The gamer's dilemma: An analysis of the arguments for the moral distinction between virtual murder and virtual paedophilia

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Abstract. Most people agree that murder is wrong. Yet, within computer games virtual murder scarcely raises an eyebrow. In one respect this is hardly surprising, as no one is actually murdered within a computer game. A virtual murder, some might argue, is no more unethical than taking a pawn in a game of chess. However, if no actual children are abused in acts of virtual paedophilia (life-like simulations of the actual practice), does that mean we should disregard these acts with the same abandon we do virtual murder? In this paper I shall outline several arguments which attempt to permit virtual murder, whilst prohibiting virtual paedophilia.

Key words: computer games, virtual murder, virtual paedophilia

Introduction

Is it immoral for a player to direct his character to murder another within a computer game? The standard response to this question is no. This is because no one is actually harmed as a result of a virtual harm.[1] Such an outlook seems intuitive, and it explains why millions of gamers feel it is perfectly permissible to commit acts of virtual murder. Yet this argument can be easily adapted to demonstrate why virtual paedophilia might also be morally permissible, as no actual children are harmed in such cases. This result is confronting, as most people feel that virtual paedophilia is not morally permissible. The aim of this paper is to examine whether any good arguments can be produced to reconcile the intuition that virtual murder is morally permissible, with the intuition that virtual paedophilia is not.

Before we outline the arguments for the moral distinction between virtual murder and virtual paedophilia, let us be clear about what is meant by these terms. A player commits an act of virtual murder in those cases where he directs his character to kill another in circumstances such that, were the game environment[2] actual, the actions of his character would constitute actual murder. By operationalizing virtual murder in this manner, we are able to set aside the bigger question of why actual murder is considered wrong.[3] For the sake of simplicity we shall focus upon cases where: the character that is virtually murdered is controlled by the computer, rather than another game player;[4] the character that is virtually murdered remains murdered (i.e. they do not 'respawn', that is, become reanimated later in the

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[1] Interestingly Elton has argued that certain types of vegetarians are unable to claim that virtual harm does not result in actual harm. This is because such vegetarians, he claims, are committed to regarding particular computer game characters as similar to animals (as both display life-like properties and cognitive capacities). In which case, if causing unnecessary pain to an animal is wrong, as an animal in pain constitutes an approximation of a human in pain, then so is causing virtual harm to computer game characters, given such characters are also human approximations. M. Elton, 'Should Vegetarians Play Video Games?', *Philosophical Papers*, 29(1): 21–42, 2000.

[2] I take the arguments presented in this paper to be able to operate sufficiently under a broad conception of a virtual/game environment. However, if a narrow focus is required, a suitable account might be found with Brey: P. Brey, 'The Ethics of Representation and Action in Virtual Reality', *Ethics and Information Technology*, 1: 5–14, 1999.

[3] Such neutrality is necessary in order to accommodate the varied accounts of wrong-doing we shall be considering in this paper.

[4] For a discussion on the actual harm that might result from a player directing his character to virtually harm another *player's* character see, T.M. Powers, 'Real Wrongs in Virtual Communities', *Ethics and Information Technology*, 5: 191–198, 2003.

game); the character that is virtually murdered clearly represents an adult; the game player is an adult; and the game player's character clearly represents an adult. Note that the arguments presented in this paper may apply equally to cases that do not fulfil these conditions. However, in order to avoid being distracted by wider issues, it will serve our interests to make these stipulations up front.

Note that our focus is upon murder, rather than killing in general. The difference being that, whilst the act of killing a person may be morally permissible, murder is not. For example, consider the popular computer game *Battlefield 1942*, which simulates various World War II battles. Presumably a player directing his character, an Allied solider, to kill an Axis solider within the context of such a battle, is not committing an act of virtual murder. This is because, were the game environment actual, we would not, by most reasonable accounts, consider the solider to be a murderer. Compare this case to one involving a game such as *Grand Theft Auto*, which simulates the antics of a car thief. In this game a player may direct her character to run over innocent pedestrians. Such an act does constitute virtual murder, since were the game environment actual, the player's character would be deemed a murderer.

