a legal analogy between traditional and virtual property interests. While there are similarities to traditional property, there are also significant differences. A player cannot control, use, or own any virtual property without

relying on the developer to provide a mechanism to ensure the preservation of virtual property. That is, the participant of the game process has access to his virtual property as a result of the fact that the game developer has made an investment in the creation and presentation of both the virtual world and the method of obtaining access to the virtual world. Without cooperation with the organizer of the game process, the player would not have any property.

4. Critical remarks about certain concepts. The developers' dominant position is that virtual reality items are the developer's creation, which is an object of intellectual property. In turn, the user gains access to such an item through a non-exclusive license agreement. This practice applies to companies such as Wargaming and Mail.Ru LLC. However, Electronic Arts does not define the nature of the item, only indicating the possibility of purchasing in-game content. But the right to the results of intellectual activity in general does not provide clear guidance on whether it applies to virtual property. R.A. Bartle argues that virtual property does not fall into a clear category such as software or database. He states that virtual property is not considered software but rather the result of software execution. Virtual property is not a database, but simply records in databases [13]. We tend to agree with him.

There is a point of view that actions with virtual reality items, made by players in the order of exchange or other alienation, are services for changing the parameters of the game process¹². But even supporters of this interpretation tend to call it “legal crutches”, not having a more successful legislative solution.

Observing the practice of courts allows us to conclude that there are double standards in relation to multiplayer online games. If we are talking about the responsibility of game developers for non-payment of taxes, the relationship between the developer of a multiplayer online game and the players can be qualified as a relationship based on a mixed contract, which includes elements of both a license agreement

¹² Arkhipov, V.V., Rybalov A.O. Ownership of Virtual Objects // URL: <https://ifacademy.ru/course/1496348/1496376?autoplay=t> (accessed: 11.05.2025).

and a contract for the provision of services for a fee. However, the courts give a completely different qualification to the relationship when a dispute arises between a player and the game developer: the court may refuse to satisfy the player's claims based on a violation of the game rules, citing Article 1062 of the CC. The characteristic of a contract as a mixed contract, which includes elements of a contract for the provision of services for a fee, is forgotten when it comes to the relationship between the game developer and the player; the concept of "game" comes to the fore¹³.

5. Conclusions. Without special need, it is not necessary to give virtual objects the legal regime of objects of civil rights, to subordinate the relevant relations within the game to the norms of law regulating relations in the real world, since the game is a simulator of human life, it allows you to "get out" of the legal field. However, as soon as the behavior of a third party or a participant in the game process violates the usual accepted rules of the game and leads to real property consequences, the protection of the affected player must be ensured.

This may seem strange now, but in time, various virtual images may well become part of an object [14]. In the future, much more exotic objects like virtual things may be added. We agree with those experts who predict that the courts, and then the legislator, will sooner or later recognize the reality of virtual property and will be forced to do so by the pressure of public life [15].

In Russia there is currently no special regulation for online gaming platforms. Virtual reality items are viewed either as services, or as an additional functionality of computer equipment software, or as a gambling game. With uncertainty of approaches in law enforcement practice, the level

of protection of gamers' rights decreases, and risks arise for game operators. Adoption of special norms will allow to neutralize the negative aspects in the construction and development of public relations on the organization of games in the digital Internet environment.

¹³ Virtual reality for real money: how are legal relations between the owner of a computer game and users regulated? // URL: <https://ezybrand.ru/blog/pravovye-otnosheniya-mezhdu-vladelczem-kompyuternoj-igry-i-polzovatelyami/> (accessed: 11.05.2025); Kukhno M. In-game User Property in Online Games: Features of Legal Regulation // URL: https://stopgame.ru/blogs/topic/109695/vnutriigrovoe_imuschestvo_polzovateley_v_onlayn_igrah_osobnosti_pravo_vogo_regulirovaniya (accessed: 11.05.2025).

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БИБЛИОГРАФИЧЕСКОЕ ОПИСАНИЕ СТАТЬИ

Алиев У.А. Правовая модель виртуальной реальности в интернет-пространстве (на примере многопользовательских онлайн-игр) / У.А. Алиев, Д.В. Пятков, Ю.В. Холоденко // Правоприменение. – 2026. – Т. 10, № 1. – С. 94–103. – DOI: 10.52468/2542-1514.2026.10(1).94-103.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC DESCRIPTION

Aliyev U.A., Pyatkov D.V., Kholodenko Yu.V. The legal model of virtual reality in the Internet space (using the example of online multiplayer games). *Pravoprimenenie = Law Enforcement Review*, 2026, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 94–103. DOI: 10.52468/2542-1514.2026.10(1).94-103. (In Russ.).