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Getting 'virtual' wrongs right

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Abstract Whilst some philosophical progress has been made on the ethical evaluation of playing video games, the exact subject matter of this enquiry remains surprisingly opaque. 'Virtual murder', simulation, representation and more are found in a literature yet to settle into a tested and cohesive terminology. Querying the language of the virtual in particular, I suggest that it is at once inexplicit and laden with presuppositions potentially liable to hinder anyone aiming to construct general philosophical claims about an ethics of gameplay, for whom assumptions about the existence of 'virtual' counterparts to morally salient phenomena may prove untrustworthy. Ambiguously straddling the pictorial and the performative aspects of video gaming, the virtual leaves obscure the ways in which we become involved in gameplay, and particularly the natures of our intentions and attitudes whilst grappling with a game; furthermore, it remains unclear how we are to generalise across encounters with the virtual. I conclude by briefly noting one potential avenue of further enquiry into our modes of participation in games: into the differences which a moral examination of playfulness might make to ethical evaluation.

Keywords Computer games · Virtual · Virtual murder · Fiction · Interactivity · Playfulness

Getting 'virtual' wrongs right

"I equipped the shotgun; I killed some guards." (*And in the game*, the old joke goes.) It is no wonder that the word 'virtual' has been serviceable in describing what we do when we play computer/video games. Neither is it startling when the scholarly literature comments on 'virtual murder' or 'virtual paedophilia' whilst investigating the ethics of those games. Yet the virtual is elusive. Whatever it is supposed to be, virtual murder cannot straightforwardly resemble murder; resemblance is a symmetrical relation, but 'virtual' murder is by implication derivative of murder as an all-too-familiar occurrence in reality. That A resembles B, and necessarily vice versa, cannot explain the one-way relation which makes A a virtual B but not vice versa.[1] Neither is playing a game understood as the creation of pictorial representations, even when the game provides feedback by means of images on a screen; on the contrary, virtual murder is what a screenshot of in-game killing is supposed to depict, not simply to *be*. What exactly could this virtuality be, then, which is supposed to distinguish such an image from a straightforward picture of fictitious murder? Is virtual murder genuinely something which exists to be investigated? What are we supposed to be doing with this talk of 'virtual' counterparts to actual (and morally salient) phenomena when we set out not merely to describe the playing of video games but to appraise its ethics?

To make further progress in investigating the morality of playing video games, it is desirable to scrutinise the virtual,

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[1] Thus, for example, judging that a pony resembles a horse, by virtue of similarities between ponies and horses, appears to commit one to the judgment that a horse resembles a pony. (There are possible counterexamples—if I see a cloud that seems to resemble a horse, do I want to say that a horse resembles the cloud?—but in general it is uncontroversial to regard resemblance as a symmetrical relation.) Plausibly a real and a 'virtual' horse will (perhaps must) resemble each other too, but since they resemble *each other*, their mutual resemblance alone cannot tell us what it is supposed to be for one horse to be real, the other virtual (cf. Abell 2009:186).

and this paper raises some difficulties which we face in trying to understand the roles it is supposed to play. The brunt of my objections will pertain to single-player games: those in which there is no interaction with other real people, and every 'virtual murder' perforce has a 'virtual' victim. Some of these difficulties may apply in non-moral contexts too; others may not. Certainly, one cannot easily claim that talk of virtual worlds, virtual pets, etc. is altogether without meaning. Then again, an agnostic can make ostensibly meaningful utterances about God without believing that any deities certainly exist, and even without being convinced that we possess a cohesive concept of divinity.

Following an initial explanation, in this and the following subsection, of why it should matter whether we conduct our ethical appraisals of video games with or without talk of the 'virtual', in subsequent sections I shall question (1) whether we can appraise actions in playing a single game as instances of any such phenomenon as e.g. 'virtual murder'; (2) whether we can compare 'virtual' wrongdoings in separate games, as we might expect to be able to if there are such 'virtual' phenomena corresponding to actual ones; and (3) whether the nature of playful engagement in video games might be such that the language of the virtual promises greater potential for the importation of traditional moral theory into gaming contexts than can in fact be easily secured. A possible conclusion is that consensus could and should be reached on some plausible definition, or taxonomy, of the virtual. (cf. Smuts 2009 on defining interactivity.) Perhaps all it needs is technical refinement. Or perhaps we shall hold onto 'virtual' as a word marking a pragmatic distinction between what happens in video games and what occurs in the 'real' world, but will less often be keen to ask *general* questions about the ethics of 'virtual murder' and the like. Another possible outcome, however, is a realisation that we both lack, and should expect that we shall continue to lack, clear ideas about the virtual or cohesive concepts of it, and therefore ought to abandon talk of it, if any clearly preferable alternatives can be found. This paper takes neither side decisively (though as a critique of the language of the virtual it leans towards the latter), but seeks to indicate the prospects for further reflection in light of the sceptical problems it raises.

One must admit that unproblematic alternatives to the language of the virtual are in short supply. Many games involve elements of mimesis (though not all, as *Tetris* shows); it can be instructive to ask how 'virtual murder' differs from the battles of a historical re-enactment society. (cf. Wonderly 2008:5; Gooskens 2011:41–42) Yet the skills developed through gaming are far from Stanislavski's. Meanwhile (and as language in McCormick 2001 and Sicart 2009 suggests), the use of computers to model scenarios may often be called simulation, which Brey (1999:5) treats as a subtype of the virtual; but with games that term ordinarily connotes, for example, *SimCity* or flight simulators, whereas it might strain the point to claim that the fantasy battles of *Shadow of the Colossus* were simulating anything.[2] 'Synthetic worlds' (Castronova 2005), in place of the popular 'virtual worlds', fails to capture how software differs from cityscapes.