A similar account of virtual paedophilia will also be adopted. A player commits an act of virtual paedophilia in those cases where she directs her character to molest[5] another in circumstances such, were the game environment actual, her character would be deemed a paedophile. Again, for the sake of simplicity we shall concern ourselves only with cases where: the character that is virtually molested is controlled by the computer, rather than another player; the character that is molested clearly represents a child; the game player is an adult; and the game player's character clearly represents an adult. Please note that although there may be cases of virtual murder and virtual paedophilia that do not conform to these conditions, it is only necessary for our purposes to focus upon those that do. And although such instances seem relatively clear, there may be occasions where it is difficult to determine whether a player is committing such acts.

Consider the 1980's landmark computer game *Pac-Man*. In this game, players direct around a maze a circular character who is able to eat ghosts, which, after being eaten, regenerate apparently unharmed. Exactly how should we morally evaluate such a game were it to be actual? Does eating a ghost constitute an act of murder? Is the fact that these ghosts are able to regenerate later morally significant? Determining whether or not virtual murder has occurred within computer games that are suitably abstracted from reality could, no doubt, amuse ethicists indefinitely. However, for our purposes we shall focus on those computer games, such as *Grand Theft Auto*, where clear instances of virtual murder are apparent.

With the types of cases to which we are concerned introduced, we can now focus our attention upon a dilemma faced by game players who routinely commit acts of virtual murder. Unless such players can identify a morally relevant distinction between virtual murder and virtual paedophilia, they must either accept that committing virtual paedophilia is morally permissible, or that they themselves have often committed morally prohibited acts. This is hardly a dilemma for those game players who are willing to permit virtual paedophilia on the grounds that, like virtual murder, no one is actually harmed.[6] However, for those players who are not prepared to bite this bullet, only one option remains if they wish to continue playing such games in good conscience. They must present an argument for the moral distinction between the acts. Five such arguments will be critically examined in what follows.

Argument 1: Social acceptability

I consider this first argument if only to quickly set it aside. Whilst it is certainly true that committing virtual murder is, for the most part, socially acceptable, committing virtual paedophilia remains taboo. Some may hope to seize upon this distinction as morally relevant. However, although reference to social conventions may *explain* why it is that people are more comfortable with virtual murder than they are with virtual paedophilia, unless one is willing to reduce morals to conventions, it certainly does not provide a moral *justification* for this outlook. Such an argument would be akin to asserting that, by virtue of the fact slavery was socially acceptable within ancient Rome, it was also, at that time, moral. We shall continue on the assumption that morality is not relative in this sense.

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[5] I acknowledge that there may be forms of paedophilia which does not involve molestation.

[6] Such intuitions were shared by the U.S Supreme Justices, who in 2002 overturned a ban on virtual child pornography on the basis that such material was protected by the First Amendment since it 'records no crime and creates no victims by its production.' See 'Virtual Porn, Real Corruption', *The National Review*, May 3, 2002.

Argument 2: Significant likelihoods

This argument builds upon the common belief 'that violent video games make it more likely, even if only by a small amount, that people will commit harmful acts against others.'[7] Let us presume that there is evidence to suggest that people who indulge in virtual paedophilia are more likely to commit acts of actual paedophilia. Let us also presume that the likelihood that virtual murder will result in actual murder is significantly lower than the likelihood virtual paedophilia will result in actual paedophilia. If both such presumptions were true, then a broadly consequentialist argument may be mounted as to why virtual paedophilia, and not virtual murder, should be morally prohibited. The argument would run as follows. Any act which is significantly likely to result in harm is immoral.[8] Committing acts of virtual murder does not significantly raise the likelihood of committing actual murder, whereas committing acts of virtual paedophilia does significantly raise the likelihood of actual paedophilia. Therefore, it is immoral to commit virtual paedophilia, but not necessarily virtual murder.