Nevertheless, it is no minor terminological judgment to decide that gaming violence not merely resembles or depicts or represents or models murder, but *is* 'virtual' murder. The more relevant similarities or correspondences 'virtual murder' has with actual murder, after all, the easier it is implicitly likely to be for the theorist of virtual wrongdoing to import established ethical theories and everyday moral intuitions about murder into gaming contexts (although Patridge 2011:307 has cast doubt on any simplistic rule of inference from enjoying games themed around x to having any particular attitudes towards x). Moreover, if there is a general principle by which any kind of immoral act which can be featured in a video game thereby acquires a virtual counterpart, then presumably there is a single (albeit not necessarily simple) taxonomy of virtual immoralities, ensuring that moral monism in 'virtual' contexts is, at least, no less plausible than in others. In investigating what the virtual is supposed to be like, then, we investigate the plausibility of creating general theories of gaming ethics.

The state of play

Recent controversy, therefore, has hinged on the degree to which 'virtual' misdeeds form a relevantly uniform class. Morgan Luck (2009) has defended the claim that 'virtual murder' in games is akin in all relevant respects to the rather rarer case of 'virtual paedophilia' in games,[3] and that the intuitive repugnance which greets the latter should, if we are to be consistent, be applied also to the former; all the arguments of which he is aware for the existence of

[2] 'Representation' encounters similar difficulties: it is easy to say that Mario's sprite in *Super Mario Bros.* represents a man, until we ask what a goomba's sprite represents. We *could* say that a goomba belongs to some class of fictitious beings which are represented in the game; but what is more definitive of a goomba than the appearance and behaviour of the goombas interacted with in *Super Mario Bros.* (against which we might judge, for example, the variant goombas of *Super Mario World*)?

[3] More accurately, virtual sex with an underage partner; nobody apparently means to imply that a psychiatric disorder might be presented via some sort of artificially intelligent simulation. Luck (2009:34) even has an example involving a fifteen-year-old: this ignores both the distinctions between paedophilia, hebephilia and ephebophilia and the fact that, while fifteen is beneath the age of consent for the country used in the example, this varies between national legal systems.

relevant differences are arguments which he finds wanting. (The software-using paedophile is a recurring character in the literature: McCormick (2001:284) appeals to the *Star Trek* Holodeck to posit conjectural 'holo-paedophilia' with 'a simulated holo-child'.) Christopher Bartel (2012) has replied that in fact there *is* a relevant difference, since one is child pornography, the other not; although when pushed to show what is wrong with child pornography which involves no actual children, he invokes an argument so counter to expectation (to the effect that child pornography sets back sexual equality for adults (Levy 2002)) that he seems to have wandered quite far from the immediacy of intuition to which Luck appeals.

Insofar as games are considered as an aesthetic medium, Bartel makes a plausible point; and gaming *is* after all an audiovisual medium. Yet it is also possible to tell a rather different story, for games are playfully participatory too.[4] Are adults ever known to role-play adult-child sexual relations? Yes: this is known as 'age play' (Weiss 2006:237–8), a minority sexual practice between consenting adults which need not be related to paedophilia (Lewis 2011:1 & 6–7). Is it intuitively immoral if age-players employ an interactive digital medium for their adult make-believe? Not obviously so, as Peter Singer (2007) has pointed out (and partly because most of us simply lack practice at forming intuitions about age play; whilst debates over legality (Meek 2008; Wilson 2009) complicate more than they resolve).[5] So on Bartel's account 'virtual' adult-child sex is distinctively immoral because (unlike violent games) it is necessarily akin to child pornography in other media; on the alternative account, 'virtual' adult-child sex is morally obscure (but tells us little about violent games), since it may not always be helpfully understood as child pornography, or indeed as 'virtual paedophilia', depending on what players actually do with it.

Potentially good news for players of violent video games, either way; but another fine mess for moral theory. Are we to consider 'virtual' adult-child sex as a form of pornographic depiction or as a kind of digital role-play? Are violent games most helpfully construed as like hitmen's training, or like children's playing at 'cops and robbers', or like 'Rook takes Queen' (cf. Luck 2009:34) with a more realistically gory presentation and without the euphemistic verb? The point is not merely that intuitions are treacherous (although they are), or that rhetorical framing can be bewitching (although it can), but that we presently lack sufficiently developed conceptual tools for constructing scrupulous comparative assertions about 'violent games' and their possible partners in crime. We have (at present) no reliable warrant for thinking that, if we reject moral particularism[6] in our actual world, we can also do so across a plurality of 'virtual worlds': that we can keep making progress by asking general questions about the ethics of 'virtual' violence, and treating (for example) the crime-themed worlds of *Grand Theft Auto* and the warfare-themed *Metal Gear* games as particular test cases, commensurable with each other within the grander scheme and open to judgment against a common standard of normative moral principles. This should make us wonder anxiously how well we are served by this talk of 'virtual' phenomena to begin with.

In the rest of this paper I make some broad suggestions about the conditions which appraisal of one or more games' ethical status would have to satisfy (if we are to make general, principled judgments to the effect that 'virtual' wrongdoings are permissible iff they satisfy conditions *x*, *y* and *z*), calling into question the suitability of the language of the virtual to address them. I suggest that the 'virtual' leaves obscure the ways in which we become involved in gameplay, and particularly the natures of our intentions and attitudes whilst grappling with a game; furthermore, it remains unclear how we are to generalise across encounters with the virtual. I conclude by briefly noting that if we are to evaluate the ethics of playful exploration, then philosophical ethics will need to explore playfulness, and this may require us to leave the 'virtual' behind.

Can I really be the hero? The trouble with instantiating virtual actions

If 'virtual murder' is exemplary of ethically concerning 'virtual' phenomena, and if what we are specifically troubled by is the thought of virtual murders performed by the players of games, then it appears that at least some virtual phenomena are construed as actions. Yet it is not clear that from these foundations we can develop a plausible picture of player agency in our ethics. Firstly, I suggest, because the language of the virtual cannot easily escape difficulties in speaking in general terms: we want to talk about multiple cases of a phenomenon called 'virtual murder' in a given game, but this turns out to be more troublesome than one might expect. Secondly, because talk of the virtual

[4] Scholars of non-moral gaming theory will recall disputes over the relative merits of 'narratological' (story-centric) and 'ludological' (gameplay-centric) emphases in characterising video games.

[5] Stephanie Patridge claims that it is 'exceedingly difficult to imagine' that no latent paedophilia could be involved (2011:306). It is doubtful, however, that the subject is a suitable one for armchair psychology.

[6] The view, associated especially with Jonathan Dancy, that it is misguided to attempt to construct principles of moral guidance which might apply across multiple situations.

obscures more than it discloses about the nature of player agency. Whatever is going on when someone plays a video game, it is difficult to group together diverse moments of play and be confident that here a player is repeatedly instantiating a general phenomenon of virtual violence.

We know from 'media effects' debates over non-interactive forms of entertainment that the problems begin as soon as we attempt to delineate our sphere of enquiry. It is difficult to avoid smuggling in artificially reductionist assumptions the instant we open our mouths, downplaying the complexities which any creative work exhibits as we try to focus on isolated points of moral interest:

> The basic problem for pornography researchers is that books, magazines, and movies do not have any inert ingredients. A film may depict rape as 'pleasurable, sexually arousing, and beneficial to the female victim.' It will also have characters in it that provoke the viewer to certain reactions; it will be edited in a way that pleases, bores, or overstimulates the viewer; the actors may be appealing or repulsive, and they may be talented or wooden; the film stock may be beautifully clear or irritatingly grainy, and so on. And we have not even started talking about the story. (Koppelman 2005:1669)

The point is put still more emphatically by Barker and Petley (2001:1–2, italics in original) in their objection to any attempt to talk about 'violence in the media' in general terms which are remotely insensitive to contextual particularities:

> The claims about the possible 'effects of violent media' are not just false, they range from the daft to the mischievous… [and] the insistent question is so wrong… because *there is no such thing as 'violence' in the media which can have harmful – or beneficial – effects*. Of course, different kinds of media use different kinds of 'violence' for many different purposes—just as they use music, colour, stock characters, deep-focus photography, rhythmic editing and scenes from the countryside, among many others. But in exactly the same way as it is daft to ask, 'What are the effects of rhythmic editing or the use of countryside scenes?' without at the same time asking where, when, and in what context these are used, so… it is stupid simply to ask, 'what are the effects of violence?'

Variant gaming experiences and their objects

Can there then be such a phenomenon as *virtual* violence in any ethically interesting sense? Do players' actions exemplify virtual murder, somewhat as Jack the Ripper's exemplified actual murder? Gaming just makes the case for perplexity deliciously worse than other media have already, whether our concern is about the possible effects of play on players or about the act of playing games itself. What do players do when given the opportunity to act out 'virtual' violence? On one occasion they took the opportunity to hold an online peace protest instead (King and Borland 2003:218–219): the Velvet-Strike modification to the *Counter-Strike* tactical shooter 'replaces bullet-ridden body counts with peaceful protests, spray-painted anti-war messages and civil disobedience' (King 2002). In other gaming contexts, no modification of game data may be involved: 'After the terrorist attacks in New York City…, players in *Everquest* and *Anarchy Online* brought their games to a halt, holding virtual candlelight vigils.' (Ibid) Other distinctive modes of gameplay include speedrunning (completing the game as fast as possible, not necessarily using methods the designers anticipated), glitch-hunting (the search for interesting ways of getting a game's code to act erroneously), and 100 % completionism (the quest to see, do and collect absolutely everything possible, sometimes requiring extensive planning). All but perhaps the last are exceptional cases; but when gamers do play 'properly', it is not obvious that the earnest honer of tournament-level skills in a fighting game is playing the 'same' game as someone casually passing time with it. The former approaches 'the game' with a seriousness and discipline quite alien to the latter's enjoyment.