Although the above argument is valid, whether or not the premises are true is less obvious. For not only must we have good reason to suppose that virtual paedophilia is significantly likely to result in actual paedophilia, we must also have good reason to suppose that virtual murder is not significantly likely to result in actual murder. However, Levy suggests that there is reason to suppose that the 'arguments that virtual child pornography will harm actual children are…weak.'[9] And of course there are numerous studies claiming violence in computer games leads to actual violence.[10] So unless we can find evidence to

suggest the opposite, this argument will fail to get off the ground.[11]

Also, this argument allows for situations where *not* committing acts of virtual paedophilia might be immoral. For example, imagine a person who has overwhelming urges to commit paedophilia. She can satisfy these urges if she were to indulge in virtual paedophilia. However, if she does not, she will be driven to commit acts of actual paedophilia. In a similar vein, Levy argues that a strong case can be made for allowing virtual paedophilia, since it may 'reduce the amount of harm to actual children, by providing an acceptable outlet for dangerous desires, and by encouraging pornographers to seek alternatives to real children'.[12] The same argument is made by Cisneros, who states that virtual child pornography 'could potentially shield children from abuse since paedophiles could use this alternative source to fulfil their desires'.[13] Consequently, in order for the gamer to utilize this argument, not only may they have to allow for instances where people have a moral obligation to commit acts of virtual paedophilia, but they must also present evidence as to why virtual murder is less likely to result in actual murder than virtual paedophilia is likely to result in actual paedophilia.

Argument 3: Enjoying the competition, rather than the kill

Rather than focusing on the harm virtual paedophilia may cause to *others*, perhaps a clear moral distinction between virtual paedophilia and virtual murder can be found if we focus upon the harm agents causes *themselves* by indulging in such acts. One might argue that, on those occasions where a player enjoys performing the act of virtual paedophilia, they harm themselves. For were you to enjoy virtual paedophilia, presumably you find something pleasurable about the notion of actual paedophilia. If this were the case, by fostering a pleasure for actual paedophilia you are harming yourself; on the grounds that such a trait injures your character. McCormick considers this argument as a natural extension of Aristotelian virtue ethics, stating that, according to this theory, by 'participating in simulations of excessive, indulgent, and wrongful acts … you do harm to yourself in that

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[7] M. McCormick, 'Is it wrong to play violent video games', *Ethics and Information Technology*, 3: 278, 2001.

[8] Of course the usual caveats would have to be added to this premise. For example, the act would have to be avoidable, and were it not performed something worse would not occur.

[9] N. Levy, 'Virtual child pornography: The eroticization of inequality', *Ethics and Information Technology*, 4: 321, 2002.

[10] C. J. Ferguson, S. Rueda, A. Cruz, D. Ferguson, S. Fritz and S. Smith, 'Violent Video Games and Aggression: Causal Relationship or Byproduct of Family Violence and Intrinsic Violence Motivation?', *Criminal Justice and Behaviour*, 35(3): 311–332, 2008; O. Weigman and E. van Schie, 'Video Game Playing and Its Relations with Aggressive and Prosocial Behavior', *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 37: 367–378, 1998; D. Williams and M. Skoric, 'Internet Fantasy Violence: A Test of Aggression in an Online Game', *Communication Monographs*, 72: 217–233, 2005.

[11] This is not to suggest such evidence might not be forthcoming.

[12] Levy, p. 321.

[13] D. Cisneros, '"Virtual Child" Pornography on the Internet: A "virtual" victim?', *The Law and Technology Review*, 19, 2002.

you erode your virtue, and you distance yourself from your goal of eudaimonia.'[14] And it is precisely due to this self harm that virtual paedophilia should be determined as immoral. Putting aside the notion that individuals may have the right to harm themselves (at least to some degree), let us consider how it is that virtual murder might hope to escape this same argument.

When one pawn takes another in a game of chess, it represents one army defeating another. Presumably chess players do not derive much pleasure from this representation of killing. Rather they enjoy the game because of other factors, such as it satisfying their competitive nature. The same might be said for virtual murder within computer games. A player may enjoy a computer game because, for example, it satisfies her competitive nature, not because it allows her to commit acts of virtual murder *per se*. If this were true, then virtual murder may not result in the same type of self harm as virtual paedophilia. This in turn may explain why virtual murder is usually considered morally permissible, whilst virtual paedophilia is not.

Intuitively, it does seem likely that people who are interested in committing acts of virtual paedophilia do so because they believe there is something enjoyable about actual paedophilia. Also, it does seem likely that most players enjoy computer games for reasons other than their ability to allow them to commit virtual murder. However, according to this view, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with virtual paedophilia. To illustrate this point imagine you are playing a computer game, the object of which is to steal the Crown Jewels from the Tower of London. One way to achieve this goal is to seduce and sleep with a Beefeater's daughter, who just so happens to be 15. A player who commits this act of virtual paedophilia may do so, not because he enjoys the notion of having sex with a child, but because he wishes to complete the game. Given the above argument, this instance of virtual paedophilia will be as permissible as a virtual murder.

One might attempt to counter this argument by suggesting that a player would not knowingly purchase a computer game that entailed virtual paedophilia, unless on some level she enjoyed the act. But, of course, the same argument can be put to the player who knowingly purchases a game entailing virtual murder. In addition, not all acts of virtual murder within computer games are intrinsic to the objectives of the game. For example, within the popular game *Grand Theft Auto*, players routinely go out of their way to drive over innocent pedestrians, despite the fact that doing so does not increase their chances of completing the game. Likewise, it is difficult to suggest that game players do not enjoy committing virtual murder to some extent, since there is a notable trend within computer games to make the act of killing more graphic. As McCormick points out,

> game makers have made some of these games more and more graphic in their portrayals of torture, assault, murder, and other acts of violence. Whereas shooting an opponent from a distance would have once resulted only in the collapse of his or her body, now the shot is accompanied by screams of pain, realistic writhing, blood, specific damage to a part of the body, flying body parts, and death.[15]

Admittedly, enjoying virtual murder may not be the primary aim of game players, but it would be naïve to suggest that no enjoyment is derived from such acts. And to whatever extent it is enjoyed, according to this argument, it will be immoral.

Argument 4: Unfairly singling out a group for harm

This argument for the moral distinction between virtual murder and virtual paedophilia derives from the severity of acts they represent. Although it is clear that murder and paedophilia are both harmful acts, some might argue that paedophilia is far more so. This may not seem immediately apparent, for given that most parents hope to minimize the amount of harm that might befall their children, it is not clear that they would prefer their child to be murdered rather than molested. However, the person making this argument might call our attention to the fact that, whilst the acts of murder and paedophilia both result in a person being harmed, it is only the paedophile that unfairly singles out a particular group of people for harm. This, they may argue, is what makes paedophilia a far more harmful act overall.

This argument seems to have some merit. For although computer games which entail virtual murder may be socially acceptable, it is doubtful that a game involving, for example, only murdering Jews or homosexuals, would be tolerated. It seems therefore, that unfairly singling out a group for harm is, in itself, additionally harmful. Subsequently, since virtual paedophilia not only represents a harmful act, but also singles out children as the recipients of this harm, it could be seen as more harmful than virtual murder (since virtual murder does not necessarily single out any particular group). Therefore, if this

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[14] McCormick, p. 285.

[15] McCormick, p. 277.

difference in harm were significant, then we might conclude that this is why virtual murder is morally permissible, whilst virtual paedophilia is not.

Two points should be made in response to this argument. Firstly it does not seem immediately obvious that the act of randomly murdering a number of people is significantly less harmful than the act of molesting this same number of children. Secondly, this argument seems to suggest that if a computer game allowed players to molest people of all different age groups, including children, it would be morally permissible to play such a game. This is because, given that such a game does not single out a particular group of people to molest, it would be just as acceptable as a computer game which does not single out a particular group of people to murder.

Argument 5: The special status of children

Some might argue that it is not the singling out of a group for harm which causes virtual paedophilia to be worse than virtual murder, *per se*, but the fact that virtual paedophilia involves harming children in particular. This argument builds upon the idea that children have a special status. This is because children possess properties such as innocence, defencelessness, etc...[16] which, *ceteris parabis*, make harming a child worse than harming an adult. The gamer might choose to draw upon the special status of children to suggest that, providing virtual murder does not entail virtual *child* murder, it will be less harmful than virtual paedophilia. And if this degree of harm is significant, then we have reason to suppose that virtual *adult* murder is morally permissible, whilst virtual paedophilia is not.