This means that our first headache involves the individuation of experiences. If what players do is so diverse and fluid, and if we are interested in their 'virtual' deeds, then hopes of reaching general conclusions about the ethics of broadly defined 'virtual' actions run into trouble. If we cannot talk without heavy qualification about 'the experience of playing' such-and-such a game, then it becomes problematic to scrutinise the ethics of 'the game' at all. What is a video game? (It is accurate but also unhelpful to reply that it is the collection of code and data which I receive when I 'buy a game'.) A clue is offered by Philip Brey's contention that:

> an understanding of computers as (mere) information processing devices is increasingly outdated. Computers function more and more often as ontic devices that generate and sustain new virtual and social realities. Increasingly, they are to us not just information devices, but portals to worlds that we inhabit. (2005:397)

What is true of the machine may plausibly be true also of an individual program; and an implication is that all the facts one could investigate about what a game offers to its players, from the texture maps to the weapon reload times, might underdetermine the ethical salience of playing it (cf.

Gooskens 2012:94), even more radically than in the case of non-interactive media like books or films. This is not only because we players are awkward little so-and-sos who demand to be active participants in our digital playgrounds, but also because it is only through a player's subjective engagement that a game could offer anything we might call 'virtual'. Art assets, animation data, event scripting: neither singly nor in combination do these alone give us reason to anoint them with this special title. This indicates why the language of the virtual might be attractive in the first place: it evokes that vitally subjective aspect of interactive play which involves a feedback loop between game and individual gamer in the act of playing. Yet it simultaneously conjures up the tantalising spectre of objective realities: indeed, of phenomena which are not just fictionally or phenomenally real, but (in some sense) *virtually* real.

This leaves us faced with implicit confusion about the intentional objects of our experiences in gameplay. The language employed in much of the literature, which talks (for example) not just of particular 'virtual murders' but of 'virtual murder' in general terms, suggests that there is a phenomenon of virtual murder which is meaningfully instantiated each time a player performs actions answering its description. Yet if Barker and Petley are right about other forms of media, and if games are not relevantly different, then by implication there just are no such general phenomena in any interesting sense: no gaming violence, and no 'virtual murder' for ethicists to appraise. At most we can draw comparisons between our atomic, context-dependent experiences (and in the next section I discuss comparison between distinct games). Even if Barker and Petley's claim fails to be applicable to gameplay, players' flexibility in choosing how to approach the act of playing a given game gives us reason to wonder whether differently disposed players are differently experiencing the same phenomena (and sharing the intentional objects of their experiences wholesale), or whether they are complicit in creating the phenomena which they experience to such an extent that a casual player, a committed player and a speedrunner are barely playing the same game, let alone sharing phenomenologically consistent experiences of playing that game and of performing any virtual murders therein.

Still, gamers clearly can compare their experiences, and insofar as we can draw comparisons we may prove able to make pragmatic generalisations. There is, indeed, a fairly reasonable sense in which we can talk about 'virtual harms' (Wolfendale 2007:114): that concerning the multiplayer game, and particularly the persistent 'virtual world' in which not only the players have an enduring presence but also the avatars representing them in play, along with 'virtual goods' (Ibid:113) of which players may be deprived. Here there is scope for genuine psychological harm, and the 'virtual' tag perhaps indicates a lack of consensus about what exactly counts as a violation of expected norms: for example, whether we have duties to respect a player/avatar's 'property' within a given 'virtual world' as we have to respect other people's property offline.[7] However, this in no way exhausts the uses to which some theorists have sought to put the language of virtual deeds and happenings. (The impossibility of ascribing comparable harms to actions in single-player games led McCormick, not to reject the language of 'virtual suffering and death' (2001:283), but to seek to explain in Aristotelian terms how playing violent games might be bad for one's own self-cultivation.)

The lack of real companions in a shared world to be the victims or beneficiaries of one's actions is the gap which representation, simulation, etc. are supposed to fill. If we proceed with the expectation that there is something interesting to be said about players' *moral* agency, however, we shall not get far if the intentions which we ascribe to players amount to 'I shall introduce more bullets to the simulation,' or 'I shall fire objects representing projectiles at the object representing a Nazi soldier.' Insofar as I am *toying* with the constraints of a game (for example, through the self-imposed challenge of completing it with the weakest equipment available), I am engaged with its very artificiality. The difficulty for the moral critic of gaming, then, is to uncover ways of engaging with games in which players' intentions do not overtly deal only with representations and simulations, and also do not deal merely with 'the picture [which] is nothing but a way for [its subject] to appear to me as absent' (Sartre 2010:24), but somehow put the artificiality of gameplay in parentheses.[8] This is why the language of the virtual remains seductive: it is suggestive of players' active involvement in what certainly can sometimes look like violence. That active involvement, however, renders virtual murder, virtual rape, etc. decidedly tricky to pin down as delineable, objective categories.

[7] It may be noteworthy that, in a suitable legal context, 'virtual property' could reasonably be considered a subtype of property in general; 'virtual murder', on the other hand, is not discussed as though it were literally a kind of murder.

[8] Here and elsewhere, the concept of the 'magic circle' might seem apposite; but it has itself attracted heavy controversy (see the opening remarks of Zimmerman 2012), and I am reluctant to critique one concept by means of another so heavily critiqued. Additionally, I suspect that the case of the virtual in games, contrasted (if there are genuine contrasts to be made) with other gaming contexts, calls for more specific tools.

My character and I?

Part of the problem is the difficulty of grasping just how it might be that we get involved in game worlds, when their themes are often fictional (though sometimes aiming for realism), but play is something we actually do. My character butchers an adversary; I remove a challenging obstacle; but which of these targets is supposed to be the victim of a virtual murder? Language in Luck (2009:32) implies the former: 'were the game environment actual, the player's character would be deemed a murderer'. However, it is precisely what this definition presupposes, i.e. the role of something which we can call 'the player's character',[9] that leads us to want to talk about player agency in 'virtual murder', and to think that here we have distinctive ethical questions that do not reduce to ones familiar from critiques of noninteractive entertainment media.