This argument has some force; for it seems plausible that children do indeed have a special status. However, we must take care not to exaggerate it. The important caveat to bear in mind is the *ceteris parabis* clause. If it is true that, *ceteris parabis*, harming a child is worse than harming an adult, then it is clearly the case that child murder will be more harmful than adult murder; and, likewise, child molestation will be more harmful that adult molestation. However, it does not follow that child molestation is more harmful than adult murder. This is because, within such a comparison, all things are not equal. In other words, murder is not equal to molestation. In order to resurrect this argument the gamer must abandon the *ceteris parabis* clause, and claim that harming a child is worse than harming an adult. Yet this seems far too strong. Do we really wish to suggest that

stealing a child's lollipop is worse than torturing an adult? Consequently, unless there is strong evidence to suggest molestation is as harmful as murder, an appeal to the special status of children does not seem to deliver the right results for the gamer.

Deciding which virtual bullet to bite

None of the five arguments for the moral distinction between virtual murder and virtual paedophilia seem wholly convincing. In which case, barring the existence of further arguments for this distinction, players of such games are left with two options. Either they acknowledge that acts of virtual murder and virtual paedophilia are morally prohibited,[17] or they acknowledge that both are morally permissible. For those gamers who have strong intuitions that virtual paedophilia should be prohibited, be aware that, although we have focused on computer games, this dilemma could be adapted to other types of virtual worlds, such as films, paintings and books.

Popular movies, such as *Pulp Fiction*, or television series, such as *Dexter*, involve multiple representations of murder. Given this, if we prohibit virtual paedophilia, we may find ourselves also prohibiting a sizable portion of popular entertainment. We may attempt to avoid this outcome by arguing that, when we view a movie that contains a representation of murder we take a passive role. Whereas the game player, as McCormick points out 'is not passive and merely observing violence committed by others, but...actually pulling the joystick trigger and inflicting simulated harm him/herself.'[18] In other words, viewers, unlike players, do not choose to commit the acts they see. This distinction does seem to be morally relevant, but it is interesting to question to what extent.

If the moral distinction between a passive and active medium is significant, then we might have grounds for prohibiting virtual paedophilia within games, whilst also permitting virtual murder within movies. This is because, whilst prohibiting virtual paedophilia within games suggests we prohibit virtual murder within games (since both are active mediums),

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[16] My thanks to a blind reviewer for this point.

[17] It is worth noting that others, such as Aristoles Worth, and Walton, have suggested that volentatary participation in, or mere experience of, a representation of an immoral act could itself constitute an immoral act. Aristotle. 'The Poetics'. In D.W. Lucus, editor, *Aristotle*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1968; K. Walton and M. Tanner, 'Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality', *Proceedings of the Aristotleian Society*, 68(Suppl Vol): 27–66, 1994; S. Worth, 'Fictional Spaces', *Philosophical Forum*, 4(35): 439–455, 2004.

[18] McCormick, p. 278.

prohibiting virtual paedophilia within games does not suggest we prohibit virtual murder within movies (since movies are a passive medium). Although this argument seems reasonable, we should acknowledge that it provides us with no grounds to suggest that there is anything wrong with watching a movie that contains computer animated scenes of paedophilia. In other words, if one wishes to morally prohibit staged-paedophilia within movies, but permit staged-murder within movies, then recourse to active/ passive distinction will not prove helpful.

The aim of this paper has been to highlight a possible inconsistency in the social acceptance of virtual immoral acts. I have argued that unless a moral distinction can be found between such acts, they should be treated in a similar fashion. Whilst I am not suggesting that virtual paedophilia should be deemed morally permissible, I do wish to make it clear that if it is not, then a significant portion of popular entertainment (those which feature representations of murder) may also be brought into question. Consequently, the questions raised concern not only players of computer games, but most members of popular culture.[19]

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