Luck, in fact, has few qualms about such reduction (2009:35–36); his focus is on whether players enjoy virtual acts, and accordingly he appeals to the gratuitously graphic nature of some video game violence (2009:34), an aspect generally comparable to, say, graphic violence in cinema.[10] This, however, is what leaves him vulnerable to Bartel's line of objection: Luck does not think his argument requires him to examine the intentionality of taking enjoyment in the virtual. In fact, he concludes by considering implications for 'other types of virtual worlds, such as films, paintings and books' (2009:34): it appears that for him the virtual is barely to be distinguished from the fictional, or perhaps the imaginative, and it is only virtual *acts* which need be defined in terms of 'the player's character'.

Fictions in other media apparently do engage our emotional involvement (Schneider 2009), such that I can passionately desire that the hero will defeat the evil Grand Vizier. Games, it would seem, permit the desire that *my character*, the hero, will defeat the Grand Vizier. It would also seem that they permit the compatible desire that *I* will defeat him (and if not, it's a good thing I quicksaved). Whilst these latter two desires have the same satisfaction conditions,[11] and both are in some fashion first-personal, they are hardly equivalent; Wolfendale's account of 'avatar attachment' is not easily extended to offline cases (2007:114, note 34). If *I* defeat the final boss, that is an actual, nonfictional accomplishment of which I can feel suitably proud. 'My character's' role is more puzzling. 'The actual I and the image-world-I,' writes Geert Gooskens, 'are separated by an abyss' (2011:40) which it takes an act of vicarious imagination to bridge (2011:42–43): in his theory of ethics and gaming, imaginative identification with a character therefore takes so central a place that, somewhat as with Luck, the distinctive mechanics of interactive play can appear to be quite overshadowed.

That my involvement is first-personal is not sufficient to solve the riddle. (*All* my experiences are first-personal.) That I exercise control over a particular in-game entity is not sufficient; the board game 'Snakes and Ladders' is not a virtual snake-sliding and ladder-climbing experience (cf. Brey 1999:4). For many purposes this is a tolerable situation; but when we are examining moral agency in relation to virtual acts, the nature of 'the player's character' (in games where there is one) inevitably falls under scrutiny. How does my agency relate to my character's? The matter remains uncertain, and the language of the virtual is not obviously helpful here, for by implication my dealings with a virtual reality must presumably correspond in some consistent fashions to my dealings with an actual one. Brey, after stating frankly that the 'term "virtual reality" has no standard meaning' (1999:5), tells us in quick succession that the player 'personifies', 'takes up the role of', 'acts out the role of' and 'leads a squadron of' characters in various violent games (1999:7).

Even when a game offers a linear narrative and little ready scope for deviance, many players may never reach the end (Phillips 2009). The greater the scope for experimentation and creative variation a game permits, the less it invites critical appraisal like 'Poker' or 'Blackjack', and the more it looks comparable to a set of playing cards, or to a dolls' house. (cf. Schulzke 2010:136) Can we then hope to delineate necessary and sufficient conditions, reliably adequate for ethical appraisal, for *any* player's participation in acts of 'virtual murder' and the like, in *any* context a game might offer?

Even if we do so hope, it is uncertain that hunting for 'virtual' counterparts to real misdeeds will ultimately prove a rewarding strategy. As the arguments in this section indicate, production of a suitable theory of virtual action and player agency is a demanding requirement: partly because there is no simple and standard way for a player to become engrossed in a game, and partly because it is tricky to account for the ways in which players insert themselves into games, participating in fictions but attaining real achievements. Ethical appraisal of gaming, however, would be hard pressed to do without such a theory; though perhaps it could do without the language of the virtual. It certainly seems that players are to be found *intending* and *doing* all manner of things; but the nature of their deeds remains surprisingly obscure.

[9] A quick puzzle: in a car racing game, is the player's character a car or its unseen driver? In a military strategy game, is the player's character an army or its unseen commander?

[10] *Generally* so, because gameplay can make some differences: for example, my targeting decisions in a game with limb-specific damage will bear little resemblance to a film director's ideas about attractive death throes.

[11] Actually, this is not precisely true: developers have been known to hand characters the final blow in cutscenes.

Adding 'virtual' on: talking comparatively about multiple games

We face difficulties not only in scrutinising our actions and experiences in playing a given game, but also in making comparative judgements involving multiple games. If there are such phenomena as virtual murder, then we should expect to be able to compare virtual murders in one game with those in another, and to be able to ask significant questions about which differences in presentation between the two games make a moral difference. Wonderly (2008), for example, posits a morally salient subcategory of 'ultra-violent' games. Yet there are complications, I suggest, in drawing such taxonomic or comparative distinctions in our enquiries into gaming ethics; and insofar as they can be drawn, it is not clear that the virtual is a helpful notion.

We can communicate the idea that game *x* features killing, and so does game *y*; but whether the comparison is aided by adding the word 'virtual' is another matter. In this section I suggest that we can certainly compare one game with another, but (again recalling Barker and Petley) a hunt for virtual murder in games risks providing no more illumination than a search for a phenomenon of cinematic violence in films. Games make thematic uses of the real world, and games are open to aesthetic comparison as creative works, but two different games will routinely offer sufficiently different contexts to leave us doubting that we shall be able to find such a phenomenon as 'virtual' murder not only present in one but shared between both. Both may feature themes of killing, in different ways, but that is it; talking in general terms about 'virtual murder' is unlikely to help us understand and appraise those ways.

That a game provides a normative framework is plain enough; each game makes certain actions possible or impossible, and facilitates certain possible actions or impedes them. One video game may treat water simply as a hazard, immediately killing a character who falls into it; in another game, falling into water may be survivable, but impede mobility; and in games which make swimming possible it may be necessary to swim in order to progress. Each game provides its own framework of challenges and goals and rewards, and expectations of inter-game consistency are fragile. Outside the context of video games, it is part of ordinary human competence that we can distinguish between the different rules of Pool and Snooker, say, without ever judging one in terms of the other or in terms of how one generally 'ought' to hit orbs across a table with a stick. We recognise that each game is self-contained and that its own rules set no standard external to themselves. Some skills and principles happen to be transferrable, but if I am playing Snooker when my opponent misses a red, and then I decide that I am actually playing Black Ball[12] and therefore ought to pot the yellow, it does not matter how skilfully I do pot the yellow; what I am doing is still illegitimate within the rules of Snooker, and my attempt to switch into a different game makes no sense within the context of a Snooker table.[13]

With video games, then, if one game facilitates fast action in combat, whilst another encourages slowly and stealthily stalking one's foes from behind, the challenge for the critic of virtual murder is to explain why either, let alone both, of these mutually incompatible 'killing' strategies should say anything about acts of killing outside their own self-referential terms. Since gamers do not confuse the fast-paced battles of *Quake* with stealthily avoiding guards' notice in *Thief* (though both feature the use of weaponry from a first-personal perspective), what could lead them to link either with practical conduct in reality? And if neither is a plausible guide to practical conduct, then what could make it nonetheless significant with regard to moral conduct? (A similar difficulty, of course, besets any suggestion that a game might offer more uplifting moral edification.) To say that both games feature virtual murder, far from promising an answer, seems to add emphasis to the perplexing question; so instead of proceeding further with attempts to distinguish between kinds of virtual murder, we find that we have reason to wonder whether it is helpful to compare 'virtual' phenomena between games in the first place.

The normative structure of a game is defined both by what it includes and by what it omits. Some video games have incorporated overtly moral judgments into their mechanics, notably those role-playing games which inherit from *Dungeons & Dragons* the idea of characters' acting in accordance with their 'alignments': sell your companions into slavery in *Planescape: Torment*, and your alignment as tracked by the game will swing in the direction of one of its subcategories of Evil. Other games have introduced moral judgments into gameplay less intentionally: it was censors' anticipated objections to in-game infanticide which saw visible children removed altogether from some versions of *Fallout*. Others have been subversively judgmental: the *Dungeon Keeper* games invited players to lead the forces of evil, and the evil things players can do include building torture chambers. Many other games leave good and evil to their backstories, and are intended to be mechanically concerned only with amoral criteria of success and failure. In the face of such variation between internally consistent games, why should there be any more scope for a general ethics of games than for a physics of games?

[12] Also written 'Blackball': British-style Eight-Ball Pool.

[13] Of course, players may devise variant rules *by agreement*, even if the rules they agree on are as barely intricate as 'Pot as many balls as you can'.

Games' thematic use of the real world

The reply will presumably appeal to the games' use of *kinds* of acts which occur in real life.[14] Take, for example, themes of killing in the context of warfare and the military. When Snake (perhaps under the player's control) kills an enemy soldier in one of the infiltration missions of the *Metal Gear* franchise, this piece of in-game violence is in some way thematically derivative of warfare in the real world, and hence has the potential to be saying something about it; and the same will also be true of sending troops through hostile terrain in *Cannon Fodder*, the two series' very different gameplay notwithstanding. When we note the pointedly high mortality rate of *Cannon Fodder*, or we recall those games in the *Metal Gear* franchise which give the player a tranquilliser gun in order to facilitate pacifist options, we shall understand these aspects of gameplay also to fall into the service of acts of saying things about warfare; and we should not ordinarily expect two distinct creative works and their (intended or accidental) messages to be consistent with one another.

This of course is true; and it is interesting to note that one seldom sees holistic enquiries into, for example, the conjunctive import of playing violent games at lunchtime and reading sermons in the evening. The focus is usually on either a few notorious specimens or a loosely defined *kind* (such as 'violent games', or such as 'violent games which permit the killing of innocents' if greater specificity is desired); when Bernard Williams chaired a committee on film censorship, it heard statements about 'people becoming desensitised or callous through a *diet* of violence' (Williams et al. 1979: para. 5.29, emphasis mine). Thus enquiry of this sort tends to be framed in a way which emphasises regularities and downplays inconsistencies; hence Barker and Petley's objection as quoted above. A question for moral philosophy is then: if multiple distinct creative works deal very differently with their handling of (for example) war, and assuming that in our real world there are general claims which can securely be made about the ethics of war (for example, in distinguishing between just and unjust wars), need it follow that there are any general claims which can be made about the ethics of creative works, such as video games, which use themes of war?

There are at least some established philosophical grounds for thinking that there might not be. Jerome Stolnitz has contended that if we try to extract truths about the human condition from works of art, the very requirement of generality obliges us to divest those works of all the particularities which make a work of art interesting and distinctive, and the result will be either so bereft of details that it turns out to be bland, or so nebulous as to be unwieldy. Thus his analysis of the great truth revealed by *Crime and Punishment*:

> The criminal [some criminals?] [all criminals?] [criminals in St Petersburg?] [criminals who kill old moneylenders?] [criminals who kill old moneylenders and come under the influence of saintly prostitutes?] desires to be caught and punished. (Stolnitz 1992:199)

A similar difficulty arises if we hope to undertake a moral evaluation of some work whilst considering it as an instance of some concerning kind, such as the violent or the erotic, and as potentially to be compared to other such instances or to be regarded as exemplary of them. Take, for example, claims put to the Williams Committee that 'emphasised the aspects of pornography which degrade women in that such material… encourages a view of women as subservient and as properly the object of, or even desirous of, sexual subjugation or assault' (Williams et al. 1979: para. 5.29). A Stolnitzised examination of such a pornographic work would probably produce something like the following, likely to be reasonable enough as a critical assessment, but highly vulnerable to Koppelman's critique in the previous section ('books, magazines, and movies do not have any inert ingredients') even before any attempt is made to generalise across a genre:

> A woman [some women?] [all women?] [women who dress provocatively?] [women who are bored housewives?] [women who are bored housewives and flirt with visiting deliverymen?] desires to be sexually assaulted.

Extending the example to cover an interactive case is left as an exercise for the patient reader. There are attempted rebuttals of Stolnitz in the literature of aesthetics which could perhaps be extended in their turn to address the added complications of interactivity; I do not rehearse these here. My own claim is not that a comparative ethical evaluation of video games *necessarily* cannot be effected; it is that reliance on nebulous virtualities threatens to make our lives more difficult still. The relationship between the world and a creative work which *says something* about it is one not easily captured by the language of the virtual: to speak of a virtual x connotes a simulacrum of x or a semblance of its presence, whilst the ways in which creative works can *say something* about x are in no way confined to this (whether or not Stolnitz is justified in his pessimism about their effectual import). There is no

[14] Of course, it is conceivable that there are defensible moral principles concerning morality in games which are independent of normative ethics external to contexts of play. McCormick (2001:282), on being a bad sport, might be read in such a light. I doubt, however, that anyone means us to take 'virtual murder', 'virtual rape' or 'virtual paedophilia' in such a way.

obviously secure reason to think that, whatever distinctive contributions video games may make to aesthetic commentary on the world and more specifically on moral conduct, they are likely to be contributions for which the language of the virtual is accurate and illuminating.

Consider Patridge's argument that games may carry 'incorrigible social meanings' which, in a certain cultural context, render them objectionable: as an example she gives the fact that the 'United States has a peculiar history of slavery and racism, and images of individuals of African descent who are eating watermelon have played a significant part in this history' (2011:308). We can readily agree that games may involve imagery, and that this imagery is not magically insulated from other cultural phenomena; but we must also recall that there is performance in gaming as well as imagery. If we want to say that games may feature virtual murder, rather than (virtual?) murder-related imagery, then consistency will incline us to say that they may also feature virtual black people with virtual watermelons, rather than (virtual?) imagery of black people with watermelons. Delete the word 'virtual' from both sides and the problem emerges: in contrast with the case of murder, there is simply nothing wrong with black people actually choosing to enjoy watermelons. (In fact, there is nothing wrong with it if they decide to photograph their watermelon breakfast for the family album.) What is objectionable, as Patridge recognises, is a certain kind of imagery in a certain kind of context.

There are possible responses to this point which might establish justifiable principles for emphasising games-as-imagery in certain cases and games-as-performance in others (perhaps beginning with the question of whether the *player's* race is significant).[15] What we cannot do is arbitrarily switch in and out of invoking the virtual. Yet this is what Patridge does give the impression of doing: elsewhere in the same work, and drawing on McCormick's, she invites the reader:

> to imagine what you would think of your friend should you find her coming out of the virtual reality suite announcing "I just had great time in there. You can even have sex with virtual children. But hey, no worries, they aren't real." (2011:305)

Since we can say of a video game that it features themes of killing (for example), much as we can say this of books or songs or television broadcasts, it is not evident that there is useful work for such a term as 'virtual murder' to do when we investigate the moral import of games; and as this section has indicated, we shall run into complications if we try to assert that multiple and divergent games feature virtual murder. Such a term may lead us to expect greater uniformity in games' use of violent themes, and greater straightforwardness when games draw upon the real world, than we are in fact likely to discover; and once we have adjusted our expectations, we may find ourselves concluding that there are at least as many ways for games to make use of the real world as there are styles of caricature. Such terms as 'virtual murder' do not, meanwhile, exhaust the ways in which we might want to talk about games for the purposes of moral appraisal, since we may also be concerned about gaming *imagery*; but there is no immediately obvious principle showing how ethical appraisal framed in terms of the virtual is supposed to sit alongside other forms of moral scrutiny.

Talk of the virtual certainly promises to link both the setting and the mechanics of a game to the world in which we live our moral lives, and thereby implies the possibility of comparing games in the light of such links; but it also carries a risk of presupposing that the thematic links to the real world which games distinctively offer must be of some certain narrow sort. Whatever virtual killing is supposed to be, it does not sound very much like an artistic commentary on killing, or even like an artist's use of killing as a dramatic theme. Can we compare the ways in which war is handled in *Metal Gear* and *Cannon Fodder*? No doubt. Is this because killing on the field of battle manifests itself within both in 'virtual' form? Probably not. Can we readily construct an ethics of 'violent games', for example, which would be applicable across a multitude of such variant games? It is rather tricky to say.

The gamer's gauntlet: concluding prospects for playfulness in ethics

The language of the virtual, then, is not as convenient and as reliably straightforward as it may at first appear; not, at any rate, when we want to use it to denote our field of enquiry as we place the playing of video games under a moral spotlight. If we begin with the thought that murder and other kinds of morally salient act have 'virtual' counterparts, then we shall certainly see it as a puzzle in need of unravelling that so many people apparently indulge in 'virtual murder' without a bat of the recreational eyelid. Yet if we commence not by trying to extend familiar moral theories, but instead by exploring the attitudes of a mind at play, then we may find that there is no need to posit a class of virtual phenomena to begin with.

Michael Flanders and Donald Swann once managed to slip a mild indelicacy past the theatre censors of their day

[15] A rather blunt approach would be a moral pessimism which evaluates a game *qua* imagery, then *qua* potential for performance, and concludes that if either is morally troubling then the game likewise is, full stop. Whether such an approach is adequately sensitive to the subtleties of a game's aesthetics as a single creative work, however, is doubtful.

by omitting directions for singing it: these turned 'we found Rockall' into 'we found rock all'. For the moral scrutineer, elements of dynamic performance are a confounding problem; and never more so than with the interactivity of video games, which routinely demolishes not only the fourth wall, but the other three as well, leaving no clear and rigid distinction between author, participant and audience. There is an immediacy in gaming, an I-*am*-going-to-beat-that-level-this-time involvement, which leaves games akin to other audiovisual media, yet stubbornly and perplexingly different; as previous sections indicate, it is an involvement which leaves it difficult to uncover any principled basis for morally appraising such general categories as 'virtual murder', either within a game or between more than one. Part of the difficulty is that it is usually a *playful* involvement, and moral philosophy in its loftiness has given rather more attention to fatal trolleys than to playfully mucking around. A lot of the heritage of moral theory is geared towards *serious business*: how we ought to live and what we can be blamed for. When we apply such questions to the playing of video games, not surprisingly it can seem that what most urgently demands appraisal is that which looks like a counterpart of morally troublesome phenomena in the actual world, and so attention is duly drawn to the potential risks of 'virtual murder', etc. If we are to make further progress in the ethical evaluation of playing video games, however, it may well be that the language of the virtual leaves us too little room to convey what players are playfully doing.

Suppose (if we briefly step outside the context of gaming) that a man, a decade into a successful though sexually unadventurous marriage, finds stirring within himself the nascent yearnings of a sexual sadist. His wife now features in his erotic thoughts as a damsel in enticing distress, squirming in a spread-eagle and squealing under the impact of a flogger. A simple and true description of the husband's attitude is therefore this: he desires to hurt his wife. Yet what he desires, we may suppose, is that his wife might be induced to find delight in a corresponding masochism: he desires that it might prove possible to introduce her to consensual BDSM with the aim of mutual erotic pleasure. An adequate characterisation of the husband's desire must therefore be a contingent one (and, if he finds himself unlucky, a counterfactual one). He desires to do violent things *to* his wife only insofar as he can playfully do them *with* her. To conduct a moral evaluation on the simple basis that he desires to hurt his wife would overlook a salient aspect of that desire.

There is nothing virtual in this, if we distinguish imaginative fantasy from virtuality; although there may be role-play. It is an actual attitude of playfulness which happens to incorporate violent intent. The player of violent video games, even when lazily butchering fleeing civilians, is unlikely to complicate our analysis any less; here too is an attitude of playfulness, and it may well be that what seemed attractive in talk of 'virtual' murder, its implicitly close connection to actual murder, in fact leaves too little space to help us understand the moral character of this playful engagement with a game.

Mary Midgley (1996) notes that moral philosophy did not 'originate as a speculative exercise that was later applied to practical use, any more than modern physics did. (Galileo was an engineer working on the flight of cannonballs.)' (1996:81) The ethical theories which we have are the products of efforts in grappling with worldly problems, and where their builders took account of any contrast between this and other worlds, it has more typically been between this temporal realm and the eternal Hereafter than between the real and anything 'virtual'. This does not mean that moral philosophy as we know it has nothing to say about video gaming; but there is no need to postulate 'virtual worlds' in order to supply it with a subject matter. What we do when gaming is certainly tricky to pin down: trickier than one might expect of a virtual counterpart to the real, with its tantalising promise of ethical conclusions no less general than the principles which we may hope to develop to guide our lives in the real world. The trickster, however, is in every case the playful human being.

Previous commentators have not been blind to the complications for moral appraisal which come from being *at play* in the course of gaming butchery, but the prevalent language of the virtual has not necessarily helped them. (We should hardly think better of a perpetrator of *actual* murder whose attitude to killing was one of playful amusement.) Playfulness complicates play in fashions which the 'virtual' is ill equipped to capture. Indeed, some gamers complexify matters further still by blurring the boundaries of their participation as players: they discuss games on forum sites, or create fan art depicting video game characters. Which supplies yet another headache for the ethical evaluation of gaming: gamers' 'contribution to the magnificent mess of human culture' (Rossignol 2008:193).

